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Arts and Cultural Change: A Course Concept Through UDL Theory and Praxis

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Citation: Mortensen, E. (2022). Arts and Cultural Change: A Course Concept Through UDL Theory and Praxis. The Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Success.

Founding Editor-in-Chief: Masood Zangeneh, Ph.D.

Editor: Hamid R. Yazdi, Ph.D.

Editor: Mona Nouroozifar, Ph.D.

Received: 08/13/2021

Accepted: 08/15/2022

Published: 12/15/2022

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Abstract: This article will outline my vision of a course linking the Arts and cultural change together. The idea stems from my experience with a course on literature and social change I took during my undergrad that course had a profound influence on my approach to teaching in the Arts. That original course will be explained along with proposed expansions on it, to build a fully UDL-based course where student groups will ultimately create and/or use various forms of art to inspire cultural change. It will explore the ways the course could be designed to allow for greater student ownership of their own learning, and to allow a strong class community to form. It will also look at potential issues and how they could be resolved if the course is approved and implemented.

Keywords: Praxis, Student, Arts, Culture, UDL.



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I would like to invite you on a journey into my imagination. I will describe and explain my idea for a new course that explores the connections between the Arts and cultural change, while at the same time constructed through the UDL guidelines. It is an innovative and demanding course concept that I hope to teach one day, but in the meantime, sharing my thoughts and ideas about it I might help spark some creativity and ideas for other educators. The idea is admittedly an ambitious one, and as such would no doubt encounter challenges to troubleshoot if run. That being said, I would like to share with you the inspiration for this course idea from my own education experience, its structure and concept of in relation to the UDL framework, and some preliminary troubleshooting and problem solving for logistics issues I have anticipated thus far. I hope you will enjoy this voyage.

The inspiration for the course I wish to create comes from my experience in a similar course called Literature and Social Change, taught by Dr. Ajay Heble. In this course we explored the ways that literature creates social change through the analysis of selected texts such as Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2006), Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories* (2002), Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (2017), Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1997), and Dr. Suess's *Horton Hears a Who* (2002). We read and discussed these texts, with writing assignments and a final exam analysing them. The most exciting part was that 25% of our grade was based on taking or creating a piece of literature and going out into the community to create social change. That may sound like an intense assignment to give to a class of undergrads, but it was the most meaningful experience of my entire undergraduate education.

The assignment was designed as a group project in which we came up with project ideas and pitched them to the class. Our peers listened and found ideas that they thought were exciting and signed up to work on various projects that were pitched. Dr. Heble also offered input and found ways to combine ideas that excited students and encouraged collaboration between peers. Groups were formed by the interest of students towards projects they wished to collaborate on, with no set group sizes. Dr. Heble also met and consulted with each group as the projects progressed, and determined with them the criteria of how each would be evaluated and reasonable expectations to align with different grade levels.

Half of the course time was devoted to creating and working on these projects, with numerous classes being dedicated to give time for the groups to engage in their work and Dr. Heble offering advice and assistance as needed. There was also an in-depth presentation from the university research department to explain the ethics review process of having projects approved if human research was involved. While significant course time was devoted to the projects, there was also clear expectations that project work would also need to be done outside of class time. This will now be described further as I discuss the project I was involved in.

My group's project was based in theatre. There was another student who was very interested in drawing attention to Canada's involvement in oppressing Haiti and subverting the results of their first ever democratic election in the early 2000s, and it was suggested that a theatrical work could be used to address this issue. Our group ultimately decided to pursue the rights to perform *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* by Daniel Brooks and Guillermo Verdecchia (2006); however, we wished to rewrite and update the play with more contemporary theatrical presentations of Chomsky's theories from *Manufacturing Consent* (Chomsky & Herman, 2002) and relate them to the specific context of political Canada-Haiti relations. We did get the rights and permissions to perform and rewrite the play from its authors and then set about determining the logistics of putting on the production.

I had started my own theatre company during my first year at university and had previously rented out the theatre space at War Memorial Hall on the campus. I was therefore charged with setting up the rental of the hall, in addition to being one of the two performers in. Our entire group wrote various sections of the script, ending up with the title *Haiti Held Hostage*. We also held bake sales and events to raise funds towards renting the theatre. It was determined with Dr. Heble that our project would be considered successful and receive a high grade if we were able to put on the production and have people come out to see the show—expectations we managed to exceed.

