

Effect of syllabus tone: students' perceptions of instructor and course

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Abstract It is not uncommon for students to complain that faculty are unapproachable, while faculty complain that students are not engaged. Such perceptions, especially when formed at the start of a semester, can impact what students learn and how instructors teach; therefore, it is critical that these perceptions are prevented if a course is to be successful. A good starting point is the syllabus, which not only informs students about a course and its requirements, but creates a first impression about the instructor and his or her attitudes toward teaching. We conducted an experiment in which the course syllabus was manipulated to reflect a friendly or an unfriendly tone so that we could explore the perceptions students formed of the instructor and class. Results supported the hypothesis that a syllabus written in a friendly, rather than unfriendly, tone evoked perceptions of the instructor being more warm, more approachable, and more motivated to teach the course.

Keywords Syllabus · Tone · Classroom climate · Person perception

Asch's (1946) seminal research on central traits illustrated the way in which embedding the adjectives "warm" or "cold" within a list of common traits produced differences in how a target individual is perceived. When the target individual's list of traits included the central trait "warm", the target individual was seen in a more favorable light compared to when the target individual's list included the central trait

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“cold”. Other researchers (e.g., Babad et al. 1999; Buchert et al. 2008; Griffin 2001; Kelley 1950; McClelland 1970; Murray et al. 1990; Waters et al. 1988; Widmeyer and Loy 1988) extended Asch (1946) study to a classroom setting. For example, in one of the earliest studies on impression formation, Kelley (1950) found that when students were told a guest lecturer was “very warm”, the central trait produced more favorable evaluations of the instructor than when students were told the guest lecturer was “rather cold”. In a more recent replication and extension of Kelley’s experiment, Widmeyer and Loy (1988) had students evaluate a lecture presented by a visiting professor. Prior to the lecture, students received background information about the instructor; some received information suggesting that the visiting professor was warm while others were presented with information that suggested the professor was cold. Analyses revealed that students perceived the visiting professor as a more effective teacher and more pleasant to have for class when he was described as a warm rather than a cold person.

Certainly, there are many sources (e.g., other students, advisors, other faculty, Internet sources like RateMyProfessor and Facebook) students can use to learn about the reputation of faculty and courses. However, one source of information students may use (and use repeatedly) throughout a semester is the course syllabus. McKeachie (1986) was among the first to note the syllabus not only informs students about the course and its requirements but also about the personality of the instructor. As such, students can glean from a syllabus the instructor’s interpersonal style and approachability and therefore can create a first impression about an instructor and his or her attitudes toward students and learning (DiClementi and Handelsman 2005; Grunert 1997).

Given the importance of a course syllabus, the purpose of the current research was to explore the effect syllabus tone had on perceptions of an instructor and the course. Although many authors (e.g., DiClementi and Handelsman 2005; Grunert 1997; McKeachie 1986) have suggested a syllabus can create an impression about an instructor, the literature on syllabus tone does not demonstrate its impact. We used Babad et al. (1999) work as a conceptual framework for the current research which replicated Asch (1946) central trait study. In an initial class meeting, Babad and colleagues (1999) told introductory psychology students that researchers were conducting an experiment on first impressions and that they would like to assess students’ first impressions of their instructor. Students were informed that in prior assessments, their professor was characterized as intelligent, skillful, industrious, warm or cold, determined, practical and cautious. Once the description of the instructor was presented, students were asked to complete a course evaluation questionnaire. Following the course evaluations, the professor entered the classroom, delivered a 30 min lecture on the nature of psychology, then left. After the instructor had exited the classroom, the researchers re-administered the course evaluation questionnaire. Three months later, toward the end of the semester, the course evaluation questionnaire was administered by the researchers for a third time. Babad et al. (1999) found that initial perceptions of the instructor changed over the course of the semester; results revealed final evaluations were inconsistent with initial evaluations.

