DISABILITIES AND PEDAGOGY

Learning with Lessened Limitations: Choose Your Own Adventure

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how enlisting the spirit of the "Choose Your Own Adventure" approach to major papers or projects might support students who are learning to take agency and understand themselves as political negotiators in the classroom and in their own learning. To that end, this essay will first briefly explore using Universal Design for Learning in the classroom, and then survey how dedication to an inclusive classroom can assist and encourage students of multiple identities to take responsibility for the management of their own time and their learning.

KEYWORDS

universal design, universal design for learning, academic accommodations, staggered due dates, student agency

Politics around inequality shape multiple components of the educational experience, not only with respect to content, but also in connection with the pace of learning.[1] Inequalities in the classroom are broader than gender and race. An increasing number of students with invisible and visible disabilities are attending college and university. At present, a significant number of university students of all ages struggle with hidden disabilities in the form of mental health issues, anxiety disorders, and learning and social disabilities. Moreover, many students have come to use the language and vocabulary of mental health and disability as a way to understand their own emotional and physical development. A focus on these categories of inequalities and an analysis of methods by which faculty might bridge some of the distances between professor and student in the classroom are increasingly the substance of conversations on campuses across the country and among academic researchers.[2] I will explore how one pedagogical practice—a "Choose Your Own Adventure" approach to major project deadlines—might assist students to take agency and understand themselves as political negotiators. I will first outline the method that

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1   I would like to thank Diane Fruchtman and Kathleen Gibbons for inviting me into this conversation, and for their willingness to read and discuss these important issues with me. I would like also to thank my colleagues who read and offered insights that improved this paper: Suzanne Crawford O'Brien, Tyler Travillian, Kevin O'Brien, Sarah Robinson, Jon Kershner, Marit Trelstad, Michael Zbaraschuk, and Tom Pearson.

2   As noted in Hosek and Soliz, "much of the research on teacher–student communication actually highlights the benefits of reducing the psychological or social distance reflected in the traditional academic hierarchy" (2016, 224).

assists me in this process—Universal Design for Learning—then survey how dedication to an inclusive classroom assists and encourages students of multiple identities take responsibility for the management of their own time and learning process.

Universal Design is the proactive design of a space, product, event, or—in this case—curriculum to make opportunities accessible for every person (Burgstahler 2015, xi).[3] When applied to the classroom, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) means that whatever is being designed should be done as broadly and inclusively as possible (Burgstahler 2015, 17-18). Unlike programs or procedures adopted to accommodate specific, identified populations, UDL strategies within higher education settings adopt a proactive approach for access to learning and facilities in order to better meet the needs of students with physical, visual, hearing, learning, attention, social, and communicative limitations or differences without calling undue attention to them as a distinct population (Burgstahler 2015, 5-6). Additionally, if there are challenges in the classroom around learning, a UDL response locates a "disability" within the curriculum, rather than within the individual learner (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon 2014, 129). In this way, UDL is culturally responsive—as well as culturally responsible— teaching for it assists in building full citizenship in the classroom for all learners. Promoted by a group of architects, engineers, and environmental and product developers, Universal Design is guided by a set of principles which can be summed up as flexibility, simplicity, and equitability.[4] While UDL's initial intention was to create accessible spaces for people who might have physical challenges, in time UDL embraced the ethos of making all spaces accessible to all people. As applied to curriculum and classroom climate, UDL operates similarly, seeking to transform the classroom into a space in which all students—irrespective of identity or ability—have equal opportunity for success.

I teach at Pacific Lutheran University, a small, private, Lutheran university in the Pacific Northwest. Founded by Norwegian Lutherans in 1890, the school is a draw for students from many Lutheran congregations along the West Coast and from the western half of the United States. That said, nearly half of our students are not overtly religious, and most students in my classes are there only to fulfill one of their two required courses in religion. Consistent with the greater population of the Pacific Northwest, my students most often claim no religious identity, they have little to no basic knowledge of any religion, and some are hostile to religion. Thus, there are invisible challenges to the subject itself, before we even begin discussing the subject matter. In addition, the multiple layers of student identity[5] play into their reception of the course content and their willingness to engage in active learning. For students struggling with a disabling component to their life, the subject of religion can cause a type of stress or anxiety different than other subjects, as it is closely linked to the vocabulary of shame and guilt that students with disabilities inherit. For students with medically documented visible or hidden disabilities, the Office of Accessibility and Accommodation (Pacific Lutheran University 2021) works to support faculty and students in the process of understanding what types of accommodations are needed for students to have equitable access to learning. Reasonable accommodations for accessibility can include, but are not limited tom, equipment in the room, seating arrangements, extended deadlines, additional time for exams, separate exam rooms, large-print materials, and note-takers. Most importantly, academic accommodations are case-by-case, and they should be specific to the needs of the student and the learning goals of the class.

