Elements of an Inclusive Syllabus: Graduate Student Ratings

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Abstract

Syllabi can be a mechanism by which professors can foster inclusivity with students. This article highlights how I, an educational leadership professor, intentionally incorporated elements within course syllabi to foster inclusivity. The text, *What Inclusive Instructors Do: Principles and Practices for Excellence in College Teaching* (Addy et al., 2021) provided several recommendations for course syllabi. Through action research, I collected graduate students' ratings of three inclusive syllabi elements. The specific syllabi sections included for this study were: (a) the instructor's approach, (b) what success "looks like" in the course, and (c) rationales for heavily weighted assignments. Articulating the instructor's approach, how to achieve success, and rationales for key assignments align with adult learning theories by giving the students the important connections between the course and the goals of the students (i.e., to become certified principals). Student ratings, collected via action research using a 10-question Likert-scale anonymous survey, indicated positive ratings of the syllabi elements. Student feedback indicated that the three elements from the syllabus helped students understand what to do and how to successfully engage in the course, peers, and the professor. These results indicated that efforts to make syllabi more inclusive made a difference for students, and I believe these results can translate to any class that utilizes a syllabus.

Keywords: inclusive syllabi, equity in education, inclusion in higher education, inclusive strategies, adult learning theories

Fostering inclusivity is vital at all educational levels, including the higher education level (Awang-Hashim et al., 2019). As an assistant clinical professor in the Educational and Literacy Leadership Department at Sacred Heart University, I agree with Hashim et al. (2019) that it is important for me to model as many inclusive practices as possible for our future educational leaders. After a 25-year career as a K–12 teacher and administrator, I sought resources to support my teaching as I transitioned to the higher education level. In the fall of 2022, the Center for Teaching and Learning at Sacred Heart University created a faculty learning community for staff; throughout the semester, a group of faculty members read and discussed chapters from the text, *What Inclusive Instructors Do: Principles and Practices for Excellence in College Teaching* (Addy et al., 2021). The text provided specific strategies for our consideration to help make our classes more inclusive. I developed and implemented an action research study with graduate students across several semesters in which the participants rated three inclusive strategies that I implemented as a result of my exploration of the Addy et al. (2021) text. This article examines the data provided by my students as they rated the three inclusive elements that I incorporated into my syllabi.

Inclusive Syllabi Elements

According to Addy et al. (2021), exploring the purpose of syllabi—with intentionality—can benefit higher education classrooms. Typically, syllabi have been embraced "as a contract, as a communication tool, or as an organizational plan" (Addy et al., 2021, p. 48). Extending syllabi to become more (inter)active as a means for students to be introduced to the instructional approaches embraced by their instructor could yield more inclusivity (Addy et al., 2021). My goal was to invite students in the graduate courses I taught to become active participants in the syllabus as a living document that can help my students and I to be more effective in our work together. If syllabi are approached as "a *living* [emphasis in original] constitution [it] invites participation, allows for evolution (or amendment), and accommodates a

community's changing needs" (Addy et al., 2021, p. 50). I approached syllabi as an ever-evolving understanding of how the class community will (inter)act. When creating each syllabus, I introduced three elements including an "Instructor's Approach" section, a "What Does Success Look Like in This Course?" section, and detailed rationales for assignments that contribute significantly to the overall course grade. Intentionally incorporating these elements aimed to provide a more inclusive experience for my graduate students.

Instructor's Approach

The "instructor's approach" section included a detailed definition of the accepted viewpoint of the syllabus as a "living constitution" (Addy et al., 2021, p. 50), along with the feedback process that I value (see Figure 1). I aimed to articulate the value of involving students in the classroom process by providing an explanation about how student feedback will be utilized. The instructor's approach section also explained the intentional modeling that the instructor planned: seeking feedback from stakeholders (in this case, graduate students) and transparently making changes is a process that future educational leaders should utilize with their future stakeholders (e.g., staff, parents, families, students). From the outset of the syllabus, the instructor's approach was intended to provide students with an understanding of "why" and "how" the instructor approaches feedback. This practice aligns with adult learning theories [The Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy (TEAL) Center, 2011] and was expected to foster more learner engagement with the content and course.

