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Structured Flexibility in Assessment: Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Different Elements of Choice on Their Decision Making, Engagement, and Learning Experiences

ABSTRACT

Research on the learning- and engagement-related impacts of choice in assessment is growing, though it often focuses on a single kind of choice with insufficient attention to the learning priorities and motivations behind students' decisions. The assessment design explored here offered flexibility to students by providing multiple kinds of choice while maintaining the critical structure of a single type of assignment, which was necessary to preserve learning outcomes and not overwhelm students. This study investigated the impact of choice not only on students' perceptions of their learning and engagement but also on their decision-making process in order to better understand their motivations and the influences of learning priorities and individual circumstances. Guided by a mixed methods approach involving a survey followed by interviews, we found that offering choice in assessment increased students' perceived autonomy and control, ability to balance other demands, quality of work, and enjoyment and interest in the work, while decreasing their stress levels. We also found that offering multiple elements of choice in a single assessment supported students' abilities to make decisions based on their complex and diverse learning priorities, motivations, and individual circumstances. This study, as well as research on flexible assessment more broadly, respond to the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning's grand challenges, which include a call for more investigation into student engagement in learning and the complex processes of learning.

KEYWORDS

assessment, flexibility and choice, student engagement and learning, grand challenges, mixed methods

INTRODUCTION

For better or worse, assessment remains a *sine qua non* of postsecondary education. Research into what, how, and why we assess—and how students experience assessment—has shed light on the inherently problematic nature of a one-size-fits-all approach, not least because students have diverse aptitudes, interests, lived experiences, and demands on their time and energy, all of which affect their learning and engagement. Moving from a one-size-fits-all approach to flexible approaches—also known as assessment empowerment (Francis 2008)—may shift some control from instructor to student. While flexible approaches to assessment take many forms, they all allow students "to choose,

to some extent, what, how, and/or when their learning is assessed" (Spinney and Kerr 2023, 46). Flexible approaches align with inclusive pedagogies, such as the Universal Design for Learning principles (CAST 2018), empowering diverse learners with multiple means through which to achieve learning goals. These approaches also have roots in and affinities with other scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) commitments, including student-centered learning (O'Neill and McMahon 2005), learner-centered teaching (Weimer 2002), and self-determination theory (Spinney and Kerr 2023).

Scholarly interest in flexible assessment approaches aligns with the Grand Challenges in Assessment project (Singer-Freeman and Robinson 2020), which aims to increase equity, improve pedagogy, and drive innovation in connection to assessment. Research into flexible assessment also potentially responds to the grand challenges for SoTL, recently identified by the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) (Scharff et al. 2023):

> SoTL practitioners study postsecondary teaching and learning to better understand and improve . . . 1) how to develop critical and creative thinkers; 2) how to encourage students to be engaged in learning; 3) the complex processes of learning; 4) how identities affect both teaching and learning; and 5) the practice, use, and growth of SoTL.

CHOICE IN ASSESSMENT

Many studies demonstrate that choice in assessment can offer a variety of benefits related to learning and engagement, but it also has potential pitfalls. Examples of benefits include students being more motivated or engaged in their learning (Kessels et al. 2024; Pacharn, Bay, and Felton 2013; Pattal, Cooper, and Wynn 2010; Spinney and Kerr 2023). Students report greater success, variously defined as higher quality work, improved learning, etc. (Hills and Peacock 2022; Kumar and Wideman 2014). They may also achieve higher grades (Pacharn, Bay, and Felton 2013; Withington and Schroeder 2017). Additionally, students may experience less stress because of flexibility in assessment (Cook 2001; Hills and Peacock 2022; Kumar and Wideman 2014; Nickels and Uddin 2003; Pretorius, van Mourik, and Barratt 2017). Potential pitfalls for students may include questioning or regretting the choices they make (Coulter, Coyne, and Andrews 2024; Coyne and Woodruff 2022) or finding choice to be overwhelming or confusing (Spinney and Kerr 2023; Wanner and Palmer 2015). These drawbacks highlight the importance of maintaining sufficient structure in assessment design in order to maintain the salience of learning goals and not overwhelm students with too much choice.

