UDC 811.111

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NARRATIVIZE THIS: AN UNLIKELY CASE

Behind the need to communicate is the need to share.
Behind the need to share is the need to be understood.
(Leo Rosten).
We are all united by one single desire to be valued by another.
(Dale Carnegie)

The present paper addresses the issue of narrativization of educational materials with focus on syllabi. The study applies discourse analysis to reveal the linguistic essence of visual syllabi. We look at narrativization via visualization, on the one hand, and empathizing and marketization, on the other. The paper analyses several specific cases of innovative visual syllabi through the lens of the above parameters.
Key words*: variation, narrativization, visual syllabus, empathy, marketization.*

Статтю присвячено розгляду наративізації освітніх матеріалів на прикладі описів навчальних курсів із застосуванням дискурсивного аналізу. Наративізація втілюється, з одного боку, через візуалізацію, а з іншого — за допомогою емпатії та маркетизації. Розглянуто низку кейсів інноваційних візуальних описів навчальних планів крізь призму зазначених параметрів.
Ключові слова*: варіативність, наративізація, візуальний опис навчального курсу, емпатія, маркетизація.*

Статья посвящена рассмотрению нарративизации учебных материалов на примере описаний учебных курсов с применением дискурсивного анализа. Нарративизация воплощается, з одной стороны, при помощи визуализации, а с другой — через эмпатию и маркетизацию. Рассматривается ряд кейсов инновационных визуальных описаний учебных курсов сквозь призму указанных параметров.
Ключевые слова: *вариативность, нарративизация, визуальное описание учебного курса, эмпатия, маркетизация.*

Education is changing. So are curricula and syllabi. Alongside the more established practices and genre conventions, new and novel approaches pave their way.

In this paper, we aim to show some current trends in syllabi writing. We have studied 39 visual curricula with qualitative methods of linguistic inquiry, specifically, discourse analysis, with emphasis on the principle of variability (audience and context), and interpretative or linguistic repertoires. The relevance of our approach consists in identifying and emphasizing the phenomenon of syllabi narrativization.

Traditionally, educational administrators tend to admire the complexity of mundane paperwork. They praise verbose curricula with long (and mostly boring) introductions, rationales and all kinds of justifications and instructional caveats. Yet some of the unorthodox curricula and syllabi are breaking the rules. Basically, it's about visual narrating of educational content. Or telling stories. And it is stories that make us human (Gottschall, 2013). And it's not even a bit surprising, if we consider the very phenomenon of «narrativist turn» with its»extensive discursive

promiscuity» (Kreiswirth, 1992) and overall «narrative ubiquity» (Herman, Jahn, Ryan, 2008) of various pan-narrative models that justify contextualizing and re-contextualizing of meaning. More and more syllabi drift away from purely descriptive lists to vivid narratives. We call this process narrativization in that it reflects discourse dynamics of educational materials.

Innovative approach to syllabi does not undermine the importance of its core elements, best summarized by Tona Hangen. Syllabi components should involve the following:

• Course information, including year, catalog number, section number, Gen Ed or departmental requirements it fulfills.

• Instructor information, including phone, email, office location, office hours, website.

• Course description (key dates, topics) and objectives (learning goals).

• Student Learning Outcomes, whether phrased explicitly or woven into the description/objectives.

• Required materials and textbooks, with ISBNs.

• Strategies or advice for course success.

• Course requirements, including clear grading scale & due dates.

• Assignments, in at least nominal detail.

• Detailed syllabus of course meetings, topics, readings, and what's due on each date.

• Guidelines for submission of assignments.

• Other course policies, like attendance, use of technology in class, academic honesty.

Resources for help, legal statement about disability accommodations. (Hangen, 2018).

At the same time, syllabi need to be modern(ized), or as David Gooblar points out, they should NOT be: first of all, syllabi should NOT look like contracts. And yes, they might even look more like a spread from a comic book than a contract. His pieces of advice boild down to this:

• **Keep it simple.** The syllabus is one of the first opportunities you have to communicate with your students. It is a chance to introduce your course, and to invite them to collaborate with you. This is not the time for elaborate language and ambiguity.

• **Limit how much you write**. You don't need to tell your students everything — right away. See if you can get your syllabus down to two pages. You don't need to tell students in August all the details about their fourth assignment, due in December.

• Make your syllabus at least somewhat **visually engaging**. **Think about how you might break up information in eye-catching ways.** Look for inspiration in magazine layouts, posters, brochures, and infographics (e.g. use an online infographic maker like Piktochart) (Gooblar, 2018).

The study conducted by Mary-Jon Ludy with co-authors clearly demonstrates that even though the students in their study responded positively to both types of

syllabi (i.e. «graphic-rich engaging syllabus» and «text-rich contractual syllabus»), the visual syllabus was rated more favorably in areas related to interest and motivation for the class as well as to the impressions of the instructor. (Ludy et al., 2016). Examples of «visual syllabi» or «syllabi gone infographics» are numerous: see, for, example https://bhpenglish.wordpress.com/2015/08.