I believe that if students understand how I function as a professor, that will give more students an understanding about how they should proceed in one of my courses. As displayed in Figure 1, I asked for feedback from students in two ways, during the class experience and after the class experience. By giving my students a voice, I hoped to encourage their participation by making their ideas important for the class.

Figure 1

Instructor's Approach

Syllabus: Often, a syllabus is viewed as a contract, a way to communicate, and/or an organizational tool. My approach aligns more with the perspective espoused by Addy, Dube, Mitchell, and SoRelle (2021): I view this syllabus as a "*living* constitution" (p. 50), encouraging participation, changes, and accommodating the needs of our class.

Feedback: Your voice is valued and vital for our class learning. Your feedback is vital to be able to best meet your needs as learners. Feedback will be elicited from you on an ongoing basis, through exit slips, anonymous surveys/forms, and/or community circle conversations. My approach to feedback is reflected in the following graphic:
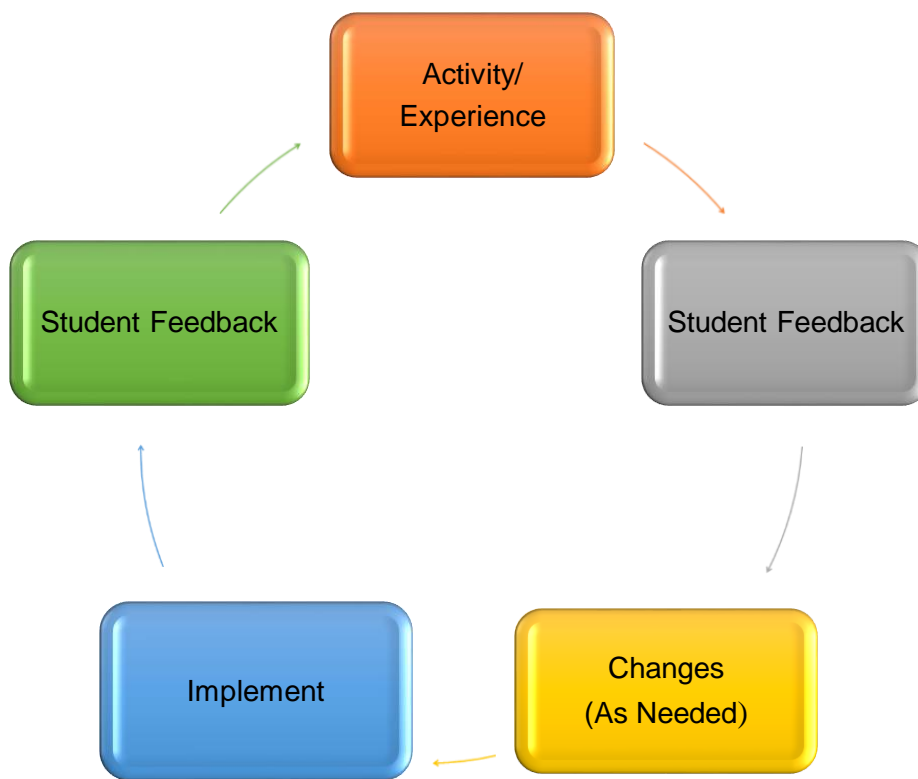
Note. Changes I make based on your feedback will be shared in a transparent manner. Not only will this process improve my ability to instruct you, but it serves as a model for you as a future administrator when working with staff. Furthermore, the assignments identified in this syllabus may change after our in-person meetings, based on our work and your input.

Source: Excerpt from Kimberly Hellerich's EDL 635-AB Spring 2023 Syllabus

I developed the instructor's approach section of the syllabus to help my students understand that I believe their experiences as teachers matter to me as I work with them as professional educators. The elements of my instructor's approach align with Knowles (1980) and his ideas about how to approach adult learners and get them engaged in class. Knowles advised that teachers of adults should consider the following:

- Create a cooperative environment in classes.

