Authority-Boundness as a Constitutive Aspect of Syllabus-Boundness among Higher Education Students

Hans Englund & Helen Stockhult

Published online: 02 Jan 2022.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Authority-Boundness as a Constitutive Aspect of Syllabus-Boundness among Higher Education Students

Hans Englund ⓘ and Helen Stockhult ⓘ

Örebro University School of Business, Örebro, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Syllabus-boundness constitutes an important attribute of a so-called surface approach to learning, whereby students are seen as highly assessment-oriented, doing what is minimally required from them, and wanting well-organized courses and clear instructions. When this concept emerged in the late 1960ies, it was linked to a discussion on issues of authoritarianism and the ways in which the boundaries of the syllabus are tightly linked to authoritative knowledge and authority figures. However, over the years, this particular aspect of syllabus-boundness has largely faded away in the literature. Based on this turn in the literature, the purpose of this paper is twofold, namely: (1) To argue for a reintroduction of issues related to authoritarianism into the debate on syllabus-boundness, and (2) Based on a qualitative study of higher education students at a Swedish university, to identify and discuss how the conceptual borders of syllabus-boundness can be widened to include aspects of authority-boundness.

Introduction

In the literature on students' approaches to learning in higher education, there has been a large and sustained interest in conceptualizing and theorizing the notion of *a surface approach to learning* (see e.g., Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2019). Although varying somewhat over time and in different parts of the literature, such an approach to learning is typically associated with attributes such as students feeling a lack of purpose when studying (Brown et al., 2017), engaging in rote learning (Coertjens et al., 2016), and having a narrow syllabus-bound attitude (Baeten et al., 2013). In this paper, we focus our attention on one of these attributes, namely a *narrow syllabus-bound attitude*. More specifically, the overall *purpose* of the paper is to problematize the conceptualization of this particular attribute in extant literature and based on this, to propose conceptual refinement. The underlying reason for this is twofold.

First, when the notion of a syllabus-bound attitude emerged in the literature in the late 1960ies, it was introduced by Hudson (1968) as a means to differentiate those students whose thinking largely converged around the syllabus as such (and hence were largely *bound* by the syllabus) from those who were more divergent in their thinking (and hence were more free in relation to the syllabus). Moreover, as a way of understanding the tendencies of the former group – i.e., *the "convergers"* – to stick closely to the requirements and expectations as expressed in the syllabus, Hudson grounded his writings in earlier discussions on *authoritarianism*. That is, he stressed that syllabus-boundness as a concept not only draws attention to how the syllabus as

such becomes a boundary or restriction for the convergers, but also to how this makes them highly dependent on those who "set such boundaries" (i.e., the authoritative figures). In fact, and to use the words of Hudson, when you literally knuckle under to the demands of the syllabus, it means that you "largely accepts what the school has to offer" (Hudson, 1968, p. 25) and that you become heavily dependent on, for example, "authoritative guidance about what to concentrate on, and what to ignore" (Hudson, 1968, p. 24).

Importantly though, in the ensuing scholarly discussions, this original focus on the authoritative aspects of syllabus-boundness has gradually faded away. Instead, syllabus-boundness has become strongly associated with students keeping within the boundaries as such through, for example, doing only what is formally required from them, requesting clear instructions on such requirements, and preferring well-structured and organized courses (see e.g., Biggs, 1987; Entwistle & McCune, 2004). Arguably, this "conceptual turn" was also further cemented as the attribute found its ways into a number of inventories, such as the Approaches to Studies Inventory (for an overview of these inventories, see e.g., Entwistle, 2018). In fact, ever since the advent of these inventories, the conceptual underpinnings of syllabus-boundness seem to have been largely taken-for-granted, to the extent that the concept is oftentimes only indirectly defined through the particular inventory used and the "items" included in such an inventory (see e.g., Brown et al., 2017).

Second, and related, in a qualitative interview study of students at a Swedish university, we found plenty of evidence of the type of authoritarianism discussed by Hudson (1966, 1968). In fact, and as will be detailed below, we found that the individual teacher was very much seen as, for example, a knowledge-based authority who could tell right from wrong, decide what was worth pursuing etcetera. As a result of this, the teacher was also seen as someone who could and should make the material within a particular course manageable, through structuring, filtrating, and demarcating it for the students. As suggested by the early writings by Hudson (1968) this clearly made the students, and their learning process, highly dependent on single teachers and their idiosyncratic views on the education – henceforth referred to as *authority-boundness*.

Based on these two interrelated observations, the more specific aims of the paper are to: (1) Argue for a reintroduction of issues related to authoritarianism into the debate on syllabus-boundness, and (2) Based on the empirical study, to identify and discuss how the conceptual borders of syllabus-boundness can be widened to also include aspects of authoritarianism. Specifically, we ask ourselves what different attributes related to authoritarianism could be identified among our interviewees and what do such attributes say about what it means to be syllabus-bound? Arguably, finding answers to these two questions is important for several reasons. *First*, in a world where notions of knowledge resistance, fake news and filter bubbles have become an important part of societal (and educational) discourses, it seems more important than ever to further our understanding of those aspects – including that of being authority-bound – that hinder students from turning into autonomous, independent, and thinking selves (cf. Biesta, 2020). *Second*, and related, such an understanding should arguably be useful when considering how we, as higher education teachers and researchers, can contribute towards educational processes that mitigate or counteract the authority-boundness of students. The premise is, we suggest, that authority-boundness is not a phenomenon that could or should be "blamed on" or attributed to a single group of actors, such as students (or teachers for that matter). On the contrary, it is arguably more fruitful to see it as an effect of the broader pedagogical and intellectual environment that students, teachers, and others contribute to uphold together.

