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A Collaboratively Designed Course: Student Perceptions, Challenges, and a Critical Reflection

ABSTRACT

This paper combines inclusive teaching, cultural humility, and Universal Design for Learning to contextualize the creation and evaluation of human services courses designed collaboratively with students. The collaborative course design was completed in two undergraduate classes with a combined total of 27 student participants. The paper provides reflection of instructor choices in implementing the collaboratively designed courses. Quantitative and qualitative feedback from students is provided and it suggests this activity increased the students' sense of power in the classroom and enhanced feelings of community and collaboration. The instructor's critical analysis identifies the benefits of promoting student autonomy, a sense of community, and active learning norms. These benefits were evident, even with the challenges of utilizing significant class time to complete the activity and socializing students to accept the power to make meaningful choices.

KEYWORDS

inclusive teaching and learning, inclusive curriculum design, cultural humility, universal design for learning, collaborative learning

INTRODUCTION

One way of providing students with an educational experience that recognizes their unique identities, strengths, and challenges is to collaborate with them directly on course design. This gives students the opportunity to create course policies and assessments that embody the values of social justice and inclusivity, onto which higher education is staking a claim (Behari-Leak 2020). The goal of this collaboratively designed course was to elevate student voices, reduce bias and inequity in design, and build intrinsic motivation. Previous research found that a "negotiated" syllabus resulted in a strong sense of control, more engagement in class activities and discussions, and higher motivation within the class (Kaplan and Renard 2015; Saines 2002). For this research project, the curriculum innovation and associated research took place within two courses in an undergraduate human services degree program. With a foundation in counseling and advocacy, this program trains students to work with people with disabilities, defined broadly, and inclusive of mental health, neurodevelopmental, and physical disabilities. Human services is one undergraduate degree under the umbrella of "helping majors," defined as majors which train students to help others, including but not limited to nursing, psychology, social work, and pre-med (Geroski 2017). Addressing structural power imbalances between instructor and student offers students in the helping professions a model for addressing those same power imbalances between themselves and those they will serve in the future (Corneau and Stergiopoulos 2012; Hampton et al. 2017).

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

There have been many terms and approaches to describe inclusive teaching, which applies social justice principles to the space between teachers and students, including students-as-partners, social justice assessment, collaborative learning, and democratic classrooms. These approaches share the goal of shifting the decision-making in the classroom to students in order to lessen the inherent power differential (Meinking and Hall 2020). Inclusive teaching, Universal design for learning (UDL), and cultural humility cross lines in my discipline because they are designed to create an inclusive classroom that works for all students. They are also utilized in human services to define a philosophy for client care, along with strategies to ensure that we work with people toward their individually defined goals, capitalizing on their strengths and resources. In the pedagogical context, these theories work together to outline an increasingly defined solution for collaborating with students to create course content, policies, and assignments that are more accessible for all students. Inclusive teaching is the broad theory under which this work is contextualized, while UDL is the vehicle through which the ideals of inclusive education can be practically applied. Cultural humility is a set of attitudes and beliefs that are discipline-specific to helping relationships (i.e., doctor-patient, therapist-client). They can be utilized as a mindset to recognize students' expertise in their own learning.

Inclusive teaching

Teaching during the global pandemic allowed some instructors to acknowledge and design for mitigating factors in students' lives, including work-life balance and the role of trauma (Armstrong-Mensah et al. 2020; Sharaievska et al. 2022), in a way higher education had previously ignored. Many professors lessened the quantity of work required and shifted grading models (Johnson, Veletsianos, and Seaman 2020). Barriers to learning were more apparent because they were momentarily universal. As universities have gradually shifted to a post-pandemic instructional environment, the barriers are still present, but they are no longer universal and instead drawn along previous lines of often marginalized identities in higher education, including disability, socioeconomic status, and ethnic minority. Therefore, upon returning to higher education in the first semester of the 2021–2022 academic year, students may have expected the flexible and inclusive pedagogies they had previously experienced, and scholars have since asked whether we can use the pandemic as an opportunity to engage in further critical pedagogy about what barriers are reinstated or eliminated (Cruz and Grodziak 2021).

The groundwork for collaborative course design was previously laid in writings on critical pedagogy (Dewey 1916; Friere 2003; hooks 1994). However, the demand has been renewed as environmental factors have pushed this demand to the forefront of students' minds. Inclusive teaching can be defined as teaching practices and policies that are designed to engage and value a diverse student body (Lawrie et al. 2017). In short, inclusive teaching is a pedagogy that "works" for a wide range of students. The discipline has focused on students who have traditionally been marginalized in higher education, such as students with disabilities and other intersecting identities, including race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Yet universities have returned to the ableist and racist ideal that there are "normal" student circumstances, and one must be capable of pointing to an objective deviation (i.e., a death in the family) to be accommodated. This automatically relegates students with more nebulous circumstances (i.e., intergenerational trauma or continual exposure to racist microaggressions) to the sidelines of the course experience with no recourse or voice (McArthur 2016). By design, higher education practices have historically excluded

these groups of students due to ideas about the nature of success which are riddled with exclusivity and bias.

Students-as-partners is a particularly well-defined method of inclusive education that identifies students as knowledgeable and involves them in course design, aiming for more equitable relationships (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). Based on the principles of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, students-as-partners is a pedagogical method in which faculty and students, "contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 7). The students-as-partners model often involves the selection of small groups of students who serve as consultants in course design and implementation, typically of a course the students have already taken. While this method involves more student feedback, as Bovill (2020) notes, it frequently involves, "small groups of often already super-engaged or privileged students to participate" (1023). In fact, this model may be prone to excluding the students at the margins (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon 2013) who are in particular need of inclusion in course redesign (de Bie 2020).