- Assess students' specific needs and interests.

- Develop learning objectives based on students' needs, interests, and skill levels.

- Create and implement sequential learning experiences to achieve objectives.

- Work collaboratively with adult students to select methods, resources, learning experiences, and materials for learning.

- Assess the learning experiences and make adjustments as needed.

- Assess student needs for further learning.

I created and implemented the elements that I added to my syllabi with these adult learning assumptions in mind. My goal was and is to develop equitable classes in which every student will be successful by working collaboratively with me and each other as adult learners. The syllabus begins the process by helping to give every student a voice and an understanding of how to work with me and each other.

What Does Success Look Like in This Course?

Adding a "What Does Success Look Like in This Course?" section was also inspired by the Addy et al. (2021) text. When drafting this section, the tone was intended to feel conversational; it was my goal for students to feel that their success was achievable. Utilizing a conversational tone was aimed at developing a welcoming and invitational connection with students. Furthermore, specific choices, such as of "our course," signals to students that I see myself as a partner with students: the learning throughout the course will be experienced

collectively and collaboratively. I am considering the students—and will include them in their learning processes.

I believe that if students follow the ideas expressed in the what success looks like section of the syllabus, they will be included and find success in this class. I included four elements in my syllabus for students (educators) to be successful in class:

- Bring an open mind to every assignment and in-person class. You will be asked to read/discuss/reflect on varied perspectives. Embrace the challenge. Be open to changing your mind. Be open to listening to—and learning from—other perspectives.

- Engage in the content and discussions with your peers. Engagement involves attention and commitment. Share your perspective(s). Identify and ask questions. All voices are vital to our discussion and learning.

  o Note: When you have Discussion Boards that ask you to reply to a peer, it is vital that you respond in a timely manner. Your peers are relying on you to engage in a dialogue—we are working together as a collective group. Please make a commitment to your peers to post responses on time. If unforeseen circumstances (or roadblocks) arise, please let me know.

- Be willing to rework assignments so you can better demonstrate your understanding of the content. I espouse a growth mindset approach to assessment: your learning exists on a continuum and your first attempt may not accurately represent your best work.

- Communicate with me if roadblocks arise. I will assist you in any way I can, including brainstorming way(s) to remove roadblocks.

(Source: Excerpt from Kimberly Hellerich's EDL 635-AB Spring 2023 Syllabus)

As noted in the, what does success look like in this course section, students are introduced to some fundamental values that I espouse: engaging with the course content

demands an open mind, attention, and commitment to learning; reworking assignments and practicing a growth mindset are highly valued. Furthermore, communication about roadblocks is key—and I, as the instructor, will partner with students to brainstorm ways to remove them. From this section, students are introduced to me as their instructor—and how I established an environment where success can be achieved, if students are: committed to their learning, open to growing as a learner, and willing to communicate with the instructor.

Understanding these important elements of the class will, in my experiences, make success and learning more accessible to every student. The idea is that teaching and learning for me is a partnership between each student and me (and with each other). This leads to the next component understanding the rationale for each assignment. By connecting each important assignment to their goal of becoming a certified principal, my goal is to have every major assignment make sense and have meaning (Sousa, 2017) for each student