Most studies exploring the impact of assessment flexibility on learning and engagement focus on a single element of choice, such as providing students with choices in types of assessment (Hanewicz, Platt, and Arendt 2017; Irwin and Hepplestone 2012; Jopp and Cohen 2020; O'Neill 2017) or essay topics (Crookes 2007), or offering them deadline flexibility (Hills and Peacock 2022; Schroeder et al. 2019). While some studies have explored assessment designs where there are multiple elements of choice in assessment, choices were spread out across multiple forms of assessment, rather than within a single one (Kumar and Wideman 2014; Spinney and Kerr 2023; Wanner and Palmer 2015). There is also a notable lack of research on the factors guiding student decisions when they are offered choice in assessment. Coyne and Woodruff (2022) provide a notable exception with their exploration of the motives behind student choices when using a flexible assessment weighting scheme.

This study builds on existing literature about choice in assessment. We took a novel approach, aiming to balance flexibility with structure by working with a single assessment featuring three elements of choice and assessing the impact on student learning experiences and engagement. Additionally, we investigated the complex factors that guide students' decision making when choice

in assessment is offered. Through a student survey and interviews, we found that students experienced increased engagement in assessment as a result of all three elements of choice (specifically increased enjoyment and interest in the assessment and decreased stress related to it). Our results shed light on the complex processes of learning and student decision making (students' motivations, priorities, and the impact of their individual circumstances).

METHODOLOGY

Our study employed a two-phased mixed methods approach, beginning with a student survey that provided preliminary data and guided the development of student interview questions to investigate survey findings more deeply. We offered multiple elements of choice to students in a single assignment and investigated student perceptions of the impact of these options on their learning experiences, including their enjoyment and interest in the task, stress level, learning, and work quality. We also investigated student decision-making processes to better understand their motivations and the influence of multiple elements of choice, learning priorities, and individual circumstances on their decisions. Before starting the research, we obtained institutional research ethics approval.

Researcher reflexivity

We are tenured, mid-career educators with common SoTL interests in student learning, student mental health, and inclusive teaching practices. We first met as novice SoTL scholars and come from different disciplinary backgrounds (English, biology, and nursing). Over the years, we continued to dialogue about SoTL, teaching, and learning, as we valued each other's cross-boundary perspectives, which challenged some of our unconscious understandings and assumptions (Behari-Leak 2020). For example, we discovered that challenges or successes we believed to be unique to teaching in our respective contexts often had commonalities across disciplines. Sharing our varied perspectives, experiences, and practices encouraged us to be more aware of the barriers we inadvertently perpetuated and the opportunities to incorporate more flexibility in our teaching.

While we are in different disciplines and have different types of course assessments, we all offer choice through structured flexibility in different ways and were curious about how students experienced choice. We decided to investigate the impact of a choice in English literature assessment because it balanced structure and flexibility by offering multiple elements of choice (deadline, text, and question) in a single assignment. The opportunity for a focused study countered any limitations of focusing on one assessment in a specific discipline and provided richer data about choice in relation to these multiple elements, which are also applicable to other disciplines.

Site, course, and participant description

We recruited participants from six third-year English literature courses that co-author Sarah Copland designed and taught at MacEwan University, a mid-sized undergraduate university in western Canada. These courses took place in the fall (September–December) or winter (January–April) terms between 2020 and 2023 and were offered in either face-to-face or hybrid modalities, depending on the stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Class sizes ranged from 10–19 students. A total of 71 students completed one or more of these courses. Most students were English majors or minors. We selected these courses because they included assessments that offered students choices of text, question, and deadline, providing the opportunity to explore how multiple elements of choice impacted student learning and decision making.