Students-as-partners can be combined with collaborative learning, where students work together to solve a problem, which has been shown to correlate with critical thinking, motivation, academic persistence, academic achievement, and positive attitudes toward peers and the instructor (Loes 2022). Whole-class co-creation combines the two approaches in expanded form and increases inclusion by centering the students of the current class in the current context. In whole-class co-creation, students are invited to collaboratively design the class, often including the selection of readings, topics covered, and methods of assessment. While whole-class co-creation has been identified as, "an underutilized and researched approach internationally" (Bovill 2020, 1023), a few studies have identified positive outcomes, including increased motivation, confidence, and engagement (Bergmark and Westman 2016); increased autonomy, self-regulation, and responsibility (Deeley and Bovill 2017); and more equal relationships with the instructor (Bovill et al. 2011). This approach may be particularly beneficial to racial and ethnic minorities, whose voices, experiences, and learning styles have often been marginalized in traditional higher education contexts (Barkley, Major, and Cross 2014; Loes 2022).

Cultural humility

Cultural humility places an emphasis on acknowledging individuals as experts in their own cultures, contextualizes the necessity of lifelong learning and reflection, acknowledges power imbalances and hierarchies, and advocates for social justice work to address barriers for marginalized individuals (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1988). It has been taught as a framework for patient relationships in physician and nursing training but has less often been applied as a pedagogical approach to working with diverse students in higher education. Certain disciplines, like those preparing helping professionals (i.e., human services, nursing), are already aligned with the ideals of justice and inclusivity (Marquis et al. 2016) and can integrate inclusive practices in the classroom, both as a method of and the content goal of instruction. Within such disciplines, instruction about why inclusivity and cultural humility is an ideal can help contextualize teaching practices and mirror the social justice practices expected of students when working with future clients or consumers. A collaborative course design requires dismantling the hierarchy in which instructors unilaterally create policies and assign grades, while students passively comply, or when they do not, are punished through professor-delineated grading procedures.

While cultural humility is used as a framework for client-provider relationships in disciplines like social work, psychology, nursing, and medicine (Loue 2022), the principles can apply in parallel to

inclusive education. Counselors express a willingness to learn from their clients (Hampton et al. 2017) and work to dismantle power hierarchies that oppress and marginalize their clients (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1988). As instructors, we can acknowledge that students are experts in their own learning and recognize and name power differentials in the space between faculty and students. Finally, cultural humility provides a call to action for service providers to work toward eliminating barriers for marginalized individuals; we can do the same as instructors in our classroom by utilizing principles of inclusive education and designing just assessments.

Universal design for learning (UDL)

UDL is a pedagogical strategy based on the social model of disability, which posits that a person is not disabled, but rather the environment itself is disabling (Mole 2013). This stands in stark contrast to the traditional process of requesting and sometimes receiving accommodations in higher education, which is based on the medical model of disability, with the underlying belief that there is something wrong with this particular student for which we need to adjust. Some scholars criticize the social model for its failure to acknowledge disability identity and functional impairment (Shakespeare and Watson 2002). However, the implementation of UDL in higher education is critical to inclusive teaching, as previous research suggests as many as 60% of students with disabilities do not disclose or register with the university disability center (Institute of Education Sciences 2022). Students have good reason not to register, as previous research shows that accommodations are as likely to create or merely mitigate barriers rather than remove them (Hughes, Corcoran, and Slee 2012; Morina Diez 2015). Even when accommodations have been granted and are useful to the student, UDL can be useful to further mitigate inequities, and research shows that all students, with and without disabilities, benefit from its integration (Seok, DaCosta, and Hodges 2018).

UDL aims to create a more inclusive educational environment by utilizing representation of material, multiple methods of engagement, and student expression of learning (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon 2013). UDL's creation of multiple options provides students with the opportunity to be autonomous deciders throughout the course, not just at the start, and is consistent with previous research that highlights students' desire for more responsibility in their own learning (Meinking and Hall 2020). By engaging learners as autonomous, motivated, and active partners, we encourage them to customize their learning according to their strengths and preferences. In undergraduate helping majors, with students who will likely work with others with disabilities in their profession, the importance of UDL is not just to the current students, but also to their future clients (Oswald, Adams, and Hiles 2018). While UDL has been rapidly adopted in elementary and secondary education in the United States, its adoption in tertiary or higher education has been less widespread (Tobin and Behling 2018). Barriers to its adoption include time constraints, lack of resources, and lack of institutional support (Hills, Overend, and Hildebrandt 2022). A recent review of the literature on UDL in higher education collected only 52 studies but found high satisfaction rates for both students and faculty (Cumming and Rose 2021).

CURRICULUM INNOVATION

This section provides an overview of the instructional decisions made to collaboratively design two undergraduate three-credit human services courses: "Introduction to Human Services" and "Case Management and Communication Skills." I was motivated to collaboratively design the courses with my students in order to increase equity, decrease the power differential, and engage students on a deeper level. I felt the temporal context (2021–2022 academic year) of the curriculum innovation was ripe for innovation; teaching and learning had been so disrupted by the COVID-19

pandemic, that we (my students and I) had the opportunity to critically reflect on what was and was not working in education and utilize that reflection as an opportunity to design together. The curriculum innovation was heavily informed by theories within my discipline. Indeed, a learning goal of the innovation was for students to better understand how the theoretical underpinnings and values of our discipline can be applied not only to the space between clients and consumers, but also to the space between teachers and students. Thus, I hoped my students would understand the importance of client empowerment and egalitarian relationships, because they had experienced them as a student.