The remaining parts of this paper are organized as follows. First, we provide a more detailed overview of syllabus-boundness as a concept in extant literature. In an ensuing section, we describe how we collected and analysed the empirical material underlying the conceptual development, after which we present and discuss the empirical findings related to syllabus-boundness and the emerging concept *authority-boundness*. In a final section, we conclude and discuss our main contributions.

Syllabus-Boundness as a Concept in Extant Literature

As suggested in the introduction, syllabus-boundness emerged as a concept during the late 1960ies when Hudson (1966, 1968) identified contrasting learning styles among English schoolboys. Based on these findings, he introduced the terms "sylbs" and "sylfs" to differentiate those students whose thinking largely converged around the syllabus as such (and hence were largely *bound* by the syllabus) from those who were more divergent in their thinking (and hence were more *free* in relation to the syllabus).[1]

Moreover, as part of his differentiation of sylbs from sylfs, he pointed to how learning styles could be tied to issues of authoritarianism. In fact, his empirical findings indicated that convergers (or sylbs) had a tendency to adopt more of an *authoritarian attitude* (Hudson, 1966; 1968). Although discussed rather briefly in his books, such an attitude seemed to include a focus on fitting in, in the sense that they were more prone to adhere to established principles and precedents, more likely to approve of being obedient, and more likely to accept "what the school has to offer" (Hudson, 1968, p. 25). In fact, when accepting "the restrictions that a syllabus imposes" (Hudson, 1968, p. 23), it seemed as if the syllabus-bound students became more reliant on teachers in terms of their expert advice and authority. In the words of Hudson (1968, p. 24) they tend to not only become dependent on "authoritative guidance about what to concentrate on, and what to ignore", but also to adapt their way of thinking and behaving in relation to "the simple say-so of an authority figure" (1968, p. 17).

The research that followed in the footsteps of Hudson's (1966, p. 1968) seminal writings continued to discuss *syllabus-boundness* largely in these terms for another decade or so. For example, several scholars continued to make explicit references to his reasonings on authority and authoritarianism also in research conducted on *higher education students*, whereby syllabus-boundness was seen as intrinsically linked to students' respect for, and attempts to live up to, the expectations of "intellectual authority", not least to ensure success or to avoid the fear of failure (see e.g., Lucas et al., 1976; Smithers et al., 1975; Thomas, 1979). Along these lines, for example, Entwistle (1977, p. 228) suggested that "[t]hese students work hard at set reading and assignments, but rarely go beyond these. They seem so preoccupied with thoughts of ultimate academic disaster that they dare not try out their own ideas: they are afraid of being wrong", while Smithers et al. (1975, p. 76) pointed to how "the syllabus-bound student may need the emotional comfort of satisfying the external authority of the curriculum, or he may just be playing the academic game" (p. 76). Linked to such attempts to satisfy external authority, several authors also continued to discuss how this made students strongly dependent on authorities and authoritative guidance. For example, Biggs (1976) referred to how dependent students rarely question their teachers or tests, and that they become dependent on support for their studies (see also Biggs, 1970). Finally, and largely in line with Hudson's (1968) writings, some authors linked such dependence to issues of dogmatism, in the sense that "the dogmatic student does not question basic assumptions" (Biggs, 1970, p. 166; see also Smithers et al., 1975).

Interestingly though, it seems as if the ensuing and more contemporary discussions on syllabus-boundness became considerably more bound to the boundaries as such. That is, in contrast to how the discussions during the 1970ies involved attempts to trace the convergence to, or compliance with, heteronomous norms to the relationships that students have to the authoritative figures behind such norms, research in this area has become considerably more focused on the convergence as such. In fact, in contemporary research it seems as if syllabus-boundness has become associated mainly with four attributes, namely that students who are syllabus-bound: (1) become highly focused on assessments, (2) do what is minimally required from them to pass their

---

[1]Actually, based on his empirical studies, Hudson initially made a distinction between two types of schoolboys: the convergers and the divergers (Hudson, 1966). Later on though, he further elaborated on how these two types were linked to, among other things, issues of syllabus-boundness and authoritarianism (Hudson, 1968). Through these latter writings it became clear that convergers are indeed more syllabus-bound than divergers (Hudson, 1968).

Table 1. Dimensions associated with a syllabus-bound attitude in contemporary research.