Rationale for Key Assignments

Lastly, I provided a "Rationale (Addy et al., 2021) for Key Assignments" within my course syllabi. I hoped that providing a detailed explanation of the intention for the key assignments would create clarity for the students—and foster an understanding of "why" the assignment is planned in the manner it is. This process directly reflects adult learning theories (Knowles, 1980; TEAL Center, 2011). It also provides a contextualized understanding for the learner, which aligns with andragogy, providing active exploration of experiences grounded in real-world experiences (Recigno & Kramer, 2022). Offering clarity in this manner was intended to benefit myself and the students, because if students understand what I am asking of them and why I am asking it, then hopefully, assignments will have more sense and meaning (Sousa, 2017) for students. If I can create and justify assignments that have meaning and make sense to all of the students, then research indicates that more students will be successful (Knowles, 1980; Recigno & Kramer, 2022; Sousa, 2017; TEAL Center, 2011). The syllabus is the beginning of

the process, so in order to make my courses more inclusive and equitable, in addition to making

the syllabus become a living document, I believe I must follow up with teaching and learning

experiences that engage students and that offer students multiple ways to interact with the

curriculum and offer feedback and assistance that will enable each student to be successful in

our classes together.

Table 1 displays two examples of key assignments from one of my syllabi. Both

assignments were developed to give students real-life experiences of a principal. The first

assignment is a simulation case study that students review in small groups and discuss and

develop ideas about how to help a teacher who is struggling in their classes. In the second

assignment, students are asked to conduct a classroom observation of a peer. My students are

asked to "conduct a pre-observation conference, view the lesson, and provide feedback via a

post-observation process." The goal is to make this process as real as possible and give all

students the opportunity to apply theory into real practice.

Table 1

Examples of Use of Rationale in My Syllabi

Assignment Title	Description and Rationale
	Assignment
Support the Struggling Teacher (Group Presentation/Assignment)	Your assignment is to analyze this case study with your group and to develop a formal improvement plan that will engage the teacher in improving their practices based on what you have learned in our class about teacher improvement and adult learning theory and in best practices that you find in the research. (15-minute presentation)
	Rationale
	This assignment is intended to provide you with the opportunity to consider how to support struggling teachers via observations, feedback, and identified resources. The group presentation element is intended to demonstrate that there are multiple ways to support struggling teachers, with varied resources.

Assignment Title	Description and Rationale
	Assignment
	Conduct a successful peer teacher observation that models professional ethical behavior during a teacher pre and postconference that insures high academic learning and equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instruction through the use of preplanning and postconference tools and Connecticut State Department of Education approved instructional framework. Submit as a Word document in Taskstream and in Blackboard.
	Rationale
Peer Teacher Observation (Key Assignment)	Rationale: This assignment is intended to provide you with a real-world opportunity to apply learning gained during this course—and reflect on the process. You will conduct a pre-observation conference, view the lesson, and provide feedback via a post-observation process. You will create a list of resources and articulate the connection between the resources and the post-conference discussion. When you are an administrator, these elements will be part of your job expectations; by practicing the process and honing your observation skills, you will be well positioned to speak to the process during a job interview.

Note. Additional items within the syllabus also included rationales, including due dates for Discussion Board submissions—to explain why assignments are due prior to the class (so the instructor can review and make instructional adjustments as needed for the subsequent class session).

Source: Excerpt from Kimberly Hellerich's EDL 635-AB Spring 2023 Syllabus

Summary

In my work to attempt to conduct classes that are inclusive (available for all students) and equitable (all students are successful) I have developed three elements for my syllabi to help my students and me begin our classes together as partners in learning. For me that partnership means that each person (including the instructor) in the class must work in positive and collaborative ways so that we are all successful. My goal is to honor, include, and meet the

learning needs of each of my professional adult students in their quest to become certified

principals (Knowles, 1980; Recigno & Kramer, 2022; Sousa, 2017; TEAL Center, 2011). I have

attempted to begin that process in a positive way by setting up the syllabus so that students

understand three important aspects of our class: my approach as an instructor, what success

looks like in the course, and clear descriptions and rationale for key assignments. The results of

my action research project indicate that students agree that these three elements were helpful

to my students.

Action Research

I believe my transition from the K–12 setting to higher education provided me with a K–

20 perspective. In my experiences, I have found that many successfully implemented strategies

in K–12 schools can benefit higher education settings, including graduate level programs.