Assignment description and choice

The assignment consisted of a paragraph-length (approximately 300-word) response to a question about a short excerpt from a literary text. The learning goal of the response paragraph assignment was for students to demonstrate and develop their ability to advance an argument about a text based on literary analysis (also known as "close reading"), before completing the larger summative assignments that built on this skill, regardless of which assignments they completed. Students submitted two response paragraphs from five or six potential choices in five of the six courses. Approximately 10% of the final course grade came from each response paragraph. One course had a slightly different assessment structure where students chose one of two response paragraphs early in the term and another one of two possible choices later in the term. In all six courses, the choices available to students differed in the text, question, and deadline. Because the courses covered different subjects, the texts and questions did not overlap, so students taking more than one course with Copland had just as many options as their classmates. Students could make decisions based on whatever factor(s) they wished and were not required to declare their decisions, meaning they could change their minds over the term. Students always had access to grades and feedback before the next deadline.

Student survey

All students who completed one of the six courses received the survey (n=71). While 17 students took two or more of these courses, we only sent the survey to them once. Survey distribution occurred in September 2022, January 2023, and April 2023, after the completion of all courses and the submission of final grades. 39% (n=28/71) of students responded to the survey. We deployed the survey via Google Forms and included nineteen questions, primarily Likert and open-ended, to explore the impact of flexibility in assessment on student learning and the factors that influenced students' decisions. The survey did not collect demographic data.

Analysis of the student survey

We compiled survey results across courses, as individual course sizes were too small to allow for statistical analyses that would reveal group differences. We then manually completed representational thematic text analysis for open-ended survey responses where we identified and coded commonalities between questions to provide a quantitative data summary (Popping 2015). Although the small sample sizes meant the results did not indicate any statistically significant differences between responses, they provided general insights into student learning experiences with the choice in assessment.

Student interviews

Using an explanatory sequential design, preliminary survey results informed the development of an interview guide to elicit more in-depth information about students' perspectives and experiences. The semi-structured interview included 18 open-ended questions exploring factors that may have influenced students' decisions for the response paragraph assignment and their learning experiences with this assessment. We sent a recruitment email, which included consent information, to all students who completed one or more of the courses offered in winter 2022, fall 2022, or winter 2023 (n=44). We limited recruitment to the three most recent courses in order to hear from participants with stronger recollections of the assignment.

Two authors conducted each of the hour-long interviews in person or online (depending on the participant's preference) in June 2023. We recorded the interviews and transcribed them for

analysis using Microsoft Word's transcription tool to generate first drafts, which we then edited manually. Due to her familiarity with the assessment and courses, Copland conducted all interviews alongside one of the other study authors. We conducted all interviews after Copland finalized course grades and students were no longer studying with Copland.

Ten participants with good representation from the three courses responded and participated in interviews. Six had taken one of the courses included in our study, three had taken two, and one had taken three. The 10 students were of different genders, ages, and disciplinary backgrounds. One was in the English honours program; one was an English major; six were English minors; and two were not enrolled in any English program. Some took full course loads of five courses per term, while others took three or four. Most participants reported working, but a few did not. Some reported having significant family commitments and/or personal stressors (e.g., health concerns, moving).

Analysis of student interviews

Using Braun and Clarke's six steps (2006, 2022), we undertook a reflexive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. To begin, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading all transcripts and then independently analyzing a single transcript and generating initial codes. We then discussed individual codes and reached a consensus on a single set of codes and definitions. Using these codes, we analyzed all ten transcripts via a comprehensive spreadsheet. We also undertook a review of the intended research aims for clarity and consensus. Following this, we identified, discussed, and defined emerging themes and developed a further spreadsheet of the thematic findings that could be used to write and support the three themes with participant quotations.

RESULTS: SURVEY

Students reported that all three elements of choice (text, question, and deadline) influenced their decisions about which assessments to complete (Table 1). Of the 28 students who responded, most indicated that the text (n=27), deadline (n=26), and question (n=25) had a "moderate" or "significant" influence on their choice. The option of "no influence" was not selected for any of the three elements of choice.