Initially I created the Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) due dates in my RELI 220: Early Christianity course to provide simple, equitable, and flexible options for due dates for major papers and projects. I had in mind those students identified through university legal and/or medical channels requiring formal accommodations for classroom assignments. However, in keeping with UDL's educational ambition to create space and methods of assessments that are inclusive of all students irrespective of their ability identity, in time I expanded the option to the entire class, offering all students the opportunity to benefit from the characteristics of UDL and to make the organization of their own semester's work more manageable.

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3 To be fair, UDL is not the only system that applies accessibility theories to education; for example, "differentiated instruction and assessment" argues that as with clothing, instruction in a classroom should not adopt a "one size fits all" model (Gregory and Chapman 2012).

4 Or "Usable, accessible, inclusive," in Burgstahler (2015, 15). UDL includes seven guidelines: equitable use, flexibility, simplicity in use (intuitive), tolerance for error, low physical effort, perceptible information, and appropriate space (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design 2020; see also Burgstahler 2015, 15-16).

5 What I mean by "multiple layers of identity" is that students today are acutely aware of the various ways in which they might understand themselves, and this contributes to both marvelous and challenging encounters with the material. For examples, a student grappling with gender identity might read the gender-bending Thekla differently than a student who has a different understanding of their own gender; likewise, a student grappling with identity construction as a first-generation college student, as a student struggling with depression, as a Latina student, as a Muslim student, as a student with a visible or hidden disability, or as a male, white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant might engage the materials in ways that are different from one another. The responsible professor will always be aware of, and sensitive to, these multiple means of engagement.

The CYOA due date is inspired by the popular Choose Your Own Adventure style of children's books that began to appear in 1979 and which are still quite popular. Though many of my students were born in the mid-to-late 1990s, these books remain well-known among them as they were popular with their parents and therefore even the title of the series elicits a touch of nostalgia.[6] Much like the open-ended, but yet structured, Dungeons and Dragons role-playing game, a reader of the Choose Your Own Adventure books is introduced early in the narrative to a level of agency regarding the direction of the story.[7] When applied within the learning environment, my model of self-scheduling major assessment due dates allows students a similar agency to determine which dates work best with their individual course schedules. Students are encouraged to read through the course syllabi for each of their classes, to organize the semester's work for larger projects alongside additional commitments and, then, to choose the due date that will, to their best estimation, offer them the greatest pathway for success. Students identify their selection by the end of the second week of the semester and commit to turn in their assignment on that date. Because students select preferred dates with me individually and privately,[8] no one knows why a request might be made for one date over another and the later date is not viewed as an accommodation. The beauty of UDL is that accommodations do not need to be made because the class, as it already stands, is preemptively accommodating. It is worth noting that students do not have open-ended options but are given a selection of dates from which to choose; unlimited options are as likely to increase anxiety as having no option at all.[9]

I used to limit the options to try and stagger papers more evenly, but I now open all dates to all students (if the whole class wishes to turn in their papers on the first date, fine; if they all wish to turn in their papers on the last date, fine). This successfully assuages any concern that the professor might be attempting to regulate student choice and reinforce professorial power. Instead, this method allows students to embrace power that they can rightly claim in the organization of classroom learning, power over the best use of their own time in the writing process.

Here are three reasons why this is an effective and inclusive method of organizing paper and project due dates. First, as the syllabus and options of due dates are made available to students well in advance of the first day of class (with an accompanying email), students who enter the class with academic accommodations who might need additional time can see that it is already built into the design of the class in several ways. In addition to the CYOA due date there are elective methods for the midterm for all students,[10] homework preferences that allow students to make choices about which homework assignments will match with their schedules,[11] an "UnEssay" alternative for students who propose a creative option for their writing project,[12] and one-hour final exams with a two-hour time window. Within this context of stability, simplicity, and equitability, these opportunities uplift and encourage student accountability and support students even as they are challenged as emerging adults and critical thinkers (see Kegan 1994).