Relatedly, higher education instructors and institutions can benefit from engaging in action

research (Gibbs et al., 2017). At the higher education level, action research can be seen as a

mechanism for critical reflection. Further, action research has often focused on "first-person

practitioner research aimed at improving individual teaching practice" (Gibbs et al., 2017, p. 6).

Action research approaches can assist instructors to become more effective.

To gather student feedback about the elements of inclusivity in the syllabus, I provided

my classes with 10 questions via an anonymous SurveyMonkey survey. Students completed the

seven Likert scale prompts and three open-end questions on the survey after reviewing the

syllabus and prior to any instruction occurring within the course. Table 2 displays the prompts

and open-ended questions from the survey.

Table 2

Student Survey

Prompts	Response Scale
1. What is your opinion of the "Instructor's Approach" section of the syllabus?	5-Point Likert Scale Liked it very much—Disliked it a lot
2. I appreciate the concept that the syllabus is described as a "living constitution."	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
3. I anticipate that the feedback cycle may be helpful to me in this class.	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
4. What is your initial reaction to the "modeling strategies" and "challenging your thinking/adopting a "leadership lens" sections?	Open ended response
5. I anticipate that the belonging wheel (included in the Classroom Community section) may help me engage as a learner in this class.	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
6. After reviewing the "What does success look like in this course?" section, I feel that I can experience success during this course.	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
7. I appreciate Dr. Hellerich included her personal goals for the course as part of the syllabus.	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly agree—Strongly disagree
8. Based on the "Instructor's Approach" section, what is something you are looking forward to?	Open ended response
9. When reviewing the syllabus, reading the rationale for assignments:	Helped me understand the assignment more. Did not help me understand the assignment more.
10. Do you have anything else you'd like to share?	Open ended response

Note: N = 69

Data Analysis of Syllabi Elements

I analyzed student ratings data from three graduate level spring courses and three graduate level Summer 1 classes. There were 69 students who completed the survey (see Table 3). For each prompt I determined the percentage of students who chose each level of the five Likert scale choices from very positive to very negative. For the purposes of this article, I analyzed what I consider to be the three most important items related to my inclusive syllabus: (a) What is your opinion of the "Instructor's Approach" section of the syllabus? (b) After reviewing the "What does success look like in this course?" section, I feel that I can experience success during this course. (c) When reviewing the syllabus, reading the rationale for assignments: Helped me understand the assignment more; Did not help me understand the assignment more. In general student data indicate high levels of ratings for the three inclusive elements of the syllabi.
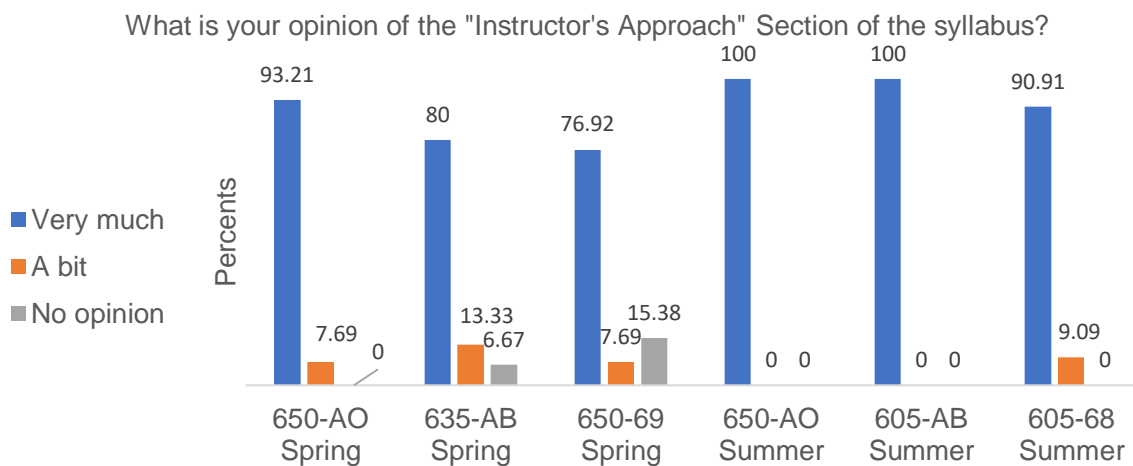
Table 3

