Assessment Choice and Student Voice with UDL

Introduction

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has gained significant traction in higher education over the past two decades (Fornauf & Erickson, 2020). UDL is seen by some to be an 'ideal fit' for higher education as it encourages educators to proactively design for a diverse learning environment (Fovet, 2020). In Ireland, UDL has been embraced by a substantial number of educators across the further and higher education sector. This is due to educators' commitment to inclusive design, and also to the leadership of AHEAD and University College Dublin's (UCD) Access and Lifelong Learning (ALL) department. AHEAD and UCD ALL have developed a Digital Badge in Universal Design for Learning, which at the time of writing has been taken up by thousands of educators across Ireland. The Digital Badge was developed with The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and is a 10-week programme offered to all those working in the post-secondary education sector in Ireland.

This academic year, National College of Ireland (NCI) received funding from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to deliver a UDL development programme. This included resource development, seminars and rolling out the Digital Badge in UDL over semesters one and two. **This article presents case studies from Dr Miguel Flores and Michèle Kehoe, two lecturers at NCI who completed the UDL Badge**. Both undertook to redesign an assessment in order to provide students with more choice and flexibility in the demonstration of their learning. The provision of choice in assessment is a relatively new concept within education (Garside et al., 2009). It is only in the past fifteen years that empirical evidence relating to the benefits of offering choice has been assembled (O'Neill & Padden, 2021; Wanner et al., 2021; O'Neill, 2011; Garside et al., 2009). The evidence presented in these studies points towards the positive impact choice in assessments had on students' learning (O'Neill, 2011), with some demonstrating greater student engagement and feelings of empowerment as a result (O'Neill & Padden, 2021; Wanner et al., 2021).

The case studies presented below support the research referenced above. They include the context of their redesigned assessments and analyses of the feedback they gathered from their students who experienced UDL. Despite UDL's grounding in neuroscience and evidence-based principles, there have been numerous calls for more reporting of the impact of UDL on students' learning (Edyburn, 2021, 2010; Fovet, 2020). Given these calls for more evidence on the impact of UDL, it was important for us to explore the students' experiences of having greater choice in assessment. For this reason, both Michèle and Miguel gathered student feedback on their experiences of choice in assessments, summaries of which are presented below. To complement the feedback collected during the typical twelve-week teaching term, the third author, Conor Thompson, gathered qualitative data after the teaching term by conducting interviews with four students from Michèle and Miguel's modules. The benefits of this approach were that a deeper understanding of the students' experiences could be gathered by a neutral party who was not the students' lecturer, and also that the students had received their assessment results at the time of recording. The interviews were recorded and are presented in video format below.

Section 1: Case Study of Two Economics Modules by Dr Miguel Flores

Context

International students contribute to the diversity of higher education across postgraduate programmes. At the same time, students with different study backgrounds pose challenges to lecturers, from teaching and delivering module content to assessment of the learning outcomes.

The MSc in Management and MSc in Finance are examples of the student diversity at NCI. Students enrolled in 2021-22 come from all over the world, with a large proportion from India (around 40%), followed by America (between 10% and 30%) and Africa (between 10% and 22%). Moreover, many students have different study backgrounds. In the case of MSc in Management, 40% of students have a background in computing, engineering, or IT, and 34% have a background in business, management, or marketing. Regarding economics, the focus of this case study, 37% of the MSc in Management students have previous knowledge of economics, while the rest 63%, do not have a background in this subject. Even in the case of the MSc in Finance, despite most students having some economics background (85% had previous knowledge of economics), the experience varies. For example, while some students had only one introductory economics module, others had a sequence of economics modules (e.g. general economics, microeconomics and macroeconomics), which shows diverse levels of their previous knowledge of economics (according to the information on students' transcripts).

The student diversity sets challenges in teaching Economics for both MSc programmes. This case study focuses on the summative assessment strategy of the Economics modules in both MSc programmes: Economics for Management (H9ECOMA) and Economics (H9ECO).

UDL implementation

The assessment strategy for both H9ECOMA and H9ECO modules is similar; students must submit a piece of coursework and a final exam. Regarding the coursework, in previous years, it has been an individual written assignment, where students were asked technical questions (e.g. solve numerical calculations; solve linear functional forms), and all of them were compulsory.

Based on UDL Principle 3, Multiple Means of Action and Expression, I introduced changes to the assessment strategy by using a broad range of assessment instruments and choice of methods of assessment. Specifically, the UDL redesign activity focused on the following two aspects.

Firstly, providing students with the choice of **individual** or **group** written assignment. (A typical assessment requires students to work either individually or in groups, but not the choice among these possible options. When a choice of assessment is provided, typically this is within the choice, e.g. group oral presentation or group poster, but not between choices).

Secondly, those who chose to work individually had the option of answering a **technical** question or a **non-technical** question (Usually, when students are provided with a choice of questions, these are among different topics).

There are several advantages of the choice between individual versus group work. First, by working in groups, students can develop their communication and teamwork skills, which are important for their employability. Second, students from different cultural backgrounds, especially non-native English speakers, might opt to work in groups to alleviate any 'perceived' disadvantage. Third, more confident students might opt for the individual assignment,

whilst less confident students might prefer to work with other students. Finally, given the diminished social interaction among students due to the coronavirus pandemic, some students may prefer the group option to have more opportunities to interact with classmates.