The courses had a range of students in their second year or third year (in a four-year degree program) and both courses met three times a week for one hour during a 15-week semester. In our human services program, classes are typically lecture-based, intermixed with student discussion and communication skill building. Students receive instruction on theories of human development, trauma, resiliency, and advocacy and intervention. The theories utilized for advocacy and intervention in our field (i.e., UDL, social model of disability, client empowerment and advocacy) share the same values as those theories which were utilized to design the curriculum innovation. Therefore, the teaching process intertwined with the teaching content for this innovation. The course assessments typically involve traditional quizzes and exams, along with papers that apply theories to practical problems (e.g., homelessness or child welfare). The final semester of the program is a full-time internship, and the majority of our graduates pursue work immediately after graduation in roles such as case manager or direct care professional. Therefore, there is equal emphasis on content knowledge about theories of counseling and skill building (how to actually implement counseling theories and document work).

The curriculum innovation process was iterative, in that data collection and the course redesign occurred simultaneously, with both students and myself critically reflecting on our experiences of teaching and learning. Data collection began on day 1 of the class when students were invited to participate in course design. Students then engaged in a two-day intensive process of course design. This was an inquiry-based learning assignment designed to address three of the four broad areas of inclusive teaching outlined by Hockings (2010): inclusive curriculum design, inclusive curriculum delivery, and inclusive assessment. Students were taught the principles of UDL, with a specific emphasis on providing multiple options for students to access class resources and demonstrate their knowledge.

Course announcements about the creation of a collaborative syllabus and questions for reflection were sent to all enrolled students one week prior to the start of the semester. The two courses opened with small-group discussions and technology-facilitated anonymous responses of what worked and what did not work for them during the previous year of pandemic-disrupted learning. After acknowledging and centering the student experience, students were invited to create the syllabus for the course, including the policies, assessments, due dates, and point allocations. Students were provided a mini-lecture on UDL, which emphasized how students could integrate multiple options for assessment on the same assignment (i.e., a paper, presentation, or exam) to increase collaborative discussion and decrease the need for negotiations based on power and privilege within the classroom. By designing the course with students, I was attempting to center disability and student challenges (Garland-Thomson 2012), acknowledging and valuing varied ways of engaging with the learning process.

Students were provided some guidelines around what could be collaboratively designed and what could not (reproduced in Table 1). For example, the course description, objectives, and textbook needed to remain due to university policy around meeting modality (face-to-face), and certain

standard policies designed to protect student rights (i.e., academic integrity). Students were able to design attendance and participation policies, late work policies, assignments, and due dates. I intentionally used the terms "collaborative" and "power sharing" to describe this process to students. Inequality was still present between myself and the students, as there were aspects of the course which the students did not have control. Therefore, I acknowledged this continuing power differential, as a criticism of the students-as-partners movement has been the unwillingness to acknowledge the continuing inequality (de Bie 2020).

Table 1. *Chart provided to students regarding changeable aspects of the course*

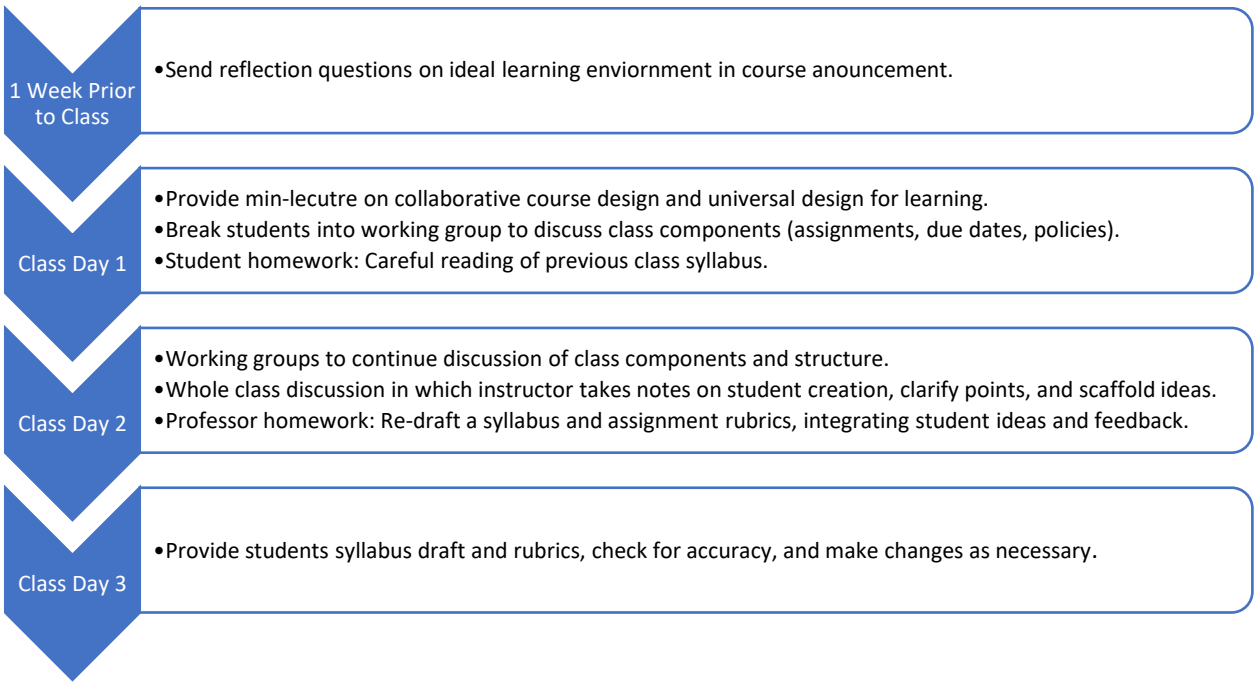
Needs to stay the same	Can be changed
Course description Course objectives Textbook University disability policy University integrity policy Mode (face-to-face) Basic guidelines - We need assignments - We need a final - Some assignments must come in first weeks of class	Classroom specific policies - Attendance - Community guidelines Assignments Due dates Grading methods Topic coverage and emphasis Teaching methods

