



University of Liège
Institute for Teaching and Research in Higher Education

Writing and presenting a useful Course Syllabus

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Introduction I

- ▶ A huge number of universities prompting their teachers to submit a “course syllabus” for each of their courses

The *Course syllabus* is

- (a) a written document
- (b) reflecting the main aspects of course planning , usually through standardized items
- (c) written by the course coordinator
- (d) delivered yearly on his/her institution demand, at the beginning of each year
- (e) for the benefit of students

- ▶ The First class meeting as a necessary complement

Introduction II

- ▶ Focusing on four questions :
 - what ?
 - when and how ?
 - why ?
- ▶ The purpose of a syllabus should drive the content (Parkes & Harris, 2002)
- ▶ ... and some research results

Question1

What ?

16 items to be included in course syllabi according to the literature

- ▶ 1) Course title
- ▶ 2) Number of credits
- ▶ 3) Contacts
- ▶ 4) Learning objectives/outcomes
- ▶ 5) Contents
- ▶ 6) Learning activities and teaching methods
- ▶ 7) Course calendar
- ▶ 8) Assessment methods and criteria
- ▶ 9) Prerequisites
- ▶ 10) Multimedia supports
- ▶ 11) Recommended or required readings
- ▶ 12) Campus resources and tutoring services
- ▶ 13) Teaching philosophy
- ▶ 14) How the course fits into the curriculum
- ▶ 15) Learning advice
- ▶ 16) Ground rules and policies