Regarding the option of technical versus non-technical question, it allowed students from different backgrounds to consider the most suitable way to answer their coursework according to their strengths. For example, those students with an engineering background are more likely to choose the technical question because they are more familiar with mathematics and, therefore, have been able to develop further problem solving/quantitative skills. On the other hand, those students with a social sciences background are more likely to choose the non-technical question because they are less familiar with mathematics.

UDL impact and results

To gauge students' perceptions on whether the redesign activity helped their learning journey, I included the following two statements in a questionnaire at the end of the term module survey.

Q1: The choice between individual vs group work assessment has been helpful in providing flexibility in my learning

The response rate was 40% (30 respondents out of 75), including both H9ECOMA and H9ECO students. The figure below shows that most of the students strongly agreed with the statement in question one. This result suggests that students valued the choice between individual versus group assignment.

Figure 1. Students' perceptions of assessment choice (Q1)
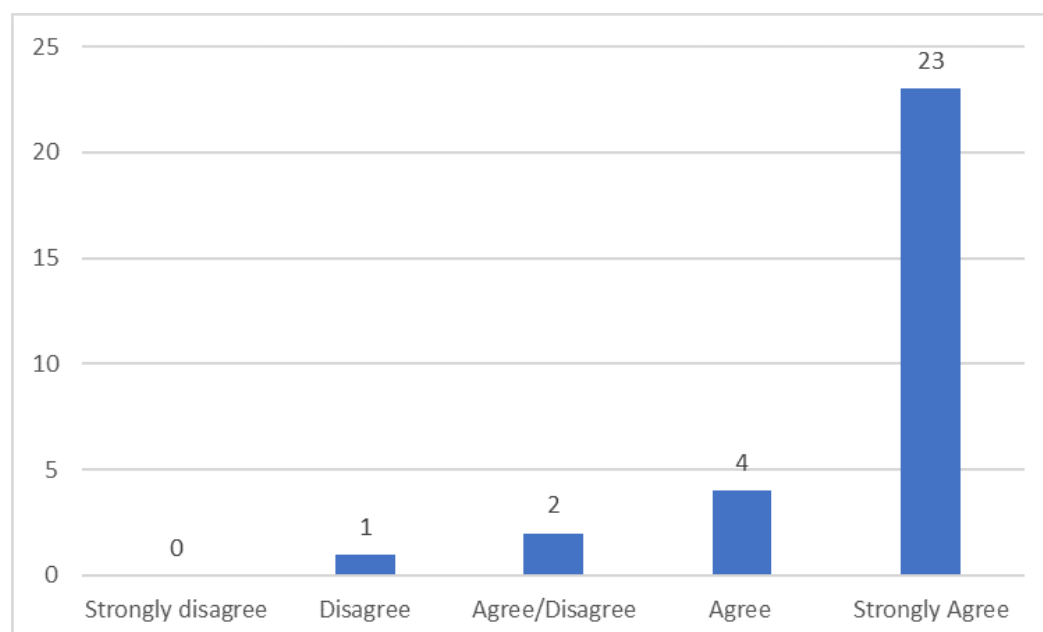
Q2: Identify up to three aspects of the assessment choice, individual vs group work, that most helped your learning.

Students in favour of individual assignment identified the following aspects:

- Avoided group work due to previous negative experience. A few students reported that because of their bad experience with previous group work, the choice between individual or group work was very important to them.
- The possibility of choosing between questions.
- Enhanced research ability, especially independent reading.

Students in favour of group assignment identified the following aspects:

- Discussion of classmates' different points of view, comparing knowledge, and learning new perspectives.
- Improving different skills, like teamwork, time management and trust.
- Developing creativity and stability.
- Interactive work, reinforcing knowledge.

The following responses are two examples of students' positive perceptions of the UDL redesign activity.

> **It was very helpful to choose myself, individual or group.**

> **I really appreciate that the lecturer gave us the choice between individual and group work. Even though I chose individual, the fact of having the choice helped me to evaluate the best way of completing the course work particularly for me.**

Final remarks from Dr Miguel Flores

The UDL redesign activity has encouraged reflection on my current teaching and learning practices, especially on assessment design for student diversity. At the same time, the choice in assessment positively contributed to the student learning experience

Section 2: Assessment is an Emotional Experience- a report by Michèle Kehoe

Inclusion is everyone's business in all areas of life. It is incumbent on the higher education system to respond to the needs of diverse student populations. The UDL framework challenges the traditional 'one size fits all' approach to learning and teaching. The UDL Digital Badge and Redesign Activity provides valuable opportunities for lecturers to stop and think about the why, what, and how of learning. As part of my UDL badge experience, I redesigned the 50% assessment for the BA(Hons) in Psychology Year 2 full-time group who were undertaking a module in Personality and Intelligence during the first semester of the academic year 2021/22. There were 65 students registered for this module and lectures were delivered online while tutorials were presented in person with an opportunity to participate in the class remotely using Teams. Recordings of classes were made available to all students.