We booked the theatre for one night, offering free admission. We ran advertising campaigns through online, through the University of Guelph radio station, and through posters across the campus. On the night of the production, the 600-seat capacity War Memorial Hall was standing room only—the biggest audience I have ever performed for. Word about our production had stretched back to Haiti and we had refugees with translators present for a Q&A session after the show. We were also asked to tour the show beyond the first performance to some other conferences and venues in the GTA. It was an incredible experience and our whole group put in a great deal of work and had a lot to be proud of (in fact, we ended up achieving 100% for our project grade). There was no other project or assignment in my entire undergraduate education that I put as much energy into, took as much learning out of, or enjoyed as thoroughly as our production of *Haiti Held Hostage*. It is this kind of incredible experience that I hope to provide the opportunity for students to have in the future through the course I am proposing.

I wish to expand on the concept of *Literature and Social Change* to explore the potential of all art forms to inspire change. I also wish to use the idea of cultural change so that the sorts of change the students wish to inspire can be broad and not have to be rooted in just social issues (for example, students could choose environmental or economic issues). This is why I am arguing the title for the course to be *Arts and Cultural Change*. Like Dr. Heble's class, the first half of the course will aim to demonstrate

and provide examples of how the Arts can inspire change, while the second will be focused on having the students engage in collaborative Arts projects aimed at doing so. I will now explain my plans for the course structure in more detail and highlight how the design of the course fits with UDL guidelines.

The first half of the course will cover five art forms that can inspire cultural change: music, visual arts, literature, film, and performance. While many courses focus on set texts, this course will be more fluid, with one week spent on each art form. The students will also get to pick the sequence of art forms, the subcategories of each, and specific texts for each. Through the UDL framework, this approach will align with Point 7 (Recruiting Interest), Point 1 (Perception), Point 3 (Comprehension) and Point 5 (Expression and Communication). This approach may already seem daunting, but I believe there is a manageable way to allow students to help build the course schedule and materials during the first week of class.

During the first week, the class will be introduced to each other and the learning outcomes and design of the course. Students will be shown options of subcategories for each of the art forms. For example, literature could have subcategories for poetry, short story, novel and nonfiction. Film could have subcategories for fiction or documentary. Performance will have subcategories of dance, opera, play, and stand-up comedy. Under each of these subcategories there will be a short list of texts that students can choose from. Using digital polls or counting hands the subcategories, texts and order for the course will be determined and the weekly schedule for the course will be built. All texts on the shortlists that students can choose from would be able to be available through the school library, be provided digitally, or be screened/shown in class. These lists would be assembled from materials the school has access to, or that the rights to them can be obtained for, or those I can provide personally.

For each of the weeks that focus on an art form and its links to cultural change there will be a pre-class discussion board/Flipgrid post with a prompting question based on the subcategory and the chosen text, each worth 2% of the final grade. After each class there would be a reflection assignment asking students to explore the original question in a deeper way, drawing on ideas discussed in class. These reflections could be submitted as a written entry, podcast, video, slideshow/Prezi, or any other form the students wish to use, provided that it allows them to demonstrate their ideas and analysis. Each of these reflections will be worth 10%. The approach to these assignments aligns with UDL framework Point 7 (Recruiting Interest), Point 8 (Sustained Effort and Persistence), Point 9 (Self-Regulation), Point 2 (Language & Symbols), Point 4 (Physical Action) and Point 5 (Expression and Communication).

After students have been shown and developed their own analysis of how the Arts can generate cultural change, the second half will let the students aim to inspire real-life change through their use of the Arts. In the 7th week, the collaborative group project will be introduced in more detail.

At this point, I will explain my own experience with a similar project described earlier, and after the first run of the course I would have previous students visit to explain and share their experience as well. The specific grading criteria for the shared group mark will be developed by myself in consultation with groups based upon their project and its aims, just as Dr. Heble did in his course. To ensure students take the project and group work seriously, it will make up 40% of the course grade—30% a shared group mark, and 10% individual based on a personal reflection and evaluation of the experience, as well as evaluations of fellow group members contributions. The fact that students will also be reviewing their peers should also encourage higher levels of collaboration. While students can be hesitant and uncomfortable with group work, I have some plans to help assist with that.