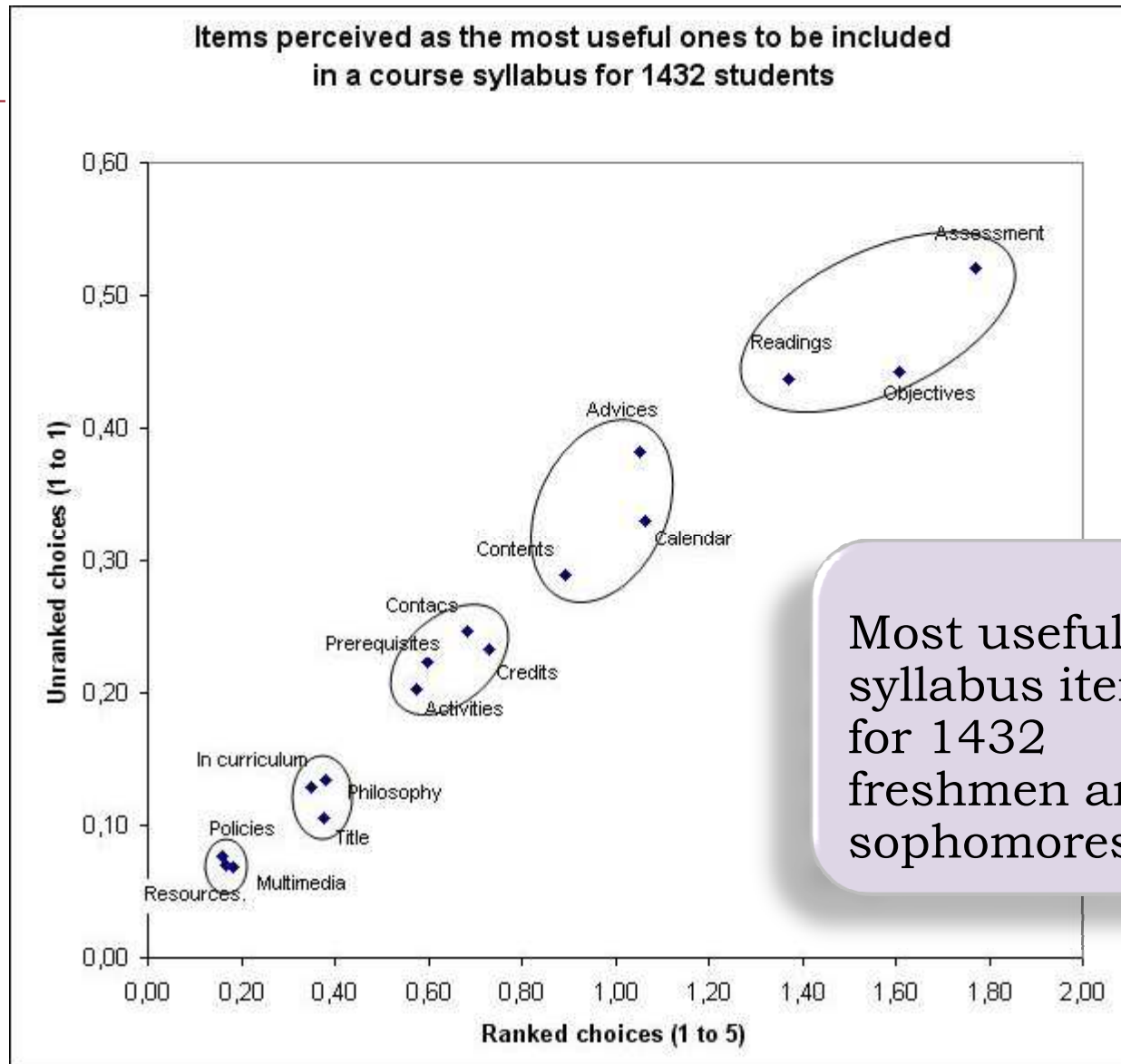
Answering the « what » question

- ▶ “What kind of information should I give them / could I give them ?”
- ▶ How much information : “Students are not usually telepathic”
(Collins, 1997)
- ▶ How much information : a matter of equity

A survey related to the « What ? » : instruments and participants

- ▶ *Out of this 16 options list, please select and rank the 5 most useful items for you.*
- ▶ 1432 students in 12 courses from 7 faculties of the ULg
 - 960 freshmen
 - 472 sophomores
- ▶ Questionnaires completed on the second day of class (in each course) during the fall of 2008.

Results



Most useful syllabus items for 1432 freshmen and sophomores

Seven comparable surveys

	Garavalia <i>et al.</i> (1999)	Becker & Calhoon (1999)	Marcis & Carr (2008)	Backer & Calhoon (2008)	Zucker (1992)	Smith & Razzouk (1993)	Perlman & McCann (1999)
Object of the survey	Which syllabus components (out of 31/ 39) are considered important by students	How much students would attend to 29 syllabus items	How much students would attend to 28 syllabus items	What item students looked for when they last viewed their syllabus	What students look for first in course syllabi	What students remembered looking at most frequently in the syllabus	What are the most useful things a faculty can do during a First class meeting according to students
Instru- ment	Likert-type scale from 1 to 5 ("not very important - very important")	Likert-type scale from 1 to 7 ("no attention at all – great deal of attention")	Likert-type scale from 1 to 7 ("no attention at all – great deal of attention")	Free choices (1 or more) out of 8 items	Open-ended question : "When I received the syllabus, the first thing I looked for was..."	Open-ended questions (students' ability to recall information from the syllabus)	Open-ended question : "What are the most useful things a faculty can do during a first class meeting ?"
Partici- pants	Pilot study : 83 undergraduate (Psychology) Primary study : 242 Undergraduates (Psychology)	863 undergraduates (psychology)	1726 undergraduate (Accounting)	204 undergraduate (Psychology)	194 undergraduate (4 content areas)	152 upper-division (Marketing)	570, undergraduates (Psychology)