Student Population Enrolled in Courses

Course	Number of Students Enrolled
650-AO Spring	14
635-AB Spring	12
650-69 Spring	14
650-AO Summer	7
605-AB Summer	11
605-68 Summer	11
TOTAL	69

Instructor's Approach

For the instructor's approach section, approximately 90% of the student responses across classes indicated a high level of "liking" this section of the syllabus (see Figure 4). Specifically, the responses from students enrolled in three summer courses yielded 97% of students selecting the Likert scale level 5 answer of "I liked it very much." For the three spring courses, 93% of the students rated this element as level 5. No students in any of the courses rated this element at a level 2 or level 1. Overall, approximately 90% of students in the six courses rated this element of inclusion for the syllabi with level 5 responses, 6.5% at level 4, and 3.5% at level 3. Thus, the vast majority of student responses across the courses indicate they perceived the Instructor's Approach section of the syllabus in a very positive manner.

Figure 2
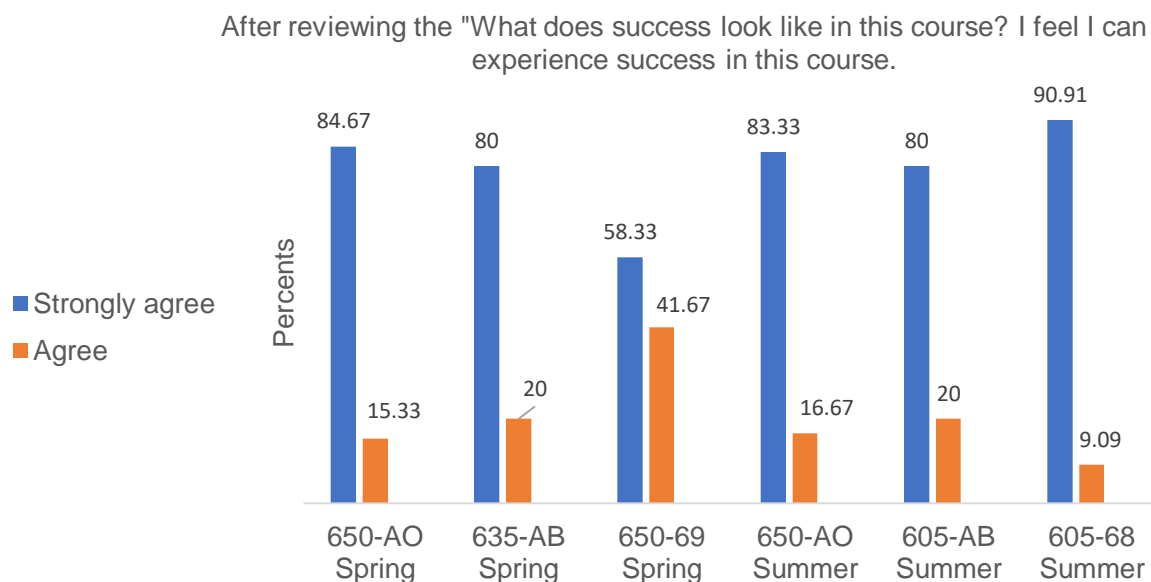
Ratings of Instructor's Approach Section

Note: See Table 3 for the N for each course.

What Does Success Look Like in This Course?

Within the section of the syllabus, "What does success look like in this course?" I articulated the expectations for success: engaging with content and peers, having an open mind, and accessing a growth mindset. Exploring the student ratings for this inclusive element from the data revealed, as displayed in Figure 5, that all of the responses were at level 5 or level 4. Approximately 80% of the student responses were level 5 and 20% were at level 4. None of the student responses were below level 4. The student rating data overwhelmingly indicated that students believed, after reading this section of the syllabus, that they could experience success based on the expectations outlined in that section of the syllabus.