When introducing the group project to the class I will also offer some instruction and ideas around group and project management approaches. Students are often nervous about group work because they are assigned groups and given tasks without being given such guidance. I will also encourage students to gain valuable experience by volunteering to be the project manager for the group and take on the responsibilities it entails. The differences between leadership and management will be clearly explained, and that project management is not about power or control but stewardship of the project to completion within the proper timeframe. I also hope to increase buy-in from students by developing groups more organically from a place of student interests and passions.

Students will be encouraged to come up with ideas to present to their peers after the first week of explaining the project ahead. The following class will focus on creating the groups and the tentative focus and approach for each project. Students can share any ideas they have that they wish to put forward. Not every student may have an idea, and some may have some similar ideas that can be combined. Other students may just hear about projects students are pitching and want to help work on them because they like their peer's idea. My aim in this class will be to offer suggestions about where ideas could mesh and facilitate groupings of students interested in an idea pitched by another classmate. Groups could be as small as 2 or as large as 10, based on the nature of the project and how many students are interested. It will be up to the groups to determine how each member should be making meaningful contributions.

Groups will also have the ability to remove members from a project if they are not holding up their end. Any students removed from their group will be given a very demanding written individual written assignment instead, designed to incentivize participation of all group members in order to avoid it. There will even be the possibility for a passionate student with a creative project idea they want to run with, to be able to do it on their own if there are no other takers. In such a case I will consult one on one with the student to set up fair grading criteria for them taking on a project solo. I aim to offer maximum flexibility and support in my approach to this course, but

I recognize that this will entail a lot of time and effort on my part outside of the typical class hours.

I will devote some classes towards groups meeting and working on their projects, wherein I will also be available to consult and troubleshoot. Depending on the nature of certain projects I can also help facilitate meetings or presentations to be given to the class or specific groups from other offices or departments at the institution that may prove helpful. I also plan to be present at each of the project launches, performances, or functions. I will always be there outside of the regular class times to participate and attend when the students have set up the launch of their project. Where applicable, I will also aim to encourage turn out for the groups' performances, events or activities. The whole of this project touches on all nine points of the UDL guidelines, with particularly extensive opportunities to develop skills with Point 6 (Executive Functions). It is the hope that the second half of the course, focused through these projects, will allow students great collaborative and experiential learning opportunities through all the UDL guidelines.

It is clear from the way I am conceiving of the course that there could be several issues to troubleshoot as the class progresses based on specific projects and approaches to them that students take. Some of these cannot be foreseen, but there are other potential issues that may arise that I have anticipated for which I can discuss some hypothetical troubleshooting. One example is the aforementioned alternative assignment for when a group member is removed for failing to contribute. I will now present a few other possible issues that could arise in the running of this course as I conceive it, and some possible solutions.

One issue that jumps out immediately for me is what I do with students who do not attend class on the day that we are forming the groups for the projects. I suspect that all educators who have run group projects have experienced this issue. In the case of this project it is possible students have already talked with each other and know peers that have already indicated interest in working on their project idea. I can also repeatedly make clear how important the group forming class is. However, after the class has occurred, I will have a sense of the projects as they stand and can send out a message/e-mail to any students not in attendance telling them about the projects and to select one they are interested in joining. They can then approach the group and the group can decide if they wish to add additional members. If anyone misses that class without a valid reason, and/or has no group that will take them, they can opt to create a solo project idea or to do the alternative term paper assignment.

Another concern could be how students will be aware of the design and expectations of the course. This can be addressed by having a course description that makes clear the large group project component of the course, and that the students will build the course content and material choices with me in the first week. The focus on of the course description will be more minimal on the specific content to be covered and focus more

on the design and approach the course will take in relation to the content of Arts and cultural change. It will be described as a more innovative and experimental approach to a course to make students aware that it will not be a typical classroom experience, and at the same time hopefully draw students in who are excited by the prospect of what is in store.

Other potential challenges such as how to consider access to materials and how to organize the students assisting in creating the course schedule have been addressed earlier in the piece. These are just some preliminary concerns that come to mind, but there will no doubt be other challenges to overcome in the first few runs of the course. If I am given the opportunity to run the course, I would like to revisit this article and write an update on successes and challenges I discover in the process. It could help to expand on ideas discussed in this article and could offer some more inspirations and approaches, which other educators may wish to implement with their own teaching. For now, I thank you for taking the time to take this trip into my imagination. I hope in the future to have this dream become a reality of student experiential learning through all of the UDL guidelines.

Funding

N/A

Declaration of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval and informed consent

N/A

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