I provided the class with the option to complete the assignment individually or as part of a group of two to four students. In addition, they were given the choice of completing **a theoretical essay on a psychoanalytic theorist of their choice or an applied essay that required them to analyse a movie, book, or character from the perspective of a psychoanalytic theorist.** Alternatively, they could do **a theoretical or applied presentation on a theorist of their choice**.

While providing the assignment details, I introduced the group to the concept of UDL and spoke briefly about multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. They were interested in gaining an insight into how this framework challenged existing approaches to teaching and assessment. Following the submission of the assignment, I asked the group to complete a post-assignment questionnaire. The open-ended questions focused on what assignment they selected, why they made that choice, and why they decided not to do the alternative assignment options presented. Consent was provided by the students to include their responses in my report. Upon analysis of the responses several themes emerged.

Table 1 Post-Assignment Student Feedback Themes and Examples of Responses

Post assignment questionnaire themes	Examples of student responses
Response to Theoretical Essay Choice	It seemed best suited to me as I love writing essays. It was a familiar approach. I preferred option 1 as writing essays is my strength.
Response to Applied Essay Choice	It offered the flexibility of choice and the opportunity to look at somebody I greatly admire in a new light. Seemed the most manageable to me personally as well as more interesting. I decided not to do the theoretical (first option) as I felt I had more of an opportunity to apply theory to a more real-life form.
Response to Presentation Choice	I chose to do this assignment because I felt the nature of the topic (analysis of character) was easier to portray and present visually/orally rather than essay format.
Perception and Experience of Group Work	I liked the idea of being able to work with a partner. I like to do group projects. I think they are productive, and one helps each other, and I understood the question more. It is not great working in groups. We don't know each other. It is challenging.
Perception and Experience of Individual Work	I prefer working alone. I like working on own and not relying on others or holding them back.
Views about Presentations	I didn't feel comfortable to do the presentation. Not a big fan of presentations for this type of topic. I felt I had more of an opportunity to apply theory to a more real-life form.

Post assignment questionnaire themes	Examples of student responses
	The other ones didn't attract my attention. I like presenting more. It was slightly more complex.
Choice/ Flexibility/ Creativity	It was something different, haven't had a chance to write with such creative freedom before. It offered the flexibility of choice.
Autonomy	Loved the options and freedom to pick yourself. I really enjoyed the element of freedom to choose which assignment I felt best suited to me. The perception of control: being able to choose which one I wanted, was satisfying and made me feel more confident about my work.
Preference for a New Challenge	Wanted a change and enjoyed it! Wanted to try something new.
Doing a Task in their Comfort Zone	It was a familiar approach. Seemed the most manageable to me personally as well as more interesting.

Following the analysis of the students' responses, I reflected on the wide variety of responses made by students to the task presented to them. In addition, the language used by students while providing the feedback highlighted the fact that assessment is an emotional activity and this was apparent in the use of words such as **felt**, **loved**, **liked** and **enjoyed**.

The experience of participating in the Digital Badge and undertaking the redesign activity has changed my way of thinking. It provided me with an insight into the experience of the students in my class from a multiple of perspectives and caused me to question and review my teaching practices. The experience was both motivational and empowering. The key learning that I took away from the experience was that in the creation of a more inclusive education system there needs to be continued focus on banning the average. Also, the process of change can take place one step at a time and all those involved in education should be encouraged to continually make one change to their practice. Of greatest significance is the fact that making assumptions about students will limit the why, what, and how of learning. As educators, we need to have the courage to offer choice, provide students with a voice, and a sense of agency and the future will be one of co-creation and possibilities.

Section 3: Student Voices on Choice in Assessment

Both Michèle and Miguel's reports attest to the positive impact that designing choice into assessments can have on students' learning. The student feedback presented above aligns with the empirical evidence gathered by colleagues elsewhere (O'Neill & Padden, 2021; Wanner et al., 2021; O'Neill, 2011; Garside et al., 2009). Following the submission of these reports, we sought to explore the students' experiences of having choice more deeply. We asked four students from Michèle and Miguel's classes to take part in interviews and asked them what their experiences of assessment were previously; how they felt about getting choice in assessments; and what advice they have on assessment design. In the spirit of UDL we have designed this paper to present information in a multiple of means. Following UDL Checkpoint 2.5 **Illustrate through multiple media** (CAST, 2018), we wished

to represent and report student feedback in both textual and visual/audio formats. For this reason, each interview was recorded (with the express permission of participants) and edited together to create this video:

Conclusion

This paper aimed to answer the call for more evidence on the impact of UDL implementation from the students' perspective (Fovet, 2020). We hoped to do this in a novel manner by presenting written reports alongside video evidence, thus capturing student voices on UDL redesign activities. As UDL gathers pace in further and higher education in Ireland, it is essential that the key stakeholders, the students, are both listened to and invited to take control of their own learning and assessment processes. It is also essential that educators in the sector gather evidence of the impact of these changes. Both Miguel and Michèle achieved this by offering choice in assessments and listening to their students' thoughts and feelings afterwards.

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