Figure 3

I Can Experience Success

After reviewing the "What does success look like in this course? I feel I can experience success in this course.

Legend: ■ Strongly agree ■ Agree

Course	Strongly agree	Agree
650-AO Spring	84.67	15.33
635-AB Spring	80	20
650-69 Spring	58.33	41.67
650-AO Summer	83.33	16.67
605-AB Summer	80	20
605-68 Summer	90.91	9.09

Note: See Table 3 for the N for each course.

Rationale for Assignments

Finally, graduate students enrolled in courses in 2023 spring and summer 1 terms provided an overwhelmingly positive response to the question regarding the provided rationale for assignments. In each of the six classes, 100% of students indicated, "The rationale helped me understand the assignment more." Providing the rationale for assignments that contribute to a significant portion of the course average was deemed helpful by all of my students.

Discussion

From my review of the student ratings for the three elements of inclusivity in the syllabus rated by students, approximately 90% of the student ratings were at level 5, strongly agree and approximately 6.5% of the ratings were at level 4, agree, with approximately 3.5% rated as neutral. Thus, students overwhelmingly rated the elements as worthy and helpful. My conclusion is that students appreciated my efforts to make my syllabus more inclusive for them. These results encourage me to continue to search for ways to ensure the inclusion of all students in my syllabi and in my classes. I believe that since students read the syllabus prior to our first class, the syllabus helped me to set a positive and inclusive tone for my classes.

Limitations

As with any study there are limitations regarding use of the data. First, the number of participants in this study were all graduate students in an educational leadership program. More studies that incorporate a variety of majors and levels of students would be useful. Second, this study had a limited number of participants (i.e., six of my classes), therefore, the results of this study should not be generalized. Third, this study took place in one university, in one department, and in one professor's classes. Studies that incorporate more diversity of types and levels of schools and numbers and variety of educators would be important to assess a much wider range of data. Fourth, my study utilized student surveys to rate the elements introduced

into my syllabi. Studies should be introduced that assess student achievement and student social and emotional comfort and/or growth. Fifth, I studied three elements of inclusivity in my syllabi. There are certainly more possibilities for making syllabi more inclusive, and other educators and researchers should study other possibilities.

Implications

By applying an action research approach to this study of the responses to my attempts to make my syllabi more inclusive, I heard directly from my students what they thought about my efforts. In my view, there is reason to believe that action research can be an important tool for any professor or teacher who wants to implement ideas into their syllabi. Awang-Hashim et al. (2019) related, "It is important that higher education practitioners participate in strategic reflection to review and understand how diversity and inclusion is conceptualized and managed in their own context" (p. 107). Higher education instructors, and their students, can benefit from exploring additional inclusive elements within courses, including syllabi.

Given the positive perceptions among these graduate students, I believe that several inclusive elements could be applied to a wider range of course syllabi—beyond these educational leadership courses. This action research data yielded that the instructor's approach section was appreciated, the explanation on how to achieve success in the course allowed students to feel they could be successful as the course began, and the rationale for major assignments helped students understand the assignments. I believe these elements can be seamlessly integrated within the syllabi of any higher education course, across all departments. Perhaps each department could create a syllabus template into which these elements would be introduced. If instructors articulate their approach, their expectations for student success, and provide a rationale for key assignments, many, if not all, students could benefit. The elements may provide for additional inclusivity and (inter)connectivity between students and their instructor—at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Furthermore, I believe these kinds of

elements could also apply to any level in which teachers utilize a syllabus. Educational leaders

and teachers can replicate these or similar concepts with their students. Finally, these ideas

may be useful in professional development for schools and their teachers at any level.

Employing adult learning theories (Knowles, 1980; TEAL Center, 2011) when trying to help

educators consider becoming more inclusive by engaging them as professional adults seems, to

me, to be a vital aspect of any professional development.

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