As course design is a huge undertaking, the students were provided the syllabus from previous course iterations and the professor explained the prior general course structure. Students were then broken into small groups to discuss individual aspects (i.e., weekly quizzes or attendance policies). The professor floated from group to group and answered questions. Groups were mixed throughout the class periods and whole group discussions occurred regarding each aspect of the syllabus as the small groups concluded. The professor aimed to minimize traditional hierarchical barriers between instructor and learners by honestly answering questions, taking notes on students driven policies and assignments, and encouraging students to think outside the box (i.e., Is a test necessary at all? What do you think?). Additionally, the instructor used a mix of open discussion and questions, small group discussions, and anonymous polling and open-ended response through the software Top Hat).

Following the first day of assignment introduction and small group work, students were encouraged to continue thinking about and discussing course design prior to the next meeting period. At the following meeting period, discussions continued, and policies and assignments were solidified. It is important to note that following the principles of UDL, students did not have to agree on assignments. Instead, several assignments (i.e., the final and weekly quizzes) had multiple options. Students were explicitly taught about universal design options and this teaching was tied not only to the curriculum innovation, but to theories of intervention for helping in human services (i.e., the idea that interventions must be tailored to individual strengths and resources). Therefore, this process of solidifying assignments was a process of solidifying options for assignments. The instructor continued to take note of and clarify student expectations and desired assignments. Following this class period, the instructor agreed to have a new syllabus and updated rubrics based on their assignment modifications to the students within one week. The updated rubrics and new syllabus were thencarefully read in small groups to ensure it was consistent with student expectations. Any

requested clarifications were made by the instructor. A flow-chart of this process is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Flow chart for collaborative course design*



METHOD

This section describes the research method for collecting student data while creating a collaborative course and syllabus with students. The collaborative course design began the first semester of the 2021–2022 academic year, when the majority of the students returned to face-to-face instruction after a year and a half of primarily remote and flexible learning. All classes were upper-level human services major courses primarily attended by second- and third-year undergraduate students in a four-year program. The collaborative course design activity was repeated in two of the same courses in the second semester of the academic year. During the second semester of the 2021–2022 academic year, the university Institutional Review Board approved the study and students were provided the opportunity to give their informed consent for participation.

Participants

Thirty students were enrolled in two courses in the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. All students present during the informed consent process (n = 27) agreed to participate. The students within the major are predominantly female (77%) and white (65%). Given the small number of students within the individual courses, all of which were taught by the primary researcher, and the lack of diversity at this primarily white institution, demographic information was not collected, to maintain student confidentiality. Minority students, based on race and gender, could easily have been identified by responses to these questions.

Procedure: Data collection

The study was an iterative process, in that data collection and curriculum innovation were both occurring simultaneously and informing one another. As the instructor, I was critically reflecting on the process of teaching and learning in higher education and encouraging my students to do the same. Data collection occurred at three key points in the semester: day 1, the mid-point in the semester, and at the conclusion of the class. On day 1 of the semester, students were invited to share their perceptions of the ideal learning environment and perceived benefits and challenges of learning during the pandemic. After responding to open-ended anonymous questions about course design, students were then invited to design the course, described above in "curriculum innovation." The second point of data collection was the mid-point in the semester, when students were invited to complete a survey regarding their experiences with collaborative course design; 21 students participated. The survey questions were designed by the researcher and included three 5-point Likert-response questions and two open-ended questions. The latter two asked what they liked about collaborative design and what they would like to improve. Finally, at the end of the semester, students were asked about their perceptions of the course; 23 students participated. At this time, students were invited to rate the course and their learning on two 7-point Likert-response questions and respond to two open-ended questions about what helped them learn in the course and how their learning could be improved. To analyze the data, means and standard deviations were calculated for all Likert survey questions. For open-ended questions, the data is reported in full, and common responses are highlighted in the results and discussion section. As the instructor, I also engaged in a critical reflection of the activity, personally assessing my perceived benefits and challenges of the approach, which is presented at the end of the results section.

RESULTS

Day 1 results

At the start of the semester, the majority of students expressed they had previously engaged in a collaborative course design activity (56%), which was because approximately half of the students had done the same activity in the previous semester with the researcher. Additionally, the majority of students (92%) said they would like to help determine the evaluation methods and course policies. Students were anonymously asked open-ended questions about what worked for them about remote learning, what did not work, and what their ideal learning environment and style would look like. Answers to those questions can be found in Table 2. Students highlighted that they appreciated the flexibility of online learning and understanding the nature of professors regarding deadlines and school-home challenges. On the flip side, students acknowledged the difficulty in focusing without structure and the challenges of connecting with one another and instructors online. A common theme of what "did not work," for them was all forms of rigidity: in assignment structure, deadlines, and course policies. Exams were frequently mentioned as a challenge as well because students perceived their input and creativity on exams as limited. As such, students' comments for an "ideal" class design centered around flexibility, combining the strengths of pandemic-learning while creating structure to address the weaknesses.