For the current research, rather than informing students that their instructor was characterized as intelligent, skillful, industrious, warm or cold, determined, practical

and cautious, our central trait manipulation was conducted through the construction of two syllabi: one written in a friendly tone, and one written in an unfriendly tone. We believed that students who read the syllabus written in a friendly tone would attribute warmth to their instructor while those who read the syllabus written in an unfriendly tone would attribute coldness to their instructor. To test the impact syllabus tone would have on subsequent impressions of the instructor, some of the students who participated in the study read only the friendly or unfriendly syllabus while others read the friendly or unfriendly syllabus and then watched a short video-taped lecture attributed to the syllabus' author. Unlike the [Babad et al. \(1999\)](#) research, we administered our dependent measures only once; as noted earlier, some completed the dependent measures after they read the syllabus, while others completed the dependent measures after they read the syllabus and watched a short video-taped lecture. In this manner, we could explore possible halo effects ([Nisbett and Wilson 1977](#); [Thorndike 1920](#)) caused by the syllabus. It was hypothesized that students' evaluation of an instructor who provided a syllabus written in a friendly tone would be evaluated more positively than an instructor who provided a syllabus written in an unfriendly tone.

1 Method

1.1 Participants

One hundred and seventy-two (172) Pennsylvania State University undergraduate students who were enrolled in introductory psychology took part in this experiment and received extra credit in exchange for their participation. Participants were tested in small groups of 20–30 students.

1.2 Stimulus materials

A base or “skeleton” syllabus was created in order that identical topics could be included in the friendly and unfriendly syllabus. These topics focused on information thought to be necessary for an effective syllabus (see [Sudreth and Galloway 2006](#)). For the current research, the base syllabus was modified to reflect the desired tone of each syllabus using characteristics hypothesized by [Harnish et al. \(2011\)](#) to illustrate a positive or friendly syllabus tone. These characteristics included: (1) using positive or friendly language; (2) providing a rationale for assignments; (3) sharing personal experiences; (4) using humor; (5) conveying compassion; and (6) showing enthusiasm for the course. For example, in the syllabus written in a friendly tone, the instructor held “student hours”, and students were welcome to contact the instructor “outside of class and student hours. You may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message”. In contrast, for the syllabus written in an unfriendly tone, the instructor held, “office hours” and students could only contact the instructor during office hours. If students needed to contact the instructor “outside of office hours, you may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message”. Similar friendly/unfriendly tone manipulations were done on the following sections of the syllabus: (1) the course description (2) course goals and objectives (3) instructor's

teaching philosophy and beliefs (4) attendance policy (5) class participation (6) missed exams or assignments policy (7) grading policy, and (8) learning resources available to students. Table 1 details the wording differences between the two syllabi.

1.3 Measures

Participants completed a questionnaire modeled after Buchert et al. (2008) which included items similar to those found on a university-sponsored teacher evaluation form. The following items measured perceived instructor approachability: “The instructor encourages students to ask questions and express their knowledge”. “The instructor is available to assist students”. “The instructor provides constructive feedback on students’ work that helps students improve”. “The instructor clearly communicates expectations for student achievement”. “The instructor clearly communicates the importance of the subject matter”. Participants rated the instructor on a 5-point Likert-type scale with response options which ranged from *not at all* to *very much*. The items were combined to form an approachability index (Cronbach coefficient alpha was .82).

Items that assessed the instructor’s ability to motivate students included: “How much do you like the professor after reading the syllabus?” “How likely would you be to schedule a class with this professor?” “Do you think you will want to take another course from this instructor?” “Do you think you will have a more positive attitude about this subject matter after taking a course with this instructor?” Items were rated using a 5-point Likert-type scale with response options which ranged from *not at all* to *very much*. The items were combined to form a motivation index. Cronbach coefficient alpha for the motivation index was .86.