So visualization in creating visual syllabi semmes to be a current hot trend. Let us emphasize several pertinent points, or rather, several lenses to look at the syllabi, on top of graphic-rich design. They are: **marketization** and **empathy**. So what's so special about syllabi in terms of the outlined parameters?

A visual narrative (or a visual storytelling) contains, according to Bruce Block, space, line, shape, tone (brightness of objects)*,* color, movement and rhythm (Block, 2007). But that's only part of the story, albeit a very important part**.**

Nancy Duarte emphasizes the role of visual storytelling for becoming an effective visual communicators: making a strong connection with the audience and leading them to a purposeful action via conveying your content with passion, persuasion, and impact. (Duarte, 2010). All of the above is related to empathy. Borrowed from aesthetics and psychology, «empathy» is a notion that is «difficult to define and hard to measure» (Kestenbaum, Farber, Sroufe, 1989). It is about «connoting a shared experience» (Eisenberg, 1989), it is also an «almost magical» emotion when «I and you» becomes «I am you,» or at least, «I might be you.» (Spiro, 2018). Accordingly, in linguistic and communication terms, empathy connotes similar ideas: «sharing another's feelings» (Tatsenko, 2018), and, what we believe the most important feature — building trust and emotional bonding via verbal and non-verbal devices (or the combination of both). The German word «Einfühlung» introduced by Theodor Lipps in 1903, and translated by the British-born psychologist Edward Titchener in 1909 as «empathy» is still a most widely used one.

Empathy has always been and still is a current hot topic in the humanities (Cialdini et al., 1997, Nowak, 2011, Herlin, Visapää, 2016**,** Eng, 2017, Ganczarek, Hünefeldt, Olivetti Belardinelli, 2018, Tatsenko, 2018). In educational context, Norman Eng (2017) call this «touching your audience», because, as he specifically emphasizes, ultimately, the students want to know two major things prior to taking a class: «Will the professor be nice?» and «Will this course be useful?» (Eng, 2018). He suggests reconsidering syllabi in this light. He gives some good examples:

INSTEAD OF	USE
You must complete makeup work to receive credit.	*You are welcome to make up missed work to earn credit.*
I only accept papers that are…	*I encourage you to submit papers that…*
Late work will result in a 40 % deduction.	*If your work is late, you can still qualify for 60 % of the original points.*

(Ibid.)

Above examples show the importance of acceptance, recognition and approval. They convey the unconscious need for validation: and don't we all crave it? Instead

of categorical «must», «you are welcome» sounds indeed inviting. Instead of «I only accept», communication-friendly «I <u>encourage you</u>» is used. The final example is a perfect case of optimistic «half-full» and pessimistic «half-empty» glass. Such encouraging approach fits in market-driven economy. Which brings to mind the notion of «marketization».

The word itself is quite transparent, at least in terms of economics. In the linguistic sense, however, it was first used by T. Yakhontova in her seminal paper «Selling» or «Telling»? The issue of cultural variation in research genres» (2002) to denote culture specific traits of Anglo-Saxon writings (this important issue was first addressed by R. Kaplan (1987), which she and, sometime earlier, J. Hinds (1997) qualifies in terms of «writer responsibility» that results in «reader oriented» texts.

Norman Eng thinks of a syllabus as a sales brochure (or sales page — called so online) employing AIDA formula (attention-interest-desire-action) that addresses:

- Some sort of a decision or issue one might face
- The benefit one gets from consuming a product or service
- How potential customers can learn about a product or service (Eng, 2018)

Even the cursory glance at narrativized visual curricula reveals the abundance of linguistic devices employed to perform just that. Here belong rhetorical questions, the constant use of «you», initially positioned -ly adverbs, adjectives that convey positive evaluations any other devices. Examples:

How do you feel about .... ?
Would you like to ...
You can consider ....
You might find ... helpful.
You will be surprised...
All you need to do is to ....»
As soon as you ...
A simple way / method to change it will be to ...»
Simply put,
Probably the best...
There's no substitute for simply [doing sth] ...
Periodically, you will find...
Frequently...
Definitely ...
Exactly ...
Completely...
Quickly ...
Certainly...

In her syllabus, Erin McLaughlin, who teaches «Multimedia Writing and Rhetoric»emphasizes big questions the course will address:

WHAT IS «LITERACY» AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

What does it mean to be «literate» in the 21st Century? What import do these literacies have for knowledge production, civic participation, community identification, and so on?

WHAT IS THE IMPORT OF MEDIUM TO MESSAGE? TO RHETORIC?

What rhetorical practices are invited/constrained by the medium? What cultural attitudes shape the text? Which genres matter most, and in what contexts?

HOW DOES MEDIA LITERACY IMPACT IDENTITY & COMMUNITIES?