Dimensions of a syllabus-bound attitude	Underlying meaning	Selected references
i. Assessment-oriented	Syllabus-bound students are oriented towards the assessments as such and the requirements surrounding such assessments in the syllabus.	Chonkar et al. (2018); Kufakunesu and Chinyoka (2017)
ii. Minimum requirement	Syllabus-bound students focus on minimum requirements and as a result only study what the assessments require from them.	Abedin et al. (2013), Mji (2003)
iii. Wanting structured and organized courses	Syllabus-bound students prefer courses that are clearly structured and highly organized so that they can reduce ambiguity and limit the potential for failure.	Abhayawansa and Fonseca (2010), Smith (2001)
iv. Wanting clear instructions	Syllabus-bound students prefer to have clear instructions so that they can reduce ambiguity and limit the potential for failure.	Miller (2021), Sharma (1997)

assessments, (3) prefer well-organized and structured courses so as to know what is expected from them and to avoid ambiguity and uncertainty, and (4) prefer clear instructions so as to know what to focus on when it comes to the assessments. Table 1 summarizes these attributes in contemporary research.

While these four attributes are oftentimes stressed concurrently in more contemporary writings, it can be noted how an assessment orientation (cf. the first attribute in Table 1) is typically depicted to result in students needing exams in order to study (Mat et al., 2016) and that they become narrowly focused on what they have to know in order to pass (Papinczak, 2009). A form of "convergent thinking" that not only results in a focus on the formal requirements as such (Entwistle, 2018), but also that they concentrate on (only) what they have to do in order to pass – "the set work" as James (1982, p. 322) expresses it (cf. the second attribute in Table 1). Again, an important part of being able to focus on such minimum requirements is to know exactly what is expected from you (cf. the third attribute in Table 1) and how to do it (cf. the fourth attribute in Table 1). Along these lines, for example, Sharma (1997, p. 137) pointed to how syllabus-bound students "prefer courses that are clearly structured and highly organized and like to have precise instructions and expectations of assessment". The premise is, as Miller (2021, p. 45) suggests, that such clarity and explicitness help "reduce ambiguity and thereby limit the potential for 'incorrect' answers, which might reduce the assessment grade".

Indeed, there are examples where the scope of syllabus-boundness is still related to the early discussions on authority. That is, apart from including aspects that relate explicitly to the syllabus (such as grade criteria, task requirements, or reading instructions), some scholars still include aspects related to, for example, teachers involved in a course. Along these lines, for example, Mji (2003, p. 691) referred to syllabus-bound students as "dependent on others (lecturers etc.) to tell and show them how to tackle work", while Smith and Smith (2000) linked syllabus-boundness to students' perceptions of teachers as being in an authoritative position whose instructions need to be followed. Importantly though, such examples are rare, and they typically lack a more conceptually oriented discussion of how syllabus-boundness is intrinsically linked to issues of authority.

Below, we will discuss how our contemporary understanding of syllabus-boundness can be enriched by picking up, and further elaborate, on the early interest in how syllabus-boundness is closely related to issues of authority. Before doing so though, we will describe the empirical work through which this argument of ours was born.

Methods

This paper grew out of a larger project that aims to further our understanding of how perceptions of learning environments affect the approaches to learning among higher education students. In this project we interviewed 19 students from a business school at a Swedish university, eight of whom

Table 2. List of interviewees.

Student	Age	Male/Female	Course level
01	23	F	Introductory
02	22	F	Introductory
03	20	M	Introductory
04	20	M	Introductory
05	19	F	Introductory
06	24	F	Introductory
07	23	M	Introductory
08	22	F	Introductory
09	24	M	Advanced
10	25	M	Advanced
11	24	M	Advanced
12	22	M	Advanced
13	29	M	Advanced
14	25	M	Advanced
15	26	M	Advanced
16	23	F	Advanced
17	25	F	Advanced
18	26	M	Advanced
19	26	F	Advanced

were within their first year of studies while the remaining ones had studied for three to five years (see Table 2).[2]

The reason for choosing students with different ages and genders was that it has previously been stressed that the adoption of a particular approach to learning is not only contextually bound but can also be bound to individual characteristics (see e.g., Baeten et al., 2013). Moreover, since students may alter their approaches to learning during their course of study (see e.g., Öhrstedt & Lindfors, 2016), we wanted students from different phases of a program. Finally, since scientific discipline can have an impact on students' approaches to learning (see e.g., Ramsden, 2003), we wanted students from a program that has previously been identified as one that tends to provoke a surface approach to learning (see e.g., Ballantine et al., 2008).

Each interview followed an interview guide that included rather open-ended questions related to the students' perceptions of their learning environments and how they approached their learning within such environments. More specifically, the interview guide covered the following overall topics: the individual background of the interviewee, how they studied during the current course, their views on the teaching activities, how they approached the course material, their views on the examination, and their work together with other students on the course. All interviewees were informed about the overall purpose of the project. Before starting each respective interview, we also informed them about the ethical guidelines underlying the project, including that all interviews and the topics covered within them were voluntary, that they could abort the interview at any time, and that they would remain anonymous. The interviews lasted between 30 and 76 min with an average of some 54 min. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional service.

An important part of the initial analyses of the transcribed material related to our interest in *students' approaches to learning*. To this end, we read and discussed among researchers a few of the transcripts, based on which we concluded that the material was replete with examples of a surface approach, in the sense that most interviewees seemed highly focused on succeeding (or at least to avoid failing) which, in turn, made them focus rather narrowly and instrumentally on what was required from them in the syllabus. Moreover, at this stage, it seemed as if the material vindicated both the contemporary and early views on syllabus-boundness (as discussed in the literature review above).