Table 1. Student feedback on the elements of choice influencing their decisions (n=28)

Factor	Significant influence	Moderate influence	Little influence	No influence
Interest in the text	19 (68%)	8 (29%)	1 (4%)	0
The deadline	18 (64%)	8 (29%)	2 (7%)	0
Interest in the question	9 (32%)	16 (57%)	3 (11%)	0

Furthermore, the majority of the participants indicated that all three elements of choice improved their learning, work quality, and enjoyment of the assessment (Table 2). Specifically, they reported that choice had a "moderate" or "significant" impact on improving their learning (choice in text, n=26; choice in question, n=26; choice in the deadline, n=9); improving their work quality (choice in text, n=26; choice in question, n=26; choice in the deadline, n=16); and increasing their enjoyment of the assessment (choice in text, n=26; choice in question, n=25; choice in the deadline, n=15). Students only selected the option of "no impact" when asked about the impact of the choice of deadline on improving their learning (n=7), work quality (n=6), or enjoyment (n=6).

Table 2. Students' perceptions of the impact of choice in text, question, and deadline on their learning, work quality, and enjoyment of the assessment (n=28)

Improved learning				
Element of choice	**Significant**	**Moderate**	**A little**	**No impact**
Text	10 (36%)	16 (57%)	2 (7%)	0
Question	12 (43%)	14 (50%)	2 (7%)	0
Deadline	2 (7%)	7 (25%)	12 (43%)	7 (25%)
Improved quality of work				
Text	14 (50%)	15 (43%)	2 (7%)	0
Question	15 (54%)	11 (39%)	2 (7%)	0
Deadline	5 (18%)	11 (39%)	6 (21%)	6 (21%)
Greater enjoyment of the assessment				
Text	21 (75%)	5 (18%)	2 (7%)	0
Question	15 (54%)	10 (36%)	3 (11%)	0
Deadline	10 (36%)	5 (18%)	7 (25%)	6 (21%)

When asked whether the choice offered made it easier to balance this assignment with other workload commitments, most students indicated that it did (n=26, 93%). One indicated that choice had no such effect, and one did not respond. Where students explained their responses in an open-ended follow-up question, fourteen mentioned benefits related to managing time/workload, five referenced their ability to complete higher-quality work, four indicated improved interest/enjoyment, and three reported decreased anxiety/stress.

Most students reported that the choice offered in this assessment had some impact on their stress or anxiety (n=17, 61%), primarily resulting in a decrease (n=15). Again, most students identified that all three elements of choice decreased their stress: choice in deadline (n=15), text (n=12), and question (n=10). Only two students reported an increase in stress or anxiety. One participant reported that all three elements of choice increased their stress or anxiety a little, and the other reported that the choice in the deadline and question increased their stress or anxiety a little but that the choice in the text had no effect.

When explaining how choice impacted their stress or anxiety, students who reported a decrease because of the choice in text spoke about being more interested in the text (n=6), more confident about completing the assignment (n=4), and better able to understand the text (n=3). Only one student stated that the choice in text increased their stress or anxiety a little, and their explanation indicated that their stress or anxiety was likely connected more to the challenge of reading the text rather than to the element of choice. Similarly, students explained that the reduction in stress/anxiety associated with the choice in question correlated with more enjoyment (n=3), confidence (n=3), and control (n=2). Two students reported increased stress due to the choice in question and described factors like overthinking the choice and the challenge of making a decision. Students who explained how the choice in deadline decreased their stress/anxiety spoke about their ability to better manage their time or workload (n=9) and complete higher-quality work (n=2). Of the students who reported increased stress or anxiety, one mentioned an assignment with a text/question they wanted to choose but a deadline that conflicted with their other academic responsibilities. The other response suggested general anxiety about deadlines and did not refer to the element of choice.

RESULTS: INTERVIEW

Interviews with the ten diverse participants provided rich data that aligned with, and added important nuance to, the initial survey findings. Three relevant themes emerged from the interview analysis. Together, they revealed that the factors that drove student decisions about which assignments to complete were complex and included their motivations and priorities as learners, as well as their individual circumstances. Interview participants appreciated multiple kinds of flexibility in assessment in terms of their learning and engagement and were thoughtful about assessment and aware of potential pitfalls of assessment choice in other contexts.