Participants also rated the instructor on two items that addressed difficulty of the course. These items were: “Compared to other courses, how hard would you expect to work in a course led by this instructor?” and “Compared to other professors, how difficult do you expect this professor to be?” A 5-point Likert-type scale with response options which ranged from *not at all* to *very much* was used. Items were combined to form a difficulty index (Cronbach coefficient alpha was .77).

Finally, participants, using a 5-point Likert-type scale with response options which ranged from *not at all* to *very much*, rated the instructor on 18 trait adjectives modeled after Asch (1946). The order in which the trait adjectives were presented was randomized. The traits which measured the target’s warmth were: *humorous*, *imaginativeness*, *sociable*, *generous*, and *popular*. The warm traits were combined to form a warmth index. Cronbach coefficient alpha for the warmth index was .79. Another set of items reflected the instructor’s coldness: *irritable*, *ruthless*, *shrewd*, *self-centered*, and *unhappy*. The cold traits were combined to form a coldness index; Cronbach coefficient alpha was .84.

1.4 Procedure

Participants were told that the psychology department was in the process of reviewing potential candidates for an adjunct position within the department. The faculty search

Table 1 Description of emotional tone in cold and warm syllabus sections

	Cold	Warm
Office hours	Office Hours: 233 Jones Hall MWF 10:00–10:50 a.m. TR 9:30–10:30 a.m. jsmith@hotmail.com If you need to contact me outside of office hours, you may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message	Student hours: 233 Jones Hall MWF 10:00–10:50 a.m. TR 9:30–10:30 a.m. jsmith@hotmail.com I welcome you to contact me outside of class and student hours. You may email me, call my office, or contact the department and leave a message
Course description	When you think about psychology, what comes to mind? My guess is that you thought about Dr. Phil, the old Frazier sitcom, or someone that “helps” people. That is a typical first impression of the field; one that excludes many other topics that fall under the heading of “psychology” that you haven’t thought of . . .	When you think about psychology, what comes to mind? My guess is that you thought about Dr. Phil, the old Frazier sitcom, or someone that “helps” people. Not bad for a first impression of the field, but there are many other topics that fall under the heading of “psychology” that you haven’t thought of . . .
Course goals and objectives	Some of the specific skills you should obtain in this course are listed below. Because you are not yet a critical consumer of information about mental processes and behavior, all of these activities will help you become one, and if you are motivated enough, use the skills in your daily life	Some of the specific skills I hope you will obtain in this course are listed below. Being a critical consumer of information about mental processes and behavior is important; all of these activities will help you become one, and it is my hope that you will use the skills in your daily life
Instructor’s teaching philosophy and beliefs	This course is a bit like a restaurant . . . My job is like the chef in the restaurant. I serve up the “food” via lectures and assignments. It’s your job to “eat” what I prepare. However, unlike your mom or dad who told you to clean your plate, I will not hound you if you’re not hungry. That is your choice and your choice alone...	This course is a bit like a restaurant . . . My job is like the chef in the restaurant. I want to serve you the most appetizing and nutritious food I can. But unlike meals with your family, I will not hound you if you are not hungry. Why? Well, from my experiences with my own kids, I know I cannot make you eat . . .
Attendance	I expect you to attend every class. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, I will drop you from the class roster in accordance with the University attendance policy	You should attend every class but extenuating circumstances arise that can make this difficult. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, you may be overextended and should drop the class per the University attendance policy
Class participation	Come prepared to actively participate in this course. This is the best way to engage you in learning the material (and it makes the lectures more interesting . . .	I hope you actively participate in this course. I say this because I found it is the best way to engage you in learning the material (and it makes the lectures more fun) . . .