Comparative results : our top 3

Notre enquête	Garavalia <i>et al.</i> (1999)	Becker & Calhoon (1999)	Marcis & Carr (2008)	Backer & Calhoon (2008)	Zucker (1992)	Smith & Razzouk (1993)	Perlman & McCann (1999)
N°1 = Assessment	3 out of the first 4 scores (on 31 / 39 items)	The 5 highest scores (on 29 items)	3 out of the first 4 scores (on 28 items)	Quiz = students' first look (62,5% and 60,2%)	43,81% for 4 related items (students' first look)	Related information most expected by surveyed students	Related information expected by 26% of surveyed students
N°2= Objectives	1 in the last 4 scores (on 31 / 39 items)	20th score (on 29 items)	19th score (on 28 items)	Not mentionned	3,09% for 1 related item	Not mentionned	Not mentionned
N°3= Readings	Omitted	3rd, 17th and 29th scores (on 29 items)	9th, 20th and 27th scores (on 28 items)	Readings = students' third look (57,1% and 36,6%)	4,13% for 2 related items	80% of surveyed students are able to remember information about textbooks	Not mentionned

Question 11

**When
& How ?**

The course syllabus : written and delivered at the beginning of the year

- ▶ “First, include all information that students *need* to have at the beginning of the course; second, include all information that students *need* to have in writing” (Altman & Cashin, 1992)
- ▶ ULg’s Commission « Contrat pédagogique » (1997) : “...so that the highest number of teachers delivers the completest information to students in writing and in time”
- ▶ Students hardly remember specific pieces of information about course planning (Smith & Razzouk, 1993)
- ▶ “ Try to think of the syllabus as an exercise in preventive medicine ”(Matejka & Kurke, 1994)

The importance of the first impressions

- ▶ Like the first class meeting, the syllabus offers an early point of contact between students and their professors (Hess, 2008), or the reality of their courses (Lulee, 2007; Collins, 1997)
- ▶ Both would be likely to impact (positively or negatively) the first impressions of students (Peer & Martin, 2005 ; Ishitama & Hartlaub, 2002)
- ▶ The syllabus is representative of the teacher's personality,
and the amount of work behind the course planning

First impressions related to the tone of the teacher

- ▶ The tone you adopt « sets the tone » of the course
- ▶ Direct impact of a warmful tone on students' retention (Littlefield, 1999)
- ▶ Premeditate the setting of the tone → adequacies :
 - between the « how » and the « who » you are
 - between what is presented and your actual behaviour on class (Fritschner, 2000)

First impressions related to the tone of the message

- ▶ Explicitly offering support to students in the course syllabus has a positive effect on their perception of the instructor (Perrine, Lisle & Tucker, 1995)
- ▶ Positive impact of a « reward » syllabus rather than a « punish » syllabus on students' perception of the instructor (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002)

Question III

Why ?

Functions of the course syllabus according to the literature

- ▶ Function of ***Contract***
- ▶ Function of ***Cognitive map***
- ▶ Function of ***Learning tool***

Functions of the course syllabus according to the literature

- ▶ Function of ***Contract*** :
 - Actual scope according to authors : from symbolic to legally binding
 - Evidentiary value and defensive shield
 - Adversary relationships versus sense of partnership
 - Flexibility, stability and security
- ▶ Function of ***Cognitive map***
- ▶ Function of ***Learning tool***

Functions of the course syllabus according to the literature

- ▶ Function of ***Contract***
- ▶ Function of ***Cognitive map*** :
 - A framework to give sense to the information
 - To « visualize » the aspects of course planning
 - To perceive the course as a whole
 - The metaphorical language used by the theorists
- ▶ Function of ***Learning tool***

Functions of the course syllabus according to the literature

- ▶ Function of ***Contract***
- ▶ Function of ***Cognitive map***
- ▶ Fonction de ***Learning tool***
 - An course syllabus enriched to facilitate learning
 - The « learning-centered » syllabus, promoting and directing actions
 - Taking into account students' perceptions related to their motivation, interests and needs

Impacting students' perceptions related to their motivation

Frequent general assertions disseminated in literature:

- ▶ “warm syllabi explain expectations in a clear and friendly fashion, encourage and **motivate** students” (Slattery & Carlson, 2005)
- ▶ “a syllabus can be used as a teaching tool to **motivate** students and keep both the teacher and the students focused on course objectives (Albers, 2003)”...