Theme 1: Students' assessment-related decisions are complex and include their motivations and priorities as learners, as well as their individual circumstances

Many participants could clearly articulate the ways they made their decisions or could rank the three elements of choice in order of importance to them, based on their learning motivations and priorities and their individual circumstances. One participant reflected:

> I'd definitely say the question would be the number one, text is number two, and then deadline number three because if a question really resonates with me, I get a bit more excited to write about it, and then it doesn't concern me which text I am addressing or when it is due because I'll probably sit and start doing it right away. (P3)

For other students, there was more nuance, as was apparent in this participant's comment about the relationship between their degree of engagement and the requirement to complete the assessment:

> I think it's kind of a chicken-and-egg situation where it's like, am I engaging with this particular text better because I know I am going to write about it, or am I going to write about it because I am more engaged in it? (P8)

Interestingly, even when participants identified one element of choice as being the most influential in their decisions about which assessments to complete, influences from the other elements became clear as the interview progressed. Students reflected more on their learning priorities and motivations, as well as their individual circumstances. For example, one participant reported that they chose based on deadline, and, as they were describing this choice, they added:

> Maybe if the one [text] would have really sparked my interest over the other one, I would have pushed myself to make it work, even though it would have been more difficult. That's kind of what I am wondering now. (P4)

This participant noted that they had not completed the early assessment they had intended to do because the text and question proved difficult, so they chose a later response paragraph in order to turn in a higher-quality assignment (P4). Several students described either having plans to start on earlier assessments and then having other things get in the way or having decreased personal stress knowing that they could choose an assessment with a later deadline if unexpected things arose; in these cases, participants expressed appreciation for having a backup option (P3, P4, P5, P7). Overall, it appears that deadline was not the sole element influencing student decisions and that external factors arose, compromising some participants' ability to follow through on their initial decisions.

Some participants reported that they would have made different decisions if they had not had significant demands on their time that limited their choices (P4, P6). In referring to a hypothetical scenario where they may have had fewer demands, one participant stated, "If I were in that situation, I would definitely choose it based off of the text and questions" (P4) instead of deadlines, which played a central role in that participant's decisions. Even when students are afforded multiple elements of choice in assessment, they may experience barriers to accessing the full range of choices.

Deadline, learning priorities, motivations, and individual circumstances
Many participants reported that the deadline strongly influenced their decisions; however, how and why varied. Some students made decisions based on wanting earlier deadlines (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8). However, even when recognizing the potential benefit of completing an assessment earlier, some participants chose not to write the earliest assignments for a variety of learning-related reasons, such as feeling less confident about what the instructor was looking for (P4, P9), wanting to benefit from class discussion and learn about peers' approaches (P6), and wanting to delay their second submission so they had more time to consider the feedback from their first (P9). While all students commented on deadline choice and reduced stress, some noted that their decision might still be based on the other elements (text or question) that facilitated more engagement:

> I would still do the more stressful deadline, even though that would be horrible for my brain, like for my mental state, like I would be very stressed . . . but . . . I have had it before where something I was really interested in has been coinciding with something like another thing I had to do that week or whatever, but I still managed to make it work for me. (P5)

Question, learning priorities, motivations, and individual circumstances
Of the three elements of choice, the question appeared less important to most participants' decisions about which assessments to complete. When the choice in question did play a role, it often related to participants' confidence in their learning: feeling they had a "good" answer (P1) or were "able to make a good argument or say something profound" (P8). For some participants, choice in question and text seemed intertwined, and whenever they spoke of the question, they also referred to the text. It is therefore likely that their thoughts about the influence of the text coloured their comments about the influence of the question. For some participants, the question impacted their engagement and learning—and therefore could be more influential in their decisions than was initially apparent, especially as most students' responses blended references to the question with references to the text. "I think good questions can allow you to think about the text more and get more out of it" (P1).

