Judging a Class by Its Syllabus
Students' Initial Impressions of Courses and Professors

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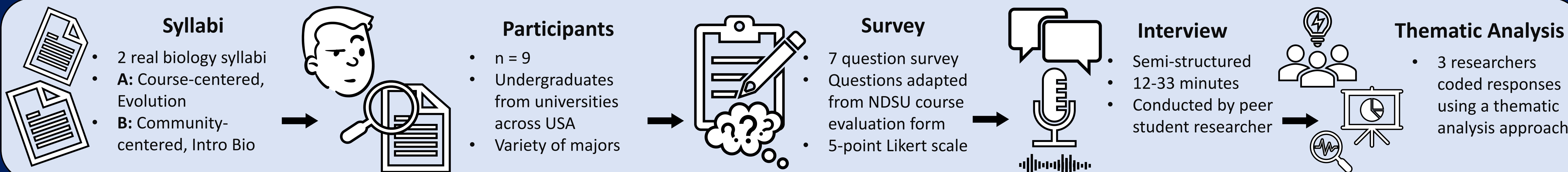[1]Arizona State University, [2]North Dakota State University

Introduction

1. Student evaluations of teaching are widely used by university departments as measures of professor quality[1].
2. Research has shown that professors can convey specific teaching attributes through the structure and language of their syllabus[2]. The present study combines these ideas to determine how students judge professors using only information in the course syllabus.

Research Question

What information from the course syllabus are students using to answer questions about professor and course characteristics?

Methods

Syllabi
- 2 real biology syllabi
- A: Course-centered, Evolution
- B: Community-centered, Intro Bio

Participants
- n = 9
- Undergraduates from universities across USA
- Variety of majors

Survey
- 7 question survey
- Questions adapted from NDSU course evaluation form
- 5-point Likert scale

Interview
- Semi-structured
- 12-33 minutes
- Conducted by peer student researcher

Thematic Analysis
- 3 researchers coded responses using a thematic analysis approach

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We asked: What sections of the syllabus did you use to answer each question?

Participants responded with actual sections of the syllabus *and* subjective interpretations.

How to Read the Chart

4 A: 4 participants agreed
0 N: 0 participants neutral
1 D: 1 participant disagreed

Top 3 codes are listed in order of frequency

Common Codes
Grades: grading scheme breakdown section
Office Hrs.: Office hours information section
Clarity: syllabus was clear & understandable
Personal Experience: use of prior experience to answer question

A **neutral** response often means **"I don't know"**

"So I just kinda put three neutrals on the last three questions because I wasn't sure."

~ Jackson, Syllabus A

Upright = Explicit syllabus features/sections
Italicized = Emergent features/qualities

Difficulty to answer survey question: Easy to answer | Neutral | Difficult to answer

A = Agree or Strongly Agree **N = Neutral** **D = Disagree or Strongly Disagree**

Syllabus A: Course-Centered (*n=5*)	Question	Syllabus B: Community-Centered (*n=4*)
4 A: Course Objectives, Schedule, *Clarity* 1 N: Course Objectives, *Clarity* 0 D:	**1** Well-defined course objectives	3 A: Course Objectives, *Clarity*, Schedule 0 N: 1 D: Course Objectives
4 A: *Clarity*, *Organization*, Schedule 0 N: 1 D: *Clarity*, Resources	**2** Content & materials clear & well-organized	3 A: *Organization*, Standards, Schedule 1 N: *Length*, *Clarity*, *Organization* 0 D:
4 A: Grades, Participation, *Clarity* 0 N: 1 D: Grades, Schedule, Assessments	**3** I understand how grades are assigned	3 A: Standards, Grades, *Organization* 1 N: *Personal Experience* 1 D: Standards, Grades, Assessments, *Clarity*
1 A: Office Hours 0 N: 4 D: Office Hours, *Prof. Qualities*, *Personal Experience*	**4** Available to assist outside of class	4 A: Office Hrs., Email Response, *Undefined Feelings* 0 N: 0 D:
0 A: 5 N: Email Response, Office Hrs., *No Specific Sections* 0 D:	**5** Will provide timely feedback	3 A: Email Response, Grades, *Assumptions* 1 N: Email Response, *Personal Experience*, *Clarity* 0 D:
1 A: Assessments, *Assumptions* 4 N: *Personal Experience*, *Language* 0 D:	**6** Will provide relevant feedback	1 A: *Clarity*, *Assumptions*, Standards 3 N: Standards, *Clarity*, Office Hours 0 D:
3 A: Participation, *Personal Experience* 2 N: *Undefined Feelings*, *Professor Qualities* 0 D:	**7** Will set and maintain high standards	4 A: Standards, *Clarity*, Assessments, Grades 0 N: 0 D:

Students often used holistic feelings to answer the questions. This is the code: "undefined feelings"

*"The questions on the survey that were easy to answer were just kind of based off of a **general vibe**."*

~ Richard, Syllabus B

Although both syllabi had an "office hours" section, the details of them left different impressions.

"It was easy. Everything that was asked here was covered in the syllabus."

~ Beth, Syllabus B

Take Home Message

Students use explicit information and subjective interpretations to predict how a course will be.

Future research questions:

1. Students make initial judgments of courses from syllabi, but how accurate are they? A follow-up **quantitative study** would compare actual student evaluation scores to participants' predicted scores.
2. Another **interview study** could examine how actual students answer their course evaluations, and compare these responses with the participants'.

How can professors put results into practice?
Results from these interviews illustrate ways students interpret syllabi that professors may not think about. Understanding how students read a syllabus can help professors tailor theirs to best represent their courses and lead to positive first impressions. A beneficial side-effect of this would be improved student evaluation scores.

References
1) Algozzine, B., Gretes, J., Flowers, C., Howley, L., Beattie, J., Spooner, F., & Bray, M. (2004). Student evaluation of college teaching: A practice in search of principles. *College teaching, 52*(4), 134-141.
2) Hackerson, E.L., Bjerke, K., Momsen, J. (In development).