Table 2. *Student assessment prior to course activity*

Question: What worked for you during remote learning? *(Class 1)*
Go at my own pace.
Take breaks when I need them.
Accessibility.
Being able to work at my own pace (when it was asynchronous) and being able to do other tasks while in class.
Being able to willingly choose whether to show my face and unmute my mic. It helped me concentrate.
Tests weren't always timed.
Being able to decide when I completed asynchronous work.
Question: What did not work for you during remote learning? *(Class 1)*
Time quizzes get me more nervous.
Some days being more chaotic at home.
Wi-Fi/computer issues at times.
I would be on TikTok while in class.
Having to teach myself the work half the time.
No face to face. Lack of experience.
I learn best face-to-face, got distracted easily at home on the computer.
A lot of distractions, not as motivated to complete my work by a certain time.
Having less motivation by the end of the semester because being at home became boring.
Question: What would the ideal class learning look like? *(Class 1)*
Having a bit more freedom (ex: fair and reasonable submission dates).
Help when needed.
Positive place.
Lecture, homework, and visual learning.
Flexibility in all aspects.
More opportunities to make the class motivating and intriguing.
Hands on experience!
Most of the classes in person, some asynchronous days.
Having a "hybrid portion of class for those who succeed in that better/in person for the better of others.
Give me examples of how traditional classroom design or assignments did not work for you. *(Class 2)*
Time exams
Long projects
Time quizzes
Large group projects
Long lectures/ slides & notes
Group projects, long lectures, due dates
Exams
Exams
Pop quizzes

Large classes
Papers
Strict deadlines
Group project designs can be dysfunctional
Long lectures

Mid-semester results

At the midpoint in the semester, 21 students responded to a survey about the collaborative course design. Students were asked three survey questions, to which they responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Students generally agreed strongly with the statement, "I felt I had a choice and a voice in the creation of the assignments and policies in this class," (M = 4.95, SD = .21). Students also agreed strongly with the statement, "Creating a collaborative syllabus for the course was time well spent," (M = 4.95, SD = .21). Finally, students agreed with the statement, "I liked the activity of creating a collaborative syllabus and would want do so in other/future classes," (M = 4.90, SD = .30).

At this measurement point, students were also asked two open-ended questions: (1) what they liked or did not like about the collaborative course design, and (2) their suggestions for improving the collaborative course design activity. Student responses to the first open-ended question can be found in Table 3. For question two, all student responses indicated that they liked the activity as is and made no suggested improvements. Students reported appreciating the choice they were given and the sense of "power" they had in the classroom. Students clearly could see the parallel between the activity and a common model used for highlighting client strengths in human services, as several students reported liking that the activity was, "person-centered," a term commonly used to refer to provider-client interactions. Finally, student responses highlighted how the activity created a culture of collaboration as one student stated, "work together early. . . makes it easier to collaborate later in things."

Table 3. *Midsemester feedback on collaborative course design*

Student reflections on collaborative course design
I love how much it is person-centered!!
I liked that we were able to negotiate with the professor on what requirements are used because it puts a level of trust and respect between the student and professor.
[I] liked working together to figure out assignments, etc.
I thoroughly enjoy being taken into consideration when dealing with grading procedures. Gives the students a voice and feeling of power.
I liked how there are options with certain assignments so if you're not comfortable with doing an assignment, you have the choice to complete it another way.
I liked the fact that we actually had a voice in what our education was going to be like and how we were able to incorporate ways that help us learn best, such as alternative options for assignments.
I liked that we could compromise on certain activities/assignments. It is also nice to know that you could miss a day without drastic change to your grade.

What I liked about the collaborative syllabus design activity was that it put us students in a position to decide how we wanted to go about the course assignments and whether we wanted them to be a part of the semester or not. It's the first time I've/have ever experienced a course like this and I hope future students get to partake in it as well.
I really liked being able to help change some of the things about the class schedule, it makes managing work easier.
I like that it is person centered.
Felt like our voice was heard and a lot of options for everyone.
That you give us an option to rewrite/edit the syllabus.
I liked that we took control as a class on how we wanted to structure the class to what would best suit US.
I like how we could have an opinion on the syllabus. If we wanted things in the syllabus or if we did not, or if we had any suggestions.
The professor allowed for everyone's feedback and she was flexible with student feedback.
I like the collaborative syllabus and how we were able to incorporate our own ideas.
I liked the midterm because I don't have to stress too much about the final.
We got to choose and agree on as a class what we wanted.
I liked that I got a say in the syllabus. A lot of professors don't do that so it's cool to express our own ideas.
I felt like the class, even in the beginning with having meetings, was able to get to know each other and work together early on which makes it easier to collaborate later in things like treatment teams or just in our case management roles. I felt like we each had good ideas and I was glad other people shared ideas I didn't have that we could implement and I could also benefit from. I also felt like [the instructor] was receiving all our ideas and giving feedback about if she thought they would be good changes or if another class had that idea but maybe it didn't work out as they intended.

Conclusion of class results

At the conclusion of the class, students were again invited to respond to an administration-created university-wide survey which included two Likert-scale questions and two open-ended questions. On a 7-point Likert scale, students positively rated their learning in response to the question, "Rate how well this course increased your understanding of the course topics," ($M = 6.91$, $SD = .29$). Students also positively rated the instructor in response to the question, "Rate how well the instructor promoted a meaningful learning experience for you," ($M = 6.91$, $SD = .29$).

At this measurement point, students were again asked two open-ended questions: (1) "What aspects of this course helped you to learn?" and "What changes to this course could improve your learning?" Because these questions are broad and inclusive of the totality of the class, the responses which corresponded to the collaborative design activity were isolated and are included in Table 4. Students mentioned how the collaborative course design was "welcoming," allowed them to feel "part of the process," and, "supported my individual choices," in learning course material. Students

also highlighted feeling that the instructor "understand(s) what students are experiencing," and was "adjustable to our need(s)," corresponding to the continual feedback loop of the class. As with the mid-semester feedback point, the most common response to what changes could be made was, "none," "nothing," and "N/A," and no changes to the collaborative course design were suggested.