Second, from a purely social exchange perspective this is an attractive option. Every student in the class, no matter their ability status or identity, can compare my course syllabus with those of their other courses, make their calculations about time management, and organize their research and writing schedules for the term (Stafford 2008). This flexibility encourages maturity in the administration of their own workload. Official language about accommodations increasingly indicates that there are students whose disabilities around perception and memory impact or prohibit them from effectively

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6 See, for example, the best-selling *Beast Quest* series by Adam Blade. In this series, readers are encouraged to "Master Your Destiny." Readers learn on the first page that the land of "Gorgonia is doomed" but "Tom has sworn to help us, and he has a new companion on his Beast Quest—You." Notice that "you" in that phrase is capitalized, granting it the role of a proper noun, which suggests that "You" are a participant in the story (Blade 2011).

7 For example, after entering a temple which you have been forbidden to enter, you are cursed to live a nonhuman life as punishment. If you survive, the administer of the curse may decide to return you to your human form. In one of the most unique—and bizarre—of the CYOA series, the reader is challenged to think like a series of animals and make choices that lead to one of fourteen endings (Packard and Wing 1985).

8 I cannot engage in conversation or suggest a specific date for a student unless I have received official notification that allows me to communicate with a student about their accommodations. Even then, I cannot have that dialogue unless initiated by the student, a process that promotes student responsibility and, I find, assists them in confidence building around their ability and identity.

9 A. W. Bendig and P. T. Hountras noted that "The highly authoritarian individual dislikes and becomes highly anxious in an unstructured and ambiguous social situation and expresses strong preferences for formal structure" (1959, 1).

10 Students can select to take the midterm in a format that works with their learning skills and talents; they can opt for an essay exam or a format consisting of true/false, multiple choice, and fill-in-the-blank questions.

11 Over the course of the semester students have approximately thirty-five homework assignments in which they reflect on the reading and demonstrate critical engagement, nearly one for each reading. While students are expected to do all the reading and think about all of the questions in preparation for their participation in class with their peer discussion groups, they are free to choose which twenty assignments they wish to complete in writing and hand in. Some students complete twenty out of the gate while others stagger their assignments as time and life permits. Because they do the reading and reflection irrespective of doing the written homework, students show up to class prepared, and the arc of student learning remains unhindered.

12 An "UnEssay" is an alternative way to demonstrate knowledge and analysis, one that allows students to play to their specific and unique strengths, talents, skills, and interests within an academically rigorous context.

organizing information (Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities 2013). In these cases, I request private meetings with students in my office or in the Office of Accessibility and Accommodation (Pacific Lutheran University 2021). We sit together, look at their syllabi from other courses and a calendar, and I assist them in mapping out a good CYOA due date. Alternatively, if a student prefers not to work with me on this, I encourage them to meet with a faculty person or with their Accessibility and Accommodation contact, someone with whom they might be more comfortable engaging in this process. While emergencies do still occur,[13] this process successfully eliminates potential conflicting course assignments, papers, or projects.

Third, this simple provision for structuring their own learning for the purpose of encouraging their academic success provides all my students with the chance to practice self-sufficiency and responsibility. They are challenged to practice metacognitive skills[14] and reflect early in the semester on their potential as students, which includes a realistic self-assessment of their own personal academic workload, their own study habits and abilities, and the amount of time they may need for completing a major paper or project.

In addition to allowing students to take active agency in the organization of their learning, CYOA due dates achieve four further pedagogical benefits. First, as noted above and quite simply, this method allows additional time for students who require either a wide variety of academic accommodations. Second, an informal poll of my students[15] suggests that this method reduces some degree of anxiety which is an increasingly prevalent experience among college students (Denizet-Lewis 2017; Tate 2017). When the work itself begins with an act of self-efficacy, this alone can help reduce anxiety around the assignment.[16] Third, the method increases student agency while still providing some degree of structured guidance; students develop the skill of agency alongside an adult who provides space within which they can decide for themselves how to best organize their schedules.[17] Finally, this method allows for staggered grading, making it possible for the instructor to provide more in-depth feedback for students. While not all faculty find that staggered grading works for them, a *Chronicle of Higher Education* forum (n.d.) on staggered due dates and grading suggests that this is a common practice among faculty. I have found that if staggered due dates are built into the syllabus from the beginning, many potential problems can be preempted, including—and especially—the unconscious bias that can emerge when students with disability status need special accommodations.