Table 1 continued

	Cold	Warm
Missed exams or assignments	Unfortunately, illnesses, death in the family or other traumatic events are part of life. Such events are no excuse for not contacting me within 24 h of the event and provide documentation. If you contact me within 24 h of the event and provide documentation, a make-up exam will be given	Unfortunately, illnesses, death in the family or other traumatic events are part of life. Such events are unwelcomed and because I understand how difficult these times are, if you contact me within 24 h of the event and provide documentation, I will be happy to give you a make-up exam
Grading	Exams are necessary to assess your mastery of core concepts . . . For most students, exams will take approximately 45 to complete, but you will have the full class meeting time (80) . . .	Exams are necessary to assess your mastery of core concepts . . . For most students, exams will take approximately 45 to complete, but please take your time and remember that you have the full class meeting time (80) . . .
Learning resources for students	At some point in your life, you asked an expert for help with something. If you find yourself not understanding the assigned readings, lectures and assignments, please set up an appointment with me . . .	We've all needed help in something at some point in our lives. If you find yourself not understanding the assigned readings, lectures and assignments, please set up an appointment with me . . .

committee had selected a candidate, but before offering the candidate the position, student opinions about the candidate were needed. Students were informed that “due to scheduling difficulties, the candidate was not available to present the lecture that she had done for faculty”.

For those students assigned to the no video condition, they were told “She left behind supporting materials, including a course syllabus, which students could review. Because the course syllabus seemed most relevant for students, we have made copies and now would like you to carefully review the candidate’s syllabus for an introductory psychology course that she teaches and then evaluate her”. A packet containing a syllabus (one written in either a friendly or unfriendly tone) and the questionnaire containing the dependent measures was presented to participants.

Those students assigned to the video condition were told, “Due to scheduling difficulties, the candidate was not available to present the lecture that she had done for faculty; however, she agreed that we could film her lecture and show it to you after you review some of the supporting materials she provided. Because the course syllabus seemed most relevant for students, we have made copies and now would like you to carefully review the candidate’s syllabus for an introductory psychology course that she teaches. Once everyone has reviewed the syllabus, we will play the video recording of the lecture and ask you to evaluate her”. After reviewing the syllabus (one written in either a friendly or unfriendly tone), participants watched the introduction to “*Deadly Persuasion: The Advertising of Alcohol and Tobacco*” a video lecture presented by Jean Kilbourne (2003). This served as the recorded lecture from the faculty candidate.

The Kilbourne video was selected for two reasons: (1) we felt the topic matter would capture the attention of students; and (2) although Dr. Kilbourne was personable in the video, she did not appear to be overly friendly or unfriendly. Thus, we believed students could attribute the syllabus tone to that of the actor in the video supporting their initial perceptions (i.e., a halo effect would be possible). None of the students had seen the video prior to the experiment.

2 Results

A series of 2 (Tone of Syllabus: Friendly, Unfriendly) \times 2 (Video: Present, Absent) ANOVAs were conducted on the dependent measures (i.e., coldness index, warmth index, approachability index, motivation index and difficulty index). For all the analyses, Sidak-Bonferroni adjusted p -values were used to counter the effect of multiple testing with a family-wise alpha error set at 1%. Only significant results are reported for the following indices.

2.1 Coldness index

A main effect for the tone of the syllabus read occurred, $F(1, 168) = 67.28$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .29$. Those who read the syllabus written in an unfriendly tone rated the hypothetical adjunct candidate as being colder ($M = 2.42$, $SD = .78$) than those who read the syllabus written in a friendly tone ($M = 1.62$, $SD = .47$).

2.2 Warmth index

For the warmth index, two main effects occurred. Those who received the syllabus written in a friendly tone rated the target as being warmer ($M = 3.52$, $SD = .59$) than those who read the syllabus that was written in an unfriendly tone ($M = 2.82$, $SD = .76$), $F(1, 168) = 39.87$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$. In addition, a main effect emerged for the video manipulation such that those who did not see the videotaped lecture rated the candidate warmer ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .78$) than those who watched the videotaped lecture ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .68$), $F(1, 168) = 10.77$, $p < .002$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$.