How do you use media to craft an identity? What kinds of media are important in your intended major, profession, club, etc? What arguments are relevant in those communities, and what form do those arguments take? (Clark, 2014).

Similar questions are used in narrativized visual syllabi:

Why study…?

Why should you want to study…?

What should you be able to know and do by the end of this course?

Such questions invite further story to unfold.

Lolita Paff (cited in Bart, 2015) advocates learner-centered approach to teaching. She suggests rewriting more raditional sullabi thus:

BEFORE. *Econ102 is an introduction to microeconomic analyses and policies. Microeconomic deals with the behavior of individuals and firms and how the behavior is influenced by government policy. The principal objective of the course is to enable students to analyze major microeconomic issues, clearly and critically.*

AFTER. *Why should you want to study microeconomics? Alfred Marshall defined economics as the study of people in the ordinary business of life. Every choice you make, from what time to get up ... whether or not to go to class ... how long to study, or work, or how much to eat, or where to go on Thursday nights ... ALL of it incorporates microeconomic principles. Microeconomics helps us to understand how people and firms make choices, how markets are organized, why and how markets behave differently, and the effects government interventions have in market outcomes. I LOVE this course, and I am hoping that by the end of the semester you will develop a deep appreciation for the subject.*

As David Gooblar (2018) points out, many of us have our hands tied to some extent when it comes to syllabus-making: departments require certain formats and certain information. He suggests trying the following: even if you can't turn your syllabus into a mini graphic novel, you can work to make it simpler, clearer, and more visually appealing: just remember the **chief rhetorical purpose** of the syllabus — to convince your students to **buy** in to your course.

Marketization goes hand in glove with audience sensitivity. Perhaps it was Tona Hangen who best verbalized this subtle issue. She even suggests the original classification of students and tries to incorporate this into her syllabi. Below you will find her take on the issue, with my comments:

«*I was looking for a way to arrange it…<u>less text-y</u>, more <u>visually engaging</u>, more <u>like a magazine or a website</u>.*	**visualizing syllabus is paramount**
I have realized that my classroom invariably contains <u>multiple audiences</u> — those with an <u>antipathy to</u> history, <u>a severe learning disability</u>, <u>functional illiteracy</u>, or an <u>allergy to opening the textbook</u> who are just hoping to escape my clutches with a <u>barely-passing grade</u>; a few coveted slots for	**multiple audience analysis (see classification below)**

Honors students who are usually strong discussants but are rarely history majors; some passionate budding young historians or future schoolteachers; recent immigrants for whom American history is a vast cipher; sometimes even a retiree on the free-tuition program whose life experience overlaps the course content… and usually the majority of young people eager to learn and engage with course ideas but so overworked from second jobs and demands of the commuter-student life that they are more likely than not to fall asleep in class and would prefer to be «fed» information rather than be made to work for their knowledge.	
«Mild» (Waders) *means that students tend to assume (for the sake of clarity if they are beginners to history or the content of the course is all new for them) that what I say reinforces what the textbook says which reinforces what the reader's primary sources tell us about the past.* **«Medium» (Snorkelers)** *students are beginning to understand that history is a conversation and that they can enter that conversation; they may notice inconsistencies between their readings and what I say in lecture, and may be confident enough to raise those in (respectful) discussion. They are perceptive of the areas where their own knowledge is strong or weak. They know that what they're being offered on the syllabus is not all there is to know. Snorkelers are interested in in how and why things happened as they did.*	**students who rely mostly on textbook content** **students with critical thinking**
«Spicy» (Divers) *go beyond the surface, seek out alternative sources, recognize and challenge their own assumptions, eagerly seize the intellectual challenge that a wide-ranging historical survey can be. They encounter genuine moral consternation about what happened in the past and try to work through that using intellectual tools (reason, evidence, argument, theory). They care about what happened and draw connections that make the past relevant to their own experience and circumstances. They inscribe themselves somewhere on the wheel of history.»*	**advanced students able to think «outside the box»**
One section I expanded considerably this time around was the «Help and Resources».	**emphasis on resources used and help provided**

The above examples suggest strong audience analysis based on years of teaching experience. This classification is both complete and impeccable. I subscribe to each and every word of it.

Syllabi visualization, empathy and marketization are the signs of narrativization in unlikely places. Who would have ever thought that part of an educational sacred cow — syllabus — would turn some day into an advertising leaflet of sorts? Yet, in

post-modern times, anything is possible. And why not? Why not make classroom communication more user-friendly? Filled with compelling stories? With a visual syllabus as an exciting journey roadmap?

Our current findings offer a humble attempt to shed the light on some pedagogically relevant linguistic trends. Future research is still necessary to explore the potential of narrativized visual curricula for instruction and assessment. Because ideas, «the currency of the twenty-first century», as Carmine Gallo (2014) names them, «effectively packaged and delivered, can change the world».

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