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The Change from Syllabus-Focused Curriculum Courses to Object-Focused Curriculum: A Case Study at Alzaytoonah University—Part 1

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Abstract

This research sheds the light on the steps and procedures taken by the University of Alzaytoonah, in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, to convert their course delivery system from a Syllabus focused to object focused course. The research lists the current system, its deficiencies, describes the measurements taken to put the new system in place, faculty training, course objectives writing, as well as syllabus re-writing. The research also explains the benefits the university hopes to gain from making such a change, as well as its effect on both, faculty as well as the student community.

Keywords: Object focused course, syllabus, online learning,

1.1 Introduction

Researchers have identified different phases students go through when taking a class. Learners go through different phases of learning. Based on Bloom (1956), learners acquire three levels of knowledge: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. Schulman (2002), in contrast, identified a six-stage learning process: engagement and motivation, knowledge and understanding, performance and action, reflection and critique, judgment and design, and commitment and identity. Traditional universities rely heavily on the concept of a syllabus that states the assignments, homework, and due dates for the course. Nevertheless, researchers found that the concept of the syllabus alone is not enough for students to excel in competition when they graduate (Sharma, Sastri, & Ahluwalia, 2010). Furthermore, assignments and exercises were identified as poorly constructed in providing guidance to what teachers need to teach and what students need to learn (Sharma et al., 2010).

An educational system should focus on transitioning the knowledge from teachers to students (Govindasamy, 2002). Students need to be able to learn not just new information, but gain the skills, experience, and abilities to solve problems (Govindasamy, 2002). To link the student to real-lifep material, and to ensure all students graduate with the minimum knowledge expected, schools decided to direct the student to complete certain objectives rather than simply list topics in the syllabus to complete (Sharma et al., 2010). However, most course material identified in the syllabus did not include any course objectives (Sharma et al., 2010).

2.1 Defining Objectives

Setting course objectives means that the student will be capable of performing specific tasks (or agenda) after course completion (Faibisoff & Willis, 1987). Establishing a clear definition of what learning object means is very important. Unfortunately, researchers differ in defining the term (Bennett & McGee, 2005; Littlejohn, 2003; Metros, 2005; Muzio, Heins, & Mundell, 2002; Parrish, 2004; Wiley et al., 2004). The problem lies in the goal behind researchers and faculty defining the objectives. Many researchers emphasize technology issues such as adaptability, reusability, and standardization (Downes, 2001; Koppi, Bogle, & Bogle, 2005; Littlejohn, 2003; Muzio et al., 2002; Siqueira, Melo, & Braz, 2004), whereas other researchers focus on technology characteristics instead (Baruque & Melo, 2004; Bradley & Boyle, 2004; Cochrane, 2005; Wiley et al., 2004). Diamond (1989), Lowman (1995), Huba and Freed (2000), and McKeachie (2002) defined course-learning objectives as items that instructors expect students to achieve by the end of the course. Alonso, López, Manrique, and Viñes (2008) defined objectives as knowledge or skill the learner needs to acquire by the end of a period (usually the end of the class).

3.1 The Current Architecture

Alzaytoonah is one of many private universities currently operating in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The university does not currently have an online program and offers various programs in different majors. One of the

majors the university offers is a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. For the purpose of this research, the Business Administration department was selected.

In the Business Administration department, courses are determined and assigned to faculty by the department dean; instructors are responsible for setting the course syllabus and picking the books they see fit for the course. Courses span a 5-day period in which students attend classes either twice a week, 1.5 hours per session, or three times a week, 1 hour per session. For courses shared among more two or more faculty members, the first, second, and final examinations are shared. The grade distribution is set by the Ministry of Education in as is show in Table 1.

Table 1: Grade distribution in Alzaytoonah University courses.

Item	**Total Points**	**Percentage**
First Exam	20	20%
Second Exam	20	20%
Final Exam	50	50%
Participation and course activity	10	10%

Students must not be absent for over than 15% of the total time or they will be dropped. Faculty is responsible for taking attendance and submitting "drop" forms for students who pass the percentage.

3.1.1 Problems with the current architecture

Due to the rigid structure the Ministry of Education imposes on the university faculty, faculty can use only 10% of the total points to evaluate the student, the administration focused on improving the delivery system to enable them to better evaluate student knowledge by changing the course delivery and content from evaluating students purely on how much of the reading material they know to how well they understand the topic and can actually apply what they learn in the market. Another problem with the current system is that faculty allocation the 10% participation and activity on attendance only. Mostly because there is no centralized course delivery system that provides faculty with the proper quizzes, assignments and activity work leaving it to the faculty to do the work, taking into consideration that this requires more work from the faculty, causing them to lean towards allocating the participation to student absence . Finally, other problems include not being able to evaluate the faculty themselves. Looking at student grades alone does not reflect how well (or how bad) a faculty is, some faculty make their tests easy giving most of their students high grades while others make their tests so difficult that the highest grade is 70 (which is a C).