2.3 Approachability index

A main effect for the tone of the syllabus was observed, $F(1, 168) = 8.75$, $p < .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Those who read the syllabus written in a friendly tone rated the target as being more approachable ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .60$) compared to those who read the syllabus written in an unfriendly tone ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .73$). Also, a main effect for the video manipulation occurred, $F(1, 168) = 8.64$, $p < .005$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Those who saw the videotaped lecture rated the target as less approachable ($M = 3.81$, $SD = .71$) compared to those who did not see the videotaped lecture ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .62$).

2.4 Motivation index

Two main effects were observed for this analysis. Those who read the syllabus written in a friendly tone rated the instructor as being more motivated to teach the course ($M = 3.60$, $SD = .80$) than those who received the syllabus that was written in an unfriendly tone ($M = 3.07$, $SD = .80$), $F(1, 168) = 19.16$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. Additionally, there was a main effect for the video manipulation, $F(1, 168) = 6.29$, $p < .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Those who did not watch the videotaped lecture rated the instructor as being more motivated to teach the course ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .88$) than those who watched the videotaped lecture ($M = 3.22$, $SD = .79$).

2.5 Difficulty index

A main effect for the tone of the syllabus read occurred, $F(1, 168) = 10.36$, $p < .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. Those who read the syllabus written in an unfriendly tone rated the course as being more difficult ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .71$) than those who read the syllabus written in a friendly tone ($M = 3.34$, $SD = .73$).

In sum, we found that students rated the instructor whose syllabus was written in a friendly tone as being warmer, less cold, more approachable, and more motivated to teach the course compared to the instructor whose syllabus possessed an unfriendly tone. It is interesting to note that participants expected the course taught by the instructor whose syllabus was written in friendly tone to be easier than the course taught by the same instructor but whose syllabus was written in an unfriendly tone. We also found that students who watched a short video-taped lecture of the instructor perceived the instructor to be less warm, less approachable, and less motivated to teach the course compared to students who did not watch the video-taped lecture.

3 Discussion

Much has been written about factors that can influence initial perceptions of faculty and courses. However, one shortcoming of this body of research is the lack of experimental research on the manner in which the tone of a syllabus affects perceptions of an instructor and the course. Our results revealed that a syllabus written in a friendly tone had a significant impact on how the instructor was perceived. These findings are consistent with observations noted earlier which suggested that the tone of a syllabus can create impressions about an instructor and a course (DiClementi and Handelsman 2005; Grunert 1997; Harnish et al. 2011; McKeachie 1986; Rubin 1985).

Interestingly, students who saw the short video-taped lecture rated the instructor as less warm, less approachable and less motivated than those who did not watch the video-taped lecture. What might account for these findings? One explanation is students were presented with additional information about the instructor; they were able to listen to a short lecture and in doing so many more cues were available for students to use to form an impression. For example, students could form impressions of the instructor based on perceived physical attractiveness, gender, speaking style,

and topic matter. Such cues are more salient than those used in the course syllabus and salient cues are used most heavily in making evaluations (Taylor and Fiske 1978). Viewed from a cognitive consistency perspective (see Abelson 1968 for an overview), the additional (salient) cues presented in the video-taped lecture may have caused cognitive inconsistencies in students' initial evaluation of the instructor which was based on either the syllabus written in a friendly or unfriendly tone. Faced with new cognitions about the instructor, students may have felt pressure to resolve the inconsistency (i.e., cognitive dissonance) and changed their evaluations by adding consonant cognitions. According to consistency theories, inconsistency engenders attitude change such that when relevant cognitions conflict, an attitude becomes unstable and open to change. Moreover, the cognitive consistency perspective provides a framework in which prior central trait research conducted in an educational setting can be integrated. For example, in the Babad et al. (1999) and Buchert et al. (2008) studies, students were exposed to their professor throughout the semester and initial attitudes form about the professor changed. In contrast, in the Griffin (2001) and McClelland (1970) studies, students were given a prompt to recall their initial attitudes about their professors. Such reminders served as a cue for cognitive consistency in students' attitudes and their subsequent evaluations.