Table 4. *End of class feedback on collaborative course design*

Student reflections on collaborative course design
What aspects of the course helped you learn?
What helped me the most is the [the professor], is engaged all the time and is willing to understand what students are experiencing and still hold them accountable.
Collaborative design, well-paced, knowledgeable instructor, interactive.
The collaborative syllabus, being able to work in partnerships to act as a case manager, welcoming feeling.
[The professor] is one of the best professors I've had in my college career. Every class is very organized and adjustable to our need.
Weekly meetings with client, collaborative syllabus.
Being able to contribute our ideas to the class syllabus helped me to feel like a part of the process that takes up a large part of student life.
The collaborative syllabus, class discussions, and [the professor's] overall welcoming attitude.
The student-based syllabus helped me learn in ways that supported my individual choices on how I learned the material.
What changes to this course could improve your learning?
N/A (Repeated Response).
I think [the professor] doesn't need to change the course, she allows student collaboration on assignments and her syllabus.
Nothing. / None (Repeated response)
The structure of this course was awesome.
I wouldn't change anything with this class. I really enjoyed it.
I would not change anything.

Results of collaborative course design

Students were invited to design attendance guidelines, assignments, due dates, grading methods, topic coverage, and teaching methods. The major modifications and design decisions made by the two groups of students are reported in this section and summarized in Table 5. While the courses were different, student modifications to the original course syllabi were centralized around four key themes: modifying tests/quizzes, providing multiple options for assessment, flexible due dates, and flexible attendance policies.

Table 5. *Original course component descriptions from syllabus and revised with student influence*

Course component	Original description	Student revisions
Tests and quizzes	Originally included time limit and single attempt	Revised to double the time limit and include two attempts (plus options—see below)
Weekly quizzes	Originally required weekly quizzes	Students added an option for submitting notes summaries in place of quizzes, if desired. Additionally, students added the option to complete a notes summary to make-up for a poor quiz grade twice per semester.
Final exam	Originally required a comprehensive final exam	Students added an option for a final pre-recorded presentation which had to cover each major topic.
Final presentation	Originally required a 5–7- minute comprehensive presentation	Based on concerns regarding presentation anxiety, students included additional other options, including a pre-recorded presentation or a final paper which was required to cover the same information as the final presentation.
Due dates	Assessments had set due dates at the end of each week	After much discussion, students retained the original due date, but added a two-day grace period without penalty. Additionally, to motivate their own desire to complete the work by the due date, students added a 1% extra credit option to each assignment completed by the official due date (not within the grace period)
Attendance	Original attendance policy included required graded attendance and a final grade attendance penalty if students missed more than four classes	Revised attendance policy included the ability to attend class remotely three times per semester and extra credit to students who all classes.

Modifying tests/quizzes

During the activity, students discussed numerous challenges with tests and quizzes, including time limits, test anxiety, and feeling as though there was a lack of learning with these assessments. After discussion, students as a group chose to keep quizzes and tests as an option, but added additional options for those who did not want to be assessed in this fashion (see next section).

Additionally, students lengthened time limits and added multiple attempts to quizzes to allow them to be more conducive of learning.

Multiple options for assessments

Students implemented multiple options for assessments, suggesting they understood and were able to apply the UDL principle of multiple methods for representing their knowledge. Regarding assessments, students often retained the original assessment (i.e., a quiz) but added additional options (i.e., student notes from completing the reading instead of taking the quiz). Another example of this is the final exam, to which students added two options: final paper or a final pre-recorded presentation. For these new assessment options, we discussed how to make the paper and presentation like the exam in terms of content and preparation. Students were able to outline that the papers/presentations must include a certain amount of information (i.e., paragraphs or minutes of coverage) for each chapter/section of material covered throughout the semester.

Flexible due dates

Regarding course policies, students wrote policies which were more flexible than previous ones. For example, in a discussion of the benefits versus drawbacks of due dates, some students felt due dates helped them to stay on task while others struggled with due dates because of outside conflicts (i.e., work, family) and personal challenges (performance anxiety, procrastination). Balancing the need for structure and flexibility, students developed creative solutions, including maintaining due dates, providing 1% extra credit for completing an assignment two days early, allowing assignments to be turned in up to two days late without penalty, and completing up to two assignments one week late with no penalty.

Flexible attendance policies

Similar to the discussion of due dates, students discussed the benefits of attendance policies (motivating attendance) and challenges (being penalized for undocumented illness or uncontrollable family circumstances). Students therefore determined there should be a set limit on permitted absences, as the professor has previously included in the syllabus. However, students increased that number slightly. Additionally, the students asked the professor for ways to participate remotely in the class. The professor agreed to run the class in hybrid fashion (utilizing Zoom in the classroom) for students who were unable to attend in person, and the students developed a guideline that allowed each student to do so only three times per semester (out of 45 class periods). In one of the courses, students decided to offer a small amount of extra credit to students who attended all class periods (allowing for the three remote-attended days). Notably, in this class 70% of the students achieved this milestone. Anecdotally, this level of attendance is unusually high for our major and institution, supported by national data in the United States which suggests that college student engagement was particularly low during the 2021–2022 academic year, as students adjusted to post-pandemic in-person instruction (McMurtrie 2022).