Ability status and identity are not the only factors that should be considered when making a teaching and learning space inclusive (see Llewellyn Ihssen 2020). UDL seeks to remove barriers which are often invisible within the classroom. When most effective, UDL is itself invisible because it supports the normalizing of alternatives and, in this way, celebrates and welcomes the increasing levels of diversity in higher education. This CYOA due date teaching tactic is inclusive because it acknowledges that multiple factors go into identifying the way in which deadlines impact how and when a student might be more successful, and it acknowledges student choice and individual identity construction in that process.

Allowing students to choose their own due dates encourages and cultivates self-awareness around learning. For example, students who are highly academically motivated, who thrive better with an earlier due date, or who have additional responsibilities like family or work, most often know that and select appropriate dates. Likewise, students who need an extended time for papers and projects, who have due dates falling at the same time, or who simply know that they write better under that unique pressure of a time crunch can select a later option. (It is worth noting that not all students who have academic accommodations automatically choose the last possible due date). Finally, as was made clear earlier, the choices are neither numerous nor infinite; students have three dates from which they can choose, and they cannot deviate from those options.

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13 Emergency situations are completely independent of this, and so I will not address accommodations for major illness or family emergencies in this context.

14 The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion contains a fine library of resources on metacognition (2021).

15 In an anonymous poll on our digital learning platform, 100 percent of the students responded "Yes" in answer to the question "Do you find that having been given the freedom to make a choice for when your final paper/project is due assists you in better organizing your work for the semester, and therefore—at least in some small way—reduces some level of anxiety?"

16 The cause of student stress and anxiety is not limited to academics but can also include loss of community for those moving away from home, challenges transitioning into higher education (i.e., feelings of inferiority or alienation), and finances.

17 Durre et al. write: "It is important for students to recognize their role in making requests early and otherwise developing positive relationships with faculty by applying skills in self-advocacy and problem solving" (2015, 120).

It is incorrect to assume that students who turn in their work later will have a longer time to devote to the assignment. This assumes that the students are beginning their work on the assignment at the same time, that they are engaged in careful research, reflective reading, composing outlines, and working through the painstaking process of drafting and editing at the same pace as one another. Rather, it is my experience as a professor of religion for undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate learners since 2002 that students born after 1995 begin work on papers or projects at roughly the one-to-two-week period before the assignment is due, and sometimes even closer.[18] This is a different than my adult learners. These students will often choose the early due dates and organize their thinking and process early on. This is not because they are better students, but because their learning styles are shaped by their age, life experience, and professional goals.

Interestingly, no students have expressed regret over their submission choice, and unlike when I used single due dates, not one student has attempted to negotiate with me for a different due date. This suggests that students understand the importance and seriousness of their commitment to their choice. In practical terms, there is neither an advantage for students who select the early due dates, nor any penalty for students selecting the later dates; all papers are graded according to the same set of metrics, and no grades are released until the final set has been graded.[19]

To conclude, I encourage professors to try UDL in their curricula; the evidence suggests that it creates a more inclusive environment for learners of all types. An additional benefit is decreasing the cost and time required to organize additional and separate accommodations for students. At a programmatic, practice, and pedagogical level UDL makes sense for the higher education classroom.

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18 This statement is not supported by scientific evidence. It is anecdotal, but it is confirmed by conversation with colleagues. This is, I believe, linked to the issue of time.

19 If a student is anxious about their grade or their assignment, I do make reasonable attempts to either grade their work early or to place it near the top of the pile. I teach sixty at minimum per semester (ninety maximum), so students must be reasonable as well in understanding my burden. This is an anxiety that I can help them manage by grading their work as early as I am able. Additionally, all papers and projects are returned in person, so I sit with a student and we go over their feedback together.

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