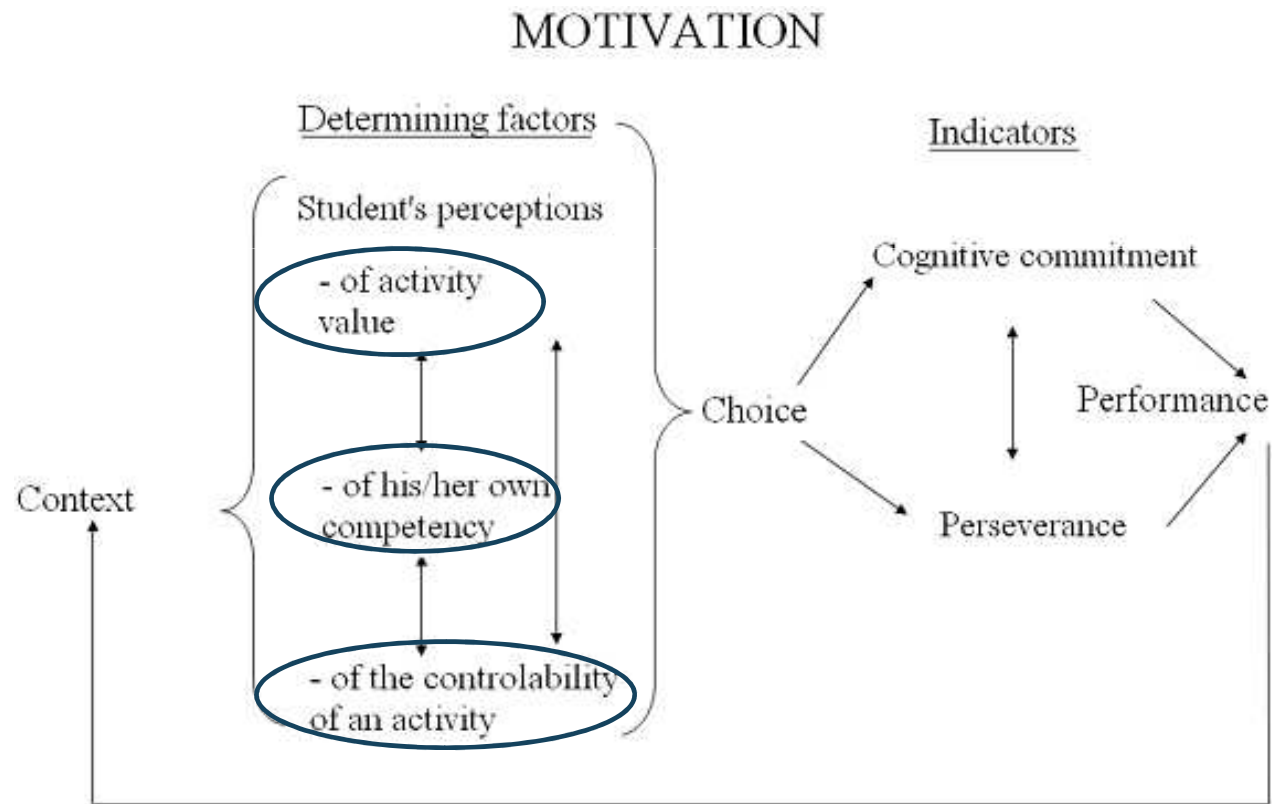
Impacting students' perceptions related to their motivation

Discussing influences on specific motivational factors :

- ▶ “the syllabus conveys enthusiasm for the subject and sparks student **interest** and motivation” (Hammons & Shock, 1994)
- ▶ “by making the implicit explicit and communicating that we believe that students **can and will succeed**, faculty ensure that all students have equal opportunities in the classroom” (Slattery & Carlson, 2005)
- ▶ “the *promising syllabus* fundamentally recognizes that people will learn best and most deeply when they have a strong sense of **control** over their own education” (Bain, quoted by Lang, 2006)