---

[2]For reasons of anonymity, we denote the interviewed students as I01–I19.

Based on this, the remaining parts of the analyses were devoted to a more systematic analysis of the various aspects of syllabus-boundness that surfaced in the material. Overall, this part of the analysis followed two main steps. First, we (re)read all 19 transcripts and coded them in NVivo (a software for qualitative analyses), with a particular focus on the different attributes of syllabus-boundness (see Table 1 above) and the emerging attribute *authority-boundness*. This resulted in a total of 89 codings for syllabus-boundness and 70 codings for authority-boundness, divided on all 19 students. The number of codings for each student ranged from 0 to 11 codings when it came to syllabus-boundness (with an average of 4.68 codings) and 1 to 8 codings when it came to authority-boundness (with an average of 3.68 codings). Second, when it came to authority-boundness we went back and forth between the codings in NVivo, the whole interview transcripts as such, and an emerging understanding of how authority-boundness contributed to a deeper understanding of what it means to be syllabus-bound. This latter part of the analysis pointed to how syllabus-bound students are not only strongly authority-bound, but that such authority-boundness, in turn, means that the notion of syllabus-boundness is (or needs to be) largely re-constituted. In fact, and as will be detailed below, our analyses suggest that when directing attention to how syllabus-boundness is closely intertwined with issues of authority, our understanding of how teachers, students, and the syllabus relate to the "boundness" of students are largely re-constituted.

Empirical Findings – Authority-Boundness as an Important Aspect of Syllabus-Boundness

The empirical findings are divided into two sections. First, we show empirically how students in the current study displayed the attributes associated with a syllabus-bound attitude in contemporary research (see Section "Syllabus-boundness"). Second, we add the notion of "authority-boundness" as an important attribute of such syllabus-boundness, and empirically substantiate the constituting elements of this notion (see Section "Authority-boundness").

Syllabus-Boundness

As suggested above, a narrow syllabus-bound attitude is associated with (1) a strong assessment orientation, (2) a minimum requirement-strategy, (3) a preference of well-structured and organized courses, and (4) a preference of clear instructions. Below, we shortly illustrate how these different, yet related, attributes of a narrow syllabus-bound attitude surfaced in our empirical material.

The first attribute is that students become highly oriented towards the assessments as such. As we talked to our respondents, such an attitude surfaced in several ways. In a general sense, many of them talked about how the assessment(s) at a particular course worked as a form of overall guiding principle for how they would take on and organize their studies. The reason for this, as suggested by one of the respondents, is that regardless of the ambitions and preconditions with which you enter a course, you know that in the end you "still need to pass the exam" (I07). Based on this, it was referred to, for example, how "most of us come to class to learn what you need to know for the exam" (I04), how they would try to anticipate "what is most important […] so that you can focus on learning that" (I02), and how it often results in a form of "cramming during the final days" before exam (I10). Or, when it comes to term-papers and written reports, how they would await the assignment as such before beginning to study:

> Reading in advance has never really worked for me. It becomes a different thing when you've had a few lectures and things like that, then it's easier to understand [what you're supposed to do], so I normally start when we've got the assignment. (I11)

Related to such an assessment orientation, extant literature typically stresses how students become focused on doing what is minimally required from them to pass such assessments. And indeed, we find plenty of evidence of such a minimum-requirement strategy among our

respondents. In fact, several of them talked about how an important "study skill" relates to understanding what to (not) focus on, regardless of whether it is about reading a book, preparing for a written exam, or crafting a term-paper. For example, it was referred to how you "need to learn what to read and what not to read" (I06), and that it is important "to learn how to prioritize" (I06).

In a similar manner, several respondents talked rather vividly of how they found ways to minimize their efforts when it came to written reports of different kind. One such example related to the division of labor within a work group, where it was referred to how "each of us reads on our own, thinking for ourselves [… because] we divide the different parts among us, and then we meet to inform each other about the individual parts" (I14). Or as suggested by another respondent:

> It takes a lot of time to write a report together, so then it's better to divide it as much as possible, and then to wrap it up together in the end to make sure that it looks good. (I06)

Part of being able to engage in such a minimum-requirement strategy is that one needs, or at least prefers, courses that are well-structured and organized (Sharma, 1997; Smith, 2001). The premise is, again, that when students focus on doing what is minimally required from them, they prefer the prerequisites to be clear and predetermined, so that they can focus on meeting the expectations of the syllabus. Or as suggested by one of our respondents:

> It's always better to know what it will be like [during the course]. The more open it is, the more demanding it is for you as a student, how you plan your time and so on. It's not that I don't want to spend some time or so [on my studies], but I feel that it's better to have a concrete goal to work towards. (I18)

In the material, it was clear that the students not only preferred courses that were well-organized and structured in this sense, but also that they used such pre-defined structures to organize their own studies. Along these lines, for example, one of the students referred to how he sympathized with the idea of higher education studies being associated with a high degree of personal responsibility, but that "it's quite nice to be able to hide the personal responsibility behind some external demands [i.e., demands set by the syllabus or the teachers] sometimes" (I10). And, as suggested by the following quote, it was clear that such "external demands" were used as an important means for organizing and narrowing down their own efforts:

> I just adapt to what the schedule says and plan my studies based on the schedule, or what the lectures cover. (I10)

Related to the preference for well-organized and structured courses, syllabus-bound students also prefer *clear instructions*. That is, when you try to find ways to reduce the amount of time and effort that you spend on your studies, it is easier if you can narrow the focus somewhat. For example, we saw this as they talked about formalized course guides or reading instructions, where it became obvious that once you know what is required from you, it is much easier to determine what to focus on and what becomes more peripheral:

> It's really tough when you have an extremely thick book, with a lot of pages, if you're expected to read the whole book, not knowing what you really need. So, it's very good for me to know what chapters or pages [to focus on]. (I02)

To summarize thus far then, we found plenty of evidence of a strong syllabus-bound attitude among our respondents, in the sense that they had a strong assessment orientation, followed a minimum-requirement strategy, and preferred well-structured courses and clear instructions. Interestingly though, and as will be discussed in more detail in the next section, our analyses also pointed to the key role that teachers play in relation to all these attributes. In fact, teachers not only seemed to play a key role when it came to the assessments as such, but also as important authorities that could help organize, structure, define and demarcate what was most relevant to focus on.

Authority-Boundness

Our findings suggest that students who are syllabus-bound are also authority-bound in the sense that when they search for clear instructions so as to succeed in their assessments with minimum effort, they become highly dependent on teachers as authoritative figures. And importantly, when directing attention to the role of such authoritative figures for syllabus-bound students, we are able to see how the different elements involved in students' relationship to the formal syllabus are largely reconstituted, in the following terms: (1) The teacher becomes an authoritative boundary-setter, (2) The relationship between students and teachers becomes one of dependence, (3) The boundaries as such become highly relativized, and (4) The student becomes a compliant self.

Teachers Become Authoritative Boundary-Setters

A first reconstitution of the notion of syllabus-boundness relates to the ways in which our respondents referred to individual teachers as the ones who (should) set the boundaries of the syllabus. On the one hand, this is hardly surprising, since teachers (at least as a collegiate) are the ones who create and work as carriers of the syllabus, through formulating the course plans, readings instructions, assignments etcetera. However, here we are not primarily interested in the role of teachers in setting this formal boundary as such, but rather in the ways in which many students seem to rely on, and expect, individual teachers to further interpret and narrow down such formal boundaries. The reason for this interest is that in so doing, students arguably ascribe to teachers a form of responsibility that extends way beyond the "formal contract" set by the syllabus as such. That is, a responsibility as an authoritative boundary setter who is not only expected to decide what to focus on, but also what is right or wrong, what is worth knowing, what is worth pursuing etcetera.

In the empirical material, such aspects surfaced in many interrelated ways. For example, several respondents referred to teachers as the ones who know what is important or what is relevant for the upcoming assessments. To illustrate, consider the following reasoning:

> When things in the book are also covered during the lecture or in other materials it probably means that it is important, as they are repeated in many different places. (I02)

Apart from picking up such "clues" during class, our respondents referred to how different types of social interactions with teachers (including before and after lectures and seminars and during tutoring) could be used in a similar manner:

> The more they interact with us, the easier it is to know, well, what it is that you're expected to know and what is central in this course. (I07)

And importantly, it was clear that they used such clues as a basis for what to read, write, memorize etcetera.

> Much of what I do is based on what is covered during class, because I think that, somehow you cover that which is important during the lectures, and then perhaps you skip some stuff in the book [when you study]. (I14)

The Relationship Between Students and Teachers Becomes One of Dependence

When relying on the individual teacher(s) to further interpret and delimit the syllabus in the ways referred to above this, in turn, means that the relationship between students and teachers are constituted in a very particular way, namely as one of dependence. The premise is that through so doing, students become highly dependent on teachers for their own knowledge development. For example, we saw this as students talked about, and "classified", teachers depending on their ability or propensity to reveal what was important, essential, interesting etcetera. And importantly, it was clear that they not only preferred the ones who could help them reduce their workload, but also that they depended on such reductions to succeed in their assessment orientation:

> Yeah, well, it becomes much easier when you know that this is what I have to concentrate on, or that I need to read this. So, it becomes much easier for me to take on the course material when I know what it is that the course leader, or the course, want me to concentrate on. (I02)

Moreover, as students rely on teachers to further operationalize and demarcate that which is already expressed in the syllabus, they not only contribute to constitute teachers in a particular way, but also position themselves as a highly vulnerable and dependent part in their relationship to their teachers. That is, it creates a form of dogmatic dependence to teachers as authority figures.

> And then you try to listen to the lecturer, to know what is essential in the subject, because they provide a pretty good overview of the subject, like: 'Today, we're at this level when it comes to research', and then you just: 'Okay, he finds that interesting to write, and learn more, about', so if you're lucky you will get that kind of question [in the written exam]. But overall, it's very much the teachers who affect what you read more about. (I14)

As suggested in this particular quote, such a dependence on your teacher means that you need "a bit of luck" so that you get the right type of question. Or as suggested earlier, it means that the outcomes of your studies become highly dependent on teachers being good at providing you with the right type of preconditions, so that you know what to focus on.