Instructor's critical reflection

This section includes my critical reflection as an instructor, with particular attention to my perception of the benefits and challenges of the activity, linking these to previous research. In terms of benefits of the approach, the students spoke of the autonomy and respect they felt in engaging in a collaborative course design and cowriting the syllabus with their instructor. Additional advantages included the students' close reading of the syllabus, the development of a class community, student

creativity in course design, and the establishment of norms of active learning from day 1. As an instructor, I have employed many methods previously to encourage the reading of the syllabus (i.e. quizzes, doing so during class time), however, I found this activity resulted in closer attention to the language in syllabus policy, as the students were given the opportunity to revise and rewrite these policies. While this took more time upfront, I spent less time reviewing and reiterating syllabus policies later in the semester. In other words, we all began on "the same page." The additional benefits noted of the development of a class community and expectations of active learning also paid dividends throughout the semester. Again, while creating an active learning community has been a goal of mine in each course for many years, this assignment immediately created a community as students were actively working together towards a shared goal in which they all had equal power (Loes 2022).

The collaborative course and syllabus design was not without challenges. At the beginning of the semester, it takes significant time to engage in this activity, time which might otherwise be devoted to the introduction of course content. In addition to the first two days at the start of the semester, the collaborative course design is a process which continues throughout the semester. Student voices have been centered at the start of class, creating an expectation that there will be a continual feedback loop throughout. The creation of an environment where students continually voice their needs and preferences in class is not seen as a drawback, but rather an advantage, albeit one which requires flexibility and nimbleness on the part of the instructor. In addition to time spent on collaboratively designing the course, time must be spent on socializing students to the power-sharing element of collaborative design. This has been previously highlighted in the students-as-partners literature, as a student said, "it can be hard to get out of those [student/faculty] roles and truly be equal" (Marquis, Black, and Healey 2017, 726).

An additional challenge in collaborative assignment design that has been highlighted previously is the "discomfort of ambiguity," for students who are accustomed to having clear instructions and grading criteria (Meinking and Hall 2020). I believe that this is where instructor education in UDL is helpful, as UDL is an excellent vehicle for the ideals of a socially just and inclusive classroom while maintaining clarity. While students can generate excellent ideas for flexible assignment options, the instructor can be responsible for creating instructions and rubrics which provide clarity and structure to those options.

It is my opinion that this collaborative course design in no way made the course '"too" easy or lacking in "rigor," as is often a concern with inclusive teaching strategies by faculty who worry these practices will reduce the quality of education (Ashworth, Bloxham, and Pearce 2010). Indeed, in this course design activity, students in several sections added additional assessments that were not a part of the course in previous iterations. For example, in one course which had a final portfolio, but no midterm, one of the modifications to the course created by the students was the implementation of a midterm. This was added by the students so they could assess their progress in the class earlier on in the course.

The concern about "rigor" may be coded language for, "not all students belong," as assessment in higher education may be measuring skills and socialization students received prior to entering the classroom (Hanesworth, Bracken, and Elkington 2019; McArthur 2016). Importantly, these skills and socialization are differentially received, dependent upon student ability and identity. Therefore, while higher education concerns itself with standards, we are codifying inequitable achievement by not recognizing the diverse methods of demonstrating one's knowledge. McArthur argues that "preoccupation with fairness or sameness is one of the major factors," which prevents assessment from being socially just" (973). We cannot ignore differential achievement by marginalized

groups in higher education, like students with disabilities and racial minorities, while claiming our assessment methods are objective and neutral. The outcome belies the process.

DISCUSSION

The key findings of the study suggest students were overall satisfied. Collaboratively designing the course increased students' sense of power in the class and feelings of collaboration and community in the classroom. Student feedback on the collaborative course design was universally positive, with l00% of students who responded (n = 21) to the mid-semester survey agreeing or strongly agreeing that the activity made them feel they had a "choice and a voice" in the class, that it was "time well spent," and that they would like to do it again in future classes. Student responses highlighted the positive impact of having a voice, choices, and collaboration on the first day of class, key aspects of collaborative and inclusive teaching (Lawrie et al. 2017; Loes 2022).

An additional key finding was that students advocated for and utilized varied assessment methods (see Table 5), which suggests that the activity allowed the participation of students at the margins, not just those who are typically centered in classroom design. Student comments expressed satisfaction with having choices for assignments, highlighting that this acknowledged different student strengths, a key underlying principle of UDL Learning (Meyer, Rose, and Gordon 2013). This study adds to the research that courses utilizing UDL are perceived positively by students (Cumming and Rose 2021) and improve academic performance (Tobin and Behling 2018).

Using a whole-class collaborative approach (Bovill 2020) was intended to increase participation of previously ignored and marginalized student populations (i.e., students with disabilities). However, as highlighted by de Bie (2022), the whole-class approach, "may actually make things worse when dominant perspectives are further incorporated into education, and marginalized experiences fall even farther out of view," (721). In another study of students with disabilities, the authors note that, "meeting the learning needs of some students may create barriers for others" (Griful-Freixenet et al. 2017, 1627). It is the combination of whole-class collaboration with technology enabled anonymous responding and principles of UDL that I believe allowed the activity to not simply solidify dominant student perspectives. UDL includes within its guidelines options for expression and communication of learning (CAST 2018). Whole-class collaboration invited all students to participate, but UDL gave students-at-the-margins pathways to integrate their ideas into the class, even if they were not shared by the majority. For example, anonymous responding allowed someone in the class to share that a final presentation would be hindered by anxiety, and this fueled a conversation about options for the final. The creation of options is in line with previous research that identified, among students with disabilities, "preferences on evaluation methods differed notably among students," (Griful-Freixenet et al. 2017, 1636).