Impacting students' perceptions related to their motivation

The *motivational dynamic's* model of Viau (1995)



Impacting students' perceptions related to their needs

- ▶ From “the consideration of what students **need in order to be successful learners**” (Hess & Whittington, 2003)...
- ▶ ... to the support of “**developmental needs** of the students” (Haugen, 1998)...
- ▶ ... the *learning-centered* syllabus “appeals to students from a variety of backgrounds and responds to their **respective needs**” (The New School - A University)...
- ▶ ...“if thoughtfully prepared, your syllabus will demonstrate the interplay of your understanding of **students' needs**” (Grunert, 1997)”

Impacting students' perceptions related to their needs

The *Theory of human motivation* of Maslow (1943)

- ▶ Fundamental association of the basic need satisfactions with basic desires to know (“to be aware of reality, to get the facts, to satisfy curiosity, to see rather than to be blind”) and to understand (“to systematize, to organize, to analyze, to look for relations and meanings”).

- ▶ Proximity with students needs in academic context :

The need for self-actualization

The esteem needs

The love needs

The safety needs

The 'physiological' needs

- maintain a normal state (schedule, timing)
- sleepiness

Impacting students' perceptions related to their needs

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The 'physiological' needs

(+):

- undisrupted routine or rhythm, outline of rigidity, not only for the present but also far into the future

- fairness

- consistency, coherent, meaningful whole

- make the world look reliable, predictable, organized, orderly

(-):

- threats of punishment, tyranny

- unexpected, unmanageable things

- -afraid of parents' disapproval, or of being abandoned by his parents

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The 'physiological' needs

- hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group, belongingness needs (student / scientific community; relationship with teacher)

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The love needs

The safety needs

The 'physiological' needs

- desire for strength, achievement, adequacy, confidence in the face of the world, independence and freedom
- desire for reputation or prestige recognition, attention, importance or appreciation

Impacting students' perceptions related to their needs

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- ▶ Proximity with students needs in academic context :

The need for self-actualization

The esteem needs

The love needs

The safety needs

The 'physiological' needs

- desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming (perspectives for deepening, access to additional resources)

Back to the survey (part 2) : instrument and examples of answers

- ▶ What are the conative and cognitive perspectives that surveyed students associate with making these contents available to them ?
- ▶ *For each of your five choices of the most useful items to include, precise in a few words what you intend to do with them.*

▶ **Examples of comments formulated by students:**

Readings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In order to work with official documents - To draw up summaries with the help of the data - It allow me to read what is useful, to prepare the exam - In order to know what I'll have to spend money for
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To know how it will be useful for us later - It is important, in order to succeed, to know what is expected from us - It allows me to better visualize the course - To focus the work and the most important things for taking notes
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To know from the beginning of the year what to expect and organise my work accordingly - To read them before the exam in order to avoid surprises - To relieve stress and define my study method - To know how to study, it helps me to know if there will be open ended questions
▶ 30	for instance

Analysis of the students' answers

- ▶ Identification in the students' comments of :
 - ▶ action verbs and cognition verbs
 - ▶ the objects of this cognition
- ▶ Analysis through different theoretical sources:
 - ▶ the learning skills and *intellectual work tools*
 - ▶ the perceptions related to student's motivation (*value, competence and controlability*)
 - ▶ the safety needs and self-actualization needs
 - ▶ the *functions* of course syllabi and *FCM*