The Boundaries Become Relativized

When students rely on, and make themselves dependent on, teachers to define and interpret the boundaries of the syllabus as outlined above, it also means that the boundaries as such become highly relativized. Indeed, the boundaries are to some extent always set by those who design and implement an education. That is, a number of aspects are more or less set by those who offer an education, such as setting learning objectives, deciding on course content, making an overall course organization etc. Arguably though, while such "curriculum-related" aspects are typically in the hands of teachers, they are so in the form of the collegiate.

Interestingly though, through relying on the individual teacher(s) involved in a specific course, the boundaries become relativized in the sense that they become subject to the individual teacher(s) and their idiosyncratic ways of making sense of the syllabus. As already indicated above, such a relativization was articulated by our respondents as they talked about teachers and their roles within a course.

> I can't really see why I should spend a lot of time on something that I realize that someone else has already filtered away. And I think that I really trust … well, if you turn the question around: 'well, if you teach this, and this is what the course is about [then it has to be important]'. (I13)

However, such roles of filtrating and demarcating the course material were not only attributed to the teacher collegiate in a more general sense. On the contrary, it was clear that they associated such roles with the teacher as an individual, whereby the attempts to find out what was important, relevant, and worth knowing, were very much associated with the individual teacher and their personal interests and predispositions. Again, this was sometimes expressed in more general terms, such as where it was referred to how "the teacher has a really important role to help us out, to directly and indirectly show what s/he thinks is important" (I13). However, it could also be related to the particular interests of individual teachers, or to particular topics or issues that students found difficult:

> Especially if it's something that is a bit trickier; it could vary from teacher to teacher, but then it can be very much of an eye opener for how you should think and how you're supposed to approach it. (I18)

Or as suggested by the following quote, to make sure that you do not read more than you have to, as this would mean that you end up learning the "wrong stuff":

> It gives me everything [to attend lectures]. I can't really understand people who do not attend lectures […], because if you go to the lecture, the lecturer will stress what is relevant […], what's important for the exam and

what you need to know for the exam. Sometimes it says in the course instructions that you should read chapters one, two and three, but at the lecture, it is stressed that chapters one and two are important and only this part of chapter three is important. That little thing, if you haven't attended the lecture, then you've missed that little piece of information, and perhaps read everything [i.e., all three chapters] and learnt the wrong stuff, if it's possible to learn the wrong stuff, I don't know really. (I03)

The Student Becomes a Compliant Self

Finally, when taken together, the above reasoning also points to how syllabus-boundness no longer becomes (only) a form of strategy mobilized so as to pass or to achieve a particular grade. On the contrary, through submitting themselves to the individual teacher(s) and their ways of interpreting the syllabus, our respondents clearly contributed to constitute themselves as compliant selves. That is, through a form of adherence to, or compliance with, the authoritative norms and ideals of the teacher, studying becomes a form of passive acceptance of what others offer you. And importantly, in many cases we could see how this type of compliance was highly intentional, in the sense that students actively talked about themselves as complying with heteronomous norms, regardless of whether they identified, or sympathized, with such norms or not. For example, one of the respondents talked about how he imagined a term-paper being written in a largely different way. However, to fit in with the heteronomous norms, he and his group members still made sure that they lived up to the expectations:

> Sometimes I think the end product becomes very academic. I realize that we need to know stuff, we need support for the statements we make, and that's fine of course. But sometimes I feel like this: 'If we had put a consultancy report at the management table, I don't think we would have cited [the teacher] 27 times on the first page [which we do now]. (I13)

In a similar manner, several respondents returned to how an important part of studying was about learning what is expected from you. Or, in the words of Hudson (1968), to realize that if you want to succeed, you better do what is expected from you:

> You seldom have to develop much more than what the teacher stresses, because they often want to … that's what then want to hear. That's what so boring with education, that you learn what teachers want and then you give it to them. (I07)

A form of insight which, at least for some students, seemed to turn studying into a highly tactical game of compliance; one where learning is about developing skills for how to succeed rather than advancing one's knowledge in a particular subject.

> It's not necessarily that the person says that 'this is what you're supposed to know'. It's more that when you listen to what the person says, you can almost hear on their voice what they find important within the current topic. Some people are really interested in their topic, and then you can see it: 'this person finds this topic interesting, or that this is interesting within this topic', and then you want to include that in your work, because then you know that this person will appreciate that you've included that particular thing. (I02)

Conclusions and Contributions

This paper set out to problematize the conceptualization of syllabus-boundness in extant literature and, based on this, to propose conceptual refinement. Starting out with the former, our review of the literature above showed that although authoritarianism did constitute an important part of the discussions of syllabus-boundness during the 1960s and 1970s, it has since then largely disappeared in the literature on students' approaches to learning. Indeed, this does not have to be a problem in and of itself, as conceptual development and refinement is arguably an important part of how a field of research evolves over time. However, in this case, we argue that this conceptual reorientation has been largely unfavourable, since authority-boundness not only constitutes an important part of what it means to be syllabus-bound, but also because it further emphasizes why syllabus-boundness constitutes a problem that needs to be addressed in contemporary higher education. The premise is

that syllabus-boundness is not only a matter of being assessment-oriented or wanting clear instructions so as to be able to minimize one's own efforts. On the contrary, and as discussed in more detail above, such aspects also constitute symptoms of a much deeper problem, namely that syllabus-boundness is heavily intertwined with issues of authority-boundness. Based on this, we suggest that authority-boundness should be reinstated as an important aspect of syllabus-boundness in future research. Moreover, when this is done, we suggest attention should be directed to how authority-boundness contributes to the type of reconstitutions of the syllabus, teachers, students, and their different interrelationships, as discussed above.