As in the Babad's (1999) research, we also observed that students who read the syllabus written in a friendly tone (i.e., they attributed warmth to the instructor) thought the course would be less difficult than those who received the syllabus written in an unfriendly tone. Our participants primarily were first year college students in their first semester who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course. A friendly-toned syllabus might have evoked memories of the tone used by high school instructors. Certainly, the friendly syllabus may have been inconsistent with students' schemas about college courses and college professors. Alternatively, the finding can be explained by two underlying dimensions on which individuals are judged: competence and likeability (Rosenberg and Sidlak 1972). Research has demonstrated a negative relationship between the dimensions of competency and likeability (Cuddy et al. 2004; Judd et al. 2005; Kervyn et al. 2009). For example, the elderly are seen as warmer when also described as lower in competence (i.e., forgetful) (Cuddy et al. 2005). We might be observing a similar effect in the current study; those who read the syllabus written in a friendly tone perceived the course to be easier while those who read the syllabus written in an unfriendly tone perceived the course to be more difficult.

The current research has some limitations that should be acknowledged because they point to directions for future research. Unlike the Babad et al. (1999) research which served as our conceptual framework, the present study was a laboratory study and because of its more controlled nature lacks ecological validity. Students did not have a class taught by an instructor whose syllabus they read and who they interacted over the course of a semester. Moreover, the assessment of the instructor and course occurred after examining the course syllabus or after examining the course syllabus and then watching a 5 min video-taped lecture. Future research is needed to determine the impact a syllabus might have throughout and at the end of a semester. This research is important because it is commonly assumed by faculty that students will revisit a syllabus throughout the semester for course information. If this assumption is true, will the syllabus serve as a prompt for students' initial impressions of an instructor?

Other factors affect student evaluation of teaching and instructor warmth as well; some are beyond the instructor's control. Indeed, factors such as the instructor's physical attractiveness (Ambady and Rosenthal 1992, 1993; Best and Addison 2000; Babad et al. 2004), gender (Feldman 1993; Basow 1995, 2000; Centra and Gaubatz 2000; Ory 2001), likability (Frymier 1994), reputation (Griffin 2001), and formality of dress (Gurung and Vespia 2007) can affect how students perceive instructors. Future research should examine the way in which physical attractiveness, gender, speaking style, course topic matter, and teaching style interact with a course syllabus to form expectations about a course.

Our findings take on even more importance in that the way in which students receive their syllabus is rapidly changing. While traditionally students were greeted by their instructor first and then presented with a syllabus, new technological advancements and course management software allow for the posting of syllabi prior to class meetings. Moreover, a recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) reported that 66% of U.S. post-secondary institutions offered some type of distance education during the 2006–2007 academic year. Distance education can be defined as “education or training courses delivered to remote (off-campus) sites via audio, video (live or prerecorded), or computer technologies, including both synchronous (i.e., simultaneous) and asynchronous (i.e., not simultaneous) instruction” (Carnes et al. 2003, p. 162). Given the financial pressures post-secondary institutions are experiencing coupled with student demand for convenient and flexible access to courses, it is likely that demand will increase for courses delivered via distance education. As institutions of higher learning move toward offering more courses via distance education, it is possible some students might never “meet” their instructor (e.g., those who take an online course). In such cases, initial impressions formed of faculty based upon syllabus tone will play a more important role in determining student evaluations of teaching.

There are important implications that can be drawn from our research. We found that presenting students with an effective syllabus written in a friendly, approachable tone can influence perceptions of the instructor and the course. Consequently, creating a syllabus for a course should not be an afterthought for instructors. Indeed, care should be taken in developing the syllabus with particular attention to its tone, because impressions are made that may facilitate faculty engagement with students. Such impressions, in turn, may set the stage for a more rewarding educational experience for those on both sides of the lectern.

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