Voifs,
2007

Viau, 2005

Maslow,
1943

Contract, cognitive map, learning
tool

Results for readings

READINGS	1st Year (N=255)	2nd Year (N=231)	Functions
to come into possession	36,1	47,6	learning tool
	35 30 25 20 15		
to understand the course	13,7	10,0	learning tool
	13,5 12,5 11,5 10,5		
to study the course	9,8	18,6	learning tool
	9,5 8,5 7,5		
to work for the course	7,1	10,0	learning tool
	6,5 5,5		
to complete notes	4,7	1,3	learning tool
what is to be bought	4,3	2,6	contract
maximizing one's chances to succeed	3,9	1,7	learning tool
to organise oneself	3,9	3,5	learning tool
to rely on this basis	3,9	3,5	
to read, to consult	3,5	1,7	
what to study with	3,1	3,0	learn tool
how to study, approach	2,4	1,3	learn tool
what actually exists	2,4	0,4	cogn map
to keep on track	2,4	0,4	contract
the available helps	2,0	3,9	learn tool
to prepare the exam	2	2,2	learn tool
to take notes	1,6	1,3	

Students expect more perspectives of **action** than of cognition

High numbers of vague **verbs**

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Effect expected on « document research », « notes taking during classes », « strategies of understanding », « organization and time management », « engagement in studies » (Wolfs, 07)

→ Criterias of the *Learning tool* function

Results for objectives

OBJECTIVES	1st Year (N=308)	2nd Year (N=179)	Functions
expectations of the professor	15,6	16,2	contract
destination to reach	14,6	8,9	cognitive map
	14 13,5 13 12,5 12 11,5		
interest of the course			
what it can be useful for	11	9,5	learning tool
the course as a whole	11	5,6	cognitive map
	10,5 10		
to see	9,7	5,6	cognitive map
to understand	9	3,9	learn tool
	8,5 8 7,5 7 6,5		
specific contents to give			
priority to	5,8	10,6	cognitive map
to define a program, to study			
what matters	5,5	5,6	learning tool
	5		
to self-assess	4,5	2,8	learning tool
what to expect	3,2	1,7	contract
to have an overview	3	0,6	cognitive map
links to career path, professional future	2,6	2,2	learn tool
to target contents to study	2,3	5,6	
position in the programme	1,6	2,8	cognit map contract +
aimed knowledge or skills	1,3	0,6	cognit map

Students expect more perspectives of cognition than of action

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	10		
	8,5		
	8		
	7,5		
	7		
	6,5		
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Typical wording used by the theorists of the *Cognitive map* function

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Perception of the *value* of the course (Viau, 2005)

Self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943)

Dimensions related to the *Learning tool* function

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Related to the *Contract* function

Security : needs of rigidity (Maslow, 1943)

Results for assessment

ASSESSMENT	1st Year (N=307)	2nd Year (N=293)	Functions
to adapt/adopt one's way to prepare	19,5 18,5 17,5 16,5 15,5	11,6	learning tool
to prepare works	15	0,3	learning tool
how will be assessed	14,3	8,2	contract
what to expect	13,7	5,8	contract
to study	13,4	29,4	learning tool
to adapt/adopt one's way to study	12,7 11,5 10,5 9,5 8,5 7,5 6,5 5,5	16,0	learning tool
to prepare oneself for the exam	4,9	16,7	learning tool
expectations of the professeur	4,6	4,1	contract
to prepare the exam, the assessment	4,6 3,5	5,1	learning tool
important points	2,6	4,4	learning tool
in order not to be surprised	2,6	1	contract
to manage one's stress	2,6	0,7	learn tool
to take it into account for the exam	2,3	1,0	learn tool
to plan , to keep up to date, to prioritize	2,3	6,5	learn tool
to prepare	2	2	learn tool
to work	2	9,6	learn tool
to adapt one's way of working	2	3,4	learn tool

Students expect more perspectives of **action** than of cognition

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to adapt one's way of working	2	3,4	learn tool

Related to the *Contract* function

Safety : needs of rigidity (Maslow, 1943)

Results for assessment

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to prepare	2	2	learn tool
to work	2	9,6	learn tool
to adapt one's way of working	2	3,4	learn tool

Expected effect on « the anticipation of assessment situations and use of knowledge » (Wolfs,07)

High numbers of **vague action verbs** expressing the will to *adapt* one's working method on the basis of the transmitted datas

→ Necessity to give a function of *Learning tool*