Taken together, these two different parts of our paper – i.e., the problematization of how syllabus-boundness is currently understood in the literature and our suggestions for conceptual refinement – arguably contribute to extant knowledge in two main ways. First, they add to the few studies that point to how teachers are involved in, and become an important part of, the type of boundaries that syllabus-bound students align themselves with. Again, these studies have pointed to, for example, how syllabus-bound students are dependent on teachers (Mji, 2003) because of the powerful and authoritative position of the latter (Smith & Smith, 2000). As argued in this paper though, it is not enough to point to how teachers, in a general sense, are involved in the syllabus-boundness of students. Rather, our findings stress the importance of analysing more systematically how an inclusion of the teacher(s) in "this equation" affects the notion of syllabus-boundness. In fact, we find that when doing so, the notion of syllabus-boundness becomes (or at least should be) largely re-constituted. The premise is that it results in that all the constituent parts – i.e., the boundaries of the syllabus, the teacher, the student, and the relationships between teachers and students – take on different meanings than typically discussed in the extant literature. In fact, and as discussed in more detail above, from such a perspective teachers become authoritative boundary setters, the boundaries are relativized, students become compliant selves and the relationship between teachers and students become one of dependence.

Second, and related, we add further nuance to the critical discussion on syllabus-boundness as an important attribute of a surface approach to learning. Again, in the existing literature, syllabus-boundness typically carries a negative connotation through being referred to as an approach to learning which means that students only do what is required from them (Mat et al., 2016; Smith & Smith, 2000), engage in superficial forms of learning (Chonkar et al., 2018), and simply reproduce the material in the syllabus (Bonsaksen et al., 2017). Or, as sometimes argued, it constitutes a less productive approach to studying which students tend to outgrow during their time at the university (see e.g., Bonsaksen et al., 2017). Adding to this, we suggest the notion of authority-boundness points to an even more deep-seated problem, namely that syllabus-bound students become highly dependent on authoritative figures to define the learning process as such. That is, they become dependent on individual teachers to define what is worth knowing, what it means to know something, and how to pursue knowledge. Importantly though, such dependence not only means that the knowledge and values that students develop become highly authority-bound, but it also goes hand-in-hand with the notion of uncritical, unreflective, and uninquisitive students. That is, in assuming that teachers feed them with things that are "true", "beyond criticism", "important", "relevant" etcetera, they turn themselves into the very opposite from what is often associated with higher education studies, namely individuals who develop knowledge and skills for personal development, liberation, and critical reflection (cf. Biesta, 2020).

As we bring this paper to a close, two things are noteworthy. First, it should be noted that our purpose has neither been to claim that higher education students in general are authority-bound in their studies, nor that all our interviewees are equally authority-bound. On the contrary, we have sought to use the insights generated from our qualitative interview-study for *problematization* and *conceptualization* purposes. That is, for critically discussing the existing literature on syllabus-boundness and for developing the notion of authority-boundness as a potentially important part of what it means to be syllabus-bound. Second, it should be noted that in developing authority-boundness as a concept we drew theoretically upon Hudson's (1966, 1968) studies of a school

context (which is potentially different from the university context studied in this paper), and empirically on a study of a rather limited number of business students at a Swedish university (who need not be representative of students at large). Both these aspects point to the need for further empirical research to see whether authority-boundness as a concept is, in the end, fruitful for understanding students from different disciplines, from different stages of their studies, from different educational settings etcetera. Hopefully though, the current study has provided important conceptual grounds for such research. Again, the premise is that we strongly believe that this type of research is important, not least when considering how educational researchers report upon increasing occurrences of a surface-approach to learning among higher education students at the same time as contemporary debates on knowledge resistance, fake news, and filter bubbles seem to grow stronger. At times like these, it seems more important than ever to consider how we, together with the students, can work to reduce the syllabus-boundness in general and the authority-boundness in particular. A first step towards this, we suggest, is to further our knowledge of the type of educational settings in which such practices are manifested.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure Statement

Funding

ORCID

Hans Englund 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3676-5155
Helen Stockhult 🔘 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5149-0092

References

Abedin, N. F. Z., Jaafar, Z., Husain, S., & Abdullah, R. (2013). The validity of ASSIST as a measurement of learning approach among MDAB students. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *90*, 549–557. https://doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.07.125

Abhayawansa, S., & Fonseca, L. (2010). Conceptions of learning and approaches to learning—a phenomenographic study of a group of overseas accounting students from Sri Lanka. *Accounting Education: An International Journal*, *19*(5), 527–550. https://doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2010.502651

Baeten, M., Dochy, F., & Struyven, K. (2013). Enhancing students' approaches to learning: The added value of gradually implementing case-based learning. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *28*(2), 315–336. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-012-0116-7

Ballantine, J. A., Duff, A., & McCourt Larres, P. (2008). Accounting and business students' approaches to learning: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Accounting Education*, *26*(4), 188–201. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaccedu.2009.03.001

Biesta, G. (2020). Risking ourselves in education: Qualification, socialization, and subjectification revisited. *Educational Theory*, *70*(1), 89–104. https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12411

Biggs, J. B. (1970). Faculty patterns in study behaviour. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, *22*(2), 161–174. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049537008254570

Biggs, J. B. (1976). Dimensions of study behaviour: Another look at ATI. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *46*(1), 68–80. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1976.tb02987.x

Biggs, J. B. (1987). *Student approaches to learning and studying. Research monograph*. Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd.