4.1 The New Proposed Architecture

In 2012, the university headed toward gaining accreditation from the Quality Assurance Department, a department created by the Ministry of Education to ensure universities abide by international educational standards. The goal behind the change is to improve the education students experience in the course, enable students to compete in the global market after they graduate, and to be able to make all processes transparent to monitor and improve the organization. Some of the changes requested by the Quality Assurance Department that concerns this research included the following:

Making major changes to the syllabus. Instead of having a syllabus that is vague and general, the syllabus needs to include the policies set by the university, as well as those of the course instructor.

Every course needs to have 10 to 12 objectives students need to achieve (or gain) by the end of the course.

Objectives need to be tied to the reading material assigned to the course

Each question in examinations (first, second, and final) must be tied to one or more objective.

Participation grade needs to be evaluated using assignments, quizzes, and other activities; course attendance should not be part of the participation grade.

The changes listed above are a clear indication of the intention of the university to change its direction from providing syllabus-focused courses to providing students with object-focused courses. A committee consisting of five faculty members was formed. The committee worked with faculty members in the department to assign objectives for each course. To ensure that faculty are knowledgeable in creating objectives, several sessions were

held explaining the different concepts and methodologies to creating course objectives. I presented the sessions, having worked with more than eight other universities teaching courses, creating curriculum, and writing course objectives (called terminal course objectives in some schools). Faculty was instructed to consider the following when writing the course objectives:

Objectives need to be easy to assess.

Objectives need to test student skills based on Bloom's taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

Each objective needs to use at least one of the verbs listed in Table 2 which is also based on Bloom's taxonomy.

Table 2: Some Useful Verbs Used to Create Course Objectives Based on Blooms Taxonomy's Principle

Knowledge	Conclude, Describe, Identify.
Comprehension	Interpret, Discuss, Demonstrate, Review, Summarize.
Application	Solve, Apply, Show, Demonstrate.
Analysis	Analyze, Explain, Research, Compare, Differentiate.
Synthesis	Construct, Build, Rewrite, Produce.
Evaluation	Evaluation, Critic, Rank, Justify.

After faculty completed setting their objectives, they submitted them to the committee. The committee would then evaluate each objective, ensuring it follows Bloom's taxonomy and meets the course and department goals.

Next, faculty was asked to use a fixed format for their syllabus. A digital form, suggested by the Educational Ministry Department and enhanced by the university was given to each faculty member. The form consisted of new components that did not exist in the old syllabus format. Table 3 demonstrates the major differences between the two formats:

Table 3: Comparison Between Old Syllabus Structure and New Syllabus Structure

New syllabus format	Old syllabus format
Faculty Information: Name, office hours, e-mail, office location and number	*Faculty Information:* Name, office hours.
Weekly planner: Included the following for each week: Reading material from book and other sources to be covered. Assignments and quizzes due that week. Objective(s) to be covered during the week. Reading material: Page numbers taken from assigned book as well as third party sources (links).	*Weekly planner:* Included the following for each week: Bullet point of topics to be covered that week. Reading material: Page numbers taken from assigned book.
Course Objectives: A list of competencies students should achieve by the end of the course.	*Course Objectives:* Did not exist.
Department Policy: A paragraph listing the faculty policies and rules.	*Department Policy:* Did not exist.
School Policy: Listed university policies including attendance and participation policies.	*School Policy:* Did not exist.

As can be seen in Table 2, the new syllabus format has greater detail and is focused toward the objectives rather than the reading material. Furthermore, assignments, quizzes, and reading material all support the objectives.

Finally, faculty is also required to tie their tests questions to the objectives listed in their syllabus. Students will be using the new format and will be evaluated based on the criteria listed in their new syllabus. Test scores and student and faculty questionnaires will be used to evaluate the process and determine whether the new system is preferred by students (and faculty) or not (and why not)! Furthermore, the next study will explore student test scores using the new system and compare them to scores for the same course held in previous sessions (using the old syllabus-focused architecture) to determine under which architecture students performed better.

5.1 The Next Step

Now that the infrastructure for the transformation has been put in place, faculty will start implementing the new strategy in their courses. Evaluating whether the program succeeds or fails in providing better education to our students will take time, but as students complete tests, course, questionnaires, it should become feasible to determine whether or not the university education quality has improved.

The next step includes enforcing the new changes on faculty and making sure there is constant supervision over both students and faculty. It's not easy changing faculty minds to start using the new system, especially if they have been using the old one for many years, but over a period of time, and with constant training, the transition should be easy to complete.

Finally, it's very important to make use the e-learning system available at the university. Even though the University does not provide e-learning courses, it provides faculty with Moodle, an online course system that enables faculty to put their course content online, give tests online, and grade and provide students with feedback online. This is a valuable source for evaluating students as well as tracking the university's intellectual capital, which has become a major factor among competing organizations including universities (Najim, Mohamed, & Alnaji, 2012).

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