When given the option to design the course, students spent the most time and made the most changes on assessments. Assessment activities require students to work relatively independently of the professor and can have a powerful impact on student learning (Boud and Falchikov 2007). Yet assessments are where instructors give the fewest options to students, even when instructors are invested and trained in UDL (Westine et al. 2019). McArthur (2016) highlights that the assessment literature has been critiqued for being too focused on neutrality and objectivity, often to the neglect of equity and the acknowledgement of differential factors which influence student achievement. For example, a final paper with clearly defined objectives and a rubric may be clear and objective, while differentially favoring students with English as a first language. Alternatively, a final presentation with the same clarity may differentially penalize students with social anxiety. UDL suggests options for the method of demonstrating knowledge (Burgstahler 2015), and the collaborative syllabus design

activity explored here puts students in the driver seat to develop those assessment options. In this case, students worked together to address issues in the final assessment by generating options for a final presentation, final paper, or pre-recorded presentation. Students and the instructor altered the rubrics to fit the different options. As the instructor, I scaffolded conversations about the goal of the assignment (consolidation of the semester's material) and students practically designed the rubrics to expand, for example, how long each section of a paper would need to be to address the same topics as the presentation. From an instructor standpoint, it is surprisingly easier to grade these different options, as there are standardized rubrics and yet less boredom and fatigue since the final projects are varied and unique. I believe that student generation and utilization of different choices for the final is preliminary evidence that students were better able to participate in the class in an autonomous fashion. It would be valuable to explore in future research if students with psychiatric and learning disabilities who have traditionally been marginalized in higher education are better able to participate in the class when student-generated alternative assessments are included.

While previous writers have acknowledged, "it is almost impossible to achieve a curriculum that tackles the needs of all learners without the co-occurring generation of barriers" (Griful-Freixenet et al. 2017, 1644), I believe utilizing a collaborative syllabus design with principles of UDL presents an initial attempt at doing so. While it may be difficult to accommodate all students, creating a class with students (Bovill 2020) and ensuring all suggested options and accommodations are integrated into the syllabus is one step toward eliminating the many barriers to success in higher education. By continuing to innovate and research successive approximations of a truly inclusive course, the scholarship of teaching and learning can continue to advance research in this area.

LIMITATIONS

The pedagogical method utilized can be considered an extension of the students-as-partners model (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014). However, I intentionally included the entire class in co-creation, rather than a small group of students (Bovill 2020). While I took care to include multiple methods of participation (i.e., anonymous responding facilitated by TopHat, small group discussion, and individual consultation), I am aware that there are pre-existing power imbalances among the students and with me that may have made it more difficult for students from marginalized groups to participate (de Bie 2020).

While the curriculum innovation may have reduced power imbalances in a way that allowed students to design curriculum that works for them, it occurred only in a few classes and as such can be considered an "individual social relations" change rather than a change in the structures of higher education that continue to differentially privilege groups of students (de Bie, 2020). Students with disabilities are more likely to drop out than students without disabilities (NCSER 2011). Marginalized students, including those with disabilities, but also additional intersecting racial, sexual, and gender identities, continue to face stereotype threat, microaggressions, and imposter syndrome during higher education, which affects student retention, achievement, and well-being (Nadal et al. 2021). The curriculum innovation was implemented in classes with small enrollment (under 20 students), which permitted extensive small group discussions. In larger classes, the activity could be scaled up by power sharing with students around a smaller number of class elements (i.e., the final assessment or attendance policies).

Additionally, as immediate action research, the curriculum innovation and research of its implementation occurred simultaneously. Therefore, I did not collect data comparing a collaboratively designed course to an instructor designed course. Additionally, my student data is all perception based. While students report that they felt the course increased their knowledge,

autonomy, and sense of belonging, I did not test these outcomes objectively with pre- and post-data or comparative class data. These designs would be ideal extensions for future research.

Finally, my design and implementation of this teaching strategy was heavily influenced by the models used for client relations within my discipline of psychology and the Human Services major, including cultural humility (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1988) and the social model of disability (Mole 2013). The curriculum innovation may, therefore, be particularly relevant for "helping majors" (Geroski 2017), which are training students to develop an egalitarian approach, and it may be less relevant for other majors. However, other disciplines may modify the activity based on the major relationship theories within their disciplines. For example, a "negotiated" syllabus was utilized within a business course (Kaplan and Renard 2015), where an emphasis was placed on proper business offers, contracts, and negotiation strategies. The strategy might be modified in communication classes to build on theories of assertive communication or in science courses based on the scientific method, thereby linking the curriculum innovation to the discipline-specific practices so that it serves as a method and model for the students.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper presents a method of integrating research on inclusive teaching, UDL, and cultural humility into one immediately applicable teaching strategy. This curriculum innovation was an iterative process and an example of immediate action research that can improve our courses as we teach and learn of new strategies, which, "invites further, and larger, conversations" (Cruz and Grodziak 2021, 5). Literature on applications of students as partners in classroom creation is small and incrementally built (Meinking and Hall 2020), and the present study provides an example of such work. Additional research could further elucidate the effectiveness of this approach. Specifically, future research could determine whether implementing a collaborative syllabus design activity increases intrinsic motivation and promotes feelings of belonging and community in the course by comparing a collaboratively designed course to a course with a standard instructor-created syllabus. Because inclusive education continues to experience critiques about course "rigor," future research could compare objective learning outcomes in collaboratively designed versus instructor-designed courses. Finally, a goal of the curriculum innovation was to make the course more inclusive and accessible, especially for traditionally marginalized students. Therefore, future research that specifically invites the perceptions of marginalized students and explores how to best meet their needs would be particularly beneficial.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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