Bonsaksen, T., Thørrisen, M. M., & Sadeghi, T. (2017). Occupational therapy students in Norway: Do their approaches to studying vary by year in the program? *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *5*(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1339

Brown, T., Fong, K. N., Bonsaksen, T., Lan, T. H., Murdolo, Y., Gonzalez, P. C., & Beng, L. H. (2017). Approaches to learning among occupational therapy undergraduate students: A cross-cultural study. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *24*(4), 299–310. https://doi.org/10.1080/11038128.2016.1229811

Chonkar, S. P., Ha, T. C., Chu, S. S. H., Ng, A. X., Lim, M. L. S., Ee, T. X., Ng, M. J., & Tan, K. H. (2018). The predominant learning approaches of medical students. *BMC Medical Education*, *18*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-018-1122-5

Coertjens, L., Vanthournout, G., Lindblom-Ylänne, S., & Postareff, L. (2016). Understanding individual differences in approaches to learning across courses: A mixed method approach. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *51*, 69–80. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2016.07.003

Entwistle, N. (1977). Strategies of learning and studying: Regent research findings. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *25*(3), 225–238. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.1977.9973497

Entwistle, N. (2018). *Student learning and academic understanding: A research perspective with implications for teaching*. Academic Press.

Entwistle, N., & McCune, V. (2004). The conceptual bases of study strategy inventories. *Educational Psychology Review*, *16*(4), 325–345. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-004-0003-0

Hudson, L. (1966). *Contrary imaginations: A psychological study of the English schoolboy*. Penguin.

Hudson, L. (1968). *Frames of mind: Ability, perception and self-perception in the arts and sciences*. Penguin.

James, A. (1982). A multivariate comparative analysis of work-related symptoms of distance and campus undergraduates. *Research in Higher Education*, *16*(4), 303–322. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00973617

Kufakunesu, M., & Chinyoka, K. (2017). Biting the technological bait? Teachers' views on the English language proficiency of secondary school learners in Zimbabwe. *Educational Research International (August 2017)*, *6*(3), 90–102.

Lindblom-Ylänne, S., Parpala, A., & Postareff, L. (2019). What constitutes the surface approach to learning in the light of new empirical evidence? *Studies in Higher Education*, *44*(12), 2183–2195. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1482267

Lucas, C. J., Grown, S., Stringer, P., & Supramaniam, S. (1976). Further observation on study difficulty in university students including 'syllabus-boundness'. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *129*(6), 598–603. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.129.6.598

Mat, N. H. D. C., Qodriani, L. U., & Kardiansyah, M. Y. (2016). Malaysian and Indonesian learners: They are judges of how they learn English most effectively in and out of classrooms. *Teknosastik*, *14*(1), 9–18. https://doi.org/10.33365/ts.v14i1.81

Miller, B. W. (2021). Beyond instrumentalism? An instructional project using communicative learning in management accounting. *Journal of Education for Business*, *96*(1), 44–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2020.1747379

Mji, A. (2003). A three-year perspective on conceptions of and orientations to learning mathematics of prospective teachers and first year university students. *International Journal of Mathematical Education in Science and Technology*, *34*(5), 687–698. https://doi.org/10.1080/0020739031000148949

Öhrstedt, M., & Lindfors, P. (2016). Students' adoption of course-specific approaches to learning in two parallel courses. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, *31*(2), 209–223. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-015-0256-7

Papinczak, T. (2009). Are deep strategic learners better suited to PBL? A preliminary study. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, *14*(3), 337–353. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-008-9115-5

Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education* (2 ed.) Routledge. ISBN 0415303451.

Sharma, D. S. (1997). Accounting students' learning conceptions, approaches to learning, and the influence of the learning–teaching context on approaches to learning. *Accounting Education*, *6*(2), 125–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/096392897331532

Smith, S. N. (2001). Approaches to study of three Chinese national groups. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *71*(3), 429–441. https://doi.org/10.1348/000709901158604

Smith, S. N., & Smith, P. J. (2000). Implications for distance education in the study approaches of different Chinese national groups. *Journal of Distance Education*, *15*(2), 71–84.

Smithers, A., Sayles, P., & Josephs, A. (1975). Syllabus-bound and syllabus-free orientations in a technological university. *Research in Education*, *13*(1), 67–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/003452377501300104

Thomas, M. C. (1979). Study difficulties in undergraduate nursing students—a British perspective. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, *16*(4), 299–305. https://doi.org/10.1016/0020-7489(79)90038-5