Text, learning priorities, motivations, and individual circumstances
Choice in text appeared to have played a strong role in most participants' decisions, specifically their enjoyment, interest, and perceptions of the quality of work they submitted. When referring to the text, most participants spoke of interest. "Being genuinely interested in a text does make me want to engage with it on a, beyond more like a surface level, you know, like, critically analyze it and try to share my thoughts" (P7). Some related interest to a desire to produce high-quality work and to feel engaged: "which of these could I provide the best response to? Which of these stimulate the most, I guess?" (P1). Other participants reported that they chose texts that resonated with them (P3, P5, P6, P9), that they had read previously (P9), or that felt like "reading for pleasure

too, like it wasn't just . . . the specific excerpts. . . . I was going beyond that and again thinking critically about . . . the work overall" (P7).

Several participants shared their appreciation for choice in text since it allowed them to avoid writing on texts they did not like (P5, P6, P7) or found harder to understand (P1, P2, P6, P9). One participant shared that they do not enjoy "forcing [themselves] to read . . . but if the text is interesting, it makes it easier to engage with critically," which in turn makes it easier to write on, elaborating that it is "hard to sit down and dedicate time to something like [they] don't really care about" (P6).

Theme 2: Students value multiple elements of choice in assessment because of the beneficial impact on learning and engagement

The second theme appeared in all ten transcripts. No participant expressed dislike of the assessment choice offered in this study or identified any negative impacts resulting from it. Common threads emerged in students' discussions around the choice's benefits to their learning and engagement.

Greater autonomy

One participant shared: "I do appreciate that choice in this . . . assessment . . . allows us as students to have our own degree of autonomy within the course" (P3). Other participants echoed this sentiment, believing that choice in assessment would afford them more control over their grades (P1, P2, P4, P5, P8, P9). For some, this perceived grade control came from deciding which assignments to complete based on what they believed would do best at (P1, P2, P5) while avoiding the assignments they felt less confident with. "That helped relieve my stress in a way. . . . A portion of my mark wasn't based on something I wasn't fully understanding" (P2). Since class discussions examined all texts and questions, students still had the opportunity to develop their understanding, but the assessment flexibility allowed them to exercise some autonomy, completing the graded work they felt best demonstrated their ability. In addition, when speaking specifically about how choice in assessment influenced their stress, many students referred to empowerment or greater control.

Greater ability to balance demands

Many participants remarked on the benefit of making decisions that balanced these assessments with their other demands, often in connection to deadline choice. For some, they balanced assignments with employment demands (P2, P6, P7, P9). Others discussed how they managed these assessments alongside the demands of other courses (P4, P5, P6, P8): "I found I had no choice with everything else [other classes]. . . . It was nice to have a little bit of control over it [this course's assignment], [be]cause I really wanted to get good grades" (P4). Several participants noted that their academic workloads got heavier as term progressed (P1, P2, P5), something they could mitigate by choosing earlier deadlines.

Higher quality of work

Participants perceived that the flexibility enabled them to complete higher-quality work and engage more deeply with topics of interest (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10). Eight participants identified the text as influencing the quality of their work, and six also identified the question as playing a role. One participant stated:

Since I got to choose a piece that I really understood . . . I read them [it] more in-depth and took more notes. . . . So I think that most likely influenced how well my initial response was written. (P2).

Regarding the choice of question, one participant recalled, "I want to choose a topic that I think I'd be able to make a good argument or say something profound" (P8). Some found it difficult to separate the influence of text and question: "If I'm excited about a topic or excited about the text we are working with, I'll complete it right away, regardless, maybe take extra time so I feel I have done it to the best of my ability" (P3). The choice in deadline also allowed a few participants to feel they had produced higher-quality work, enabling them to choose a period when they had more time to dedicate to the assignment.

Increased enjoyment

Having a choice in question and text played a role in all participants' overall enjoyment of the assessment and the course. One participant observed, "Having the choice to pick . . . what would work best for me and choose what I am most excited about definitely allows me the space to . . . complete the task more joyfully" (P3). Two participants reported taking additional courses with this instructor, at least in part because they enjoyed the flexibility.

Theme 3: Students acknowledge possible pitfalls of choice in assessment in other configurations and contexts

While no participants shared any negative impacts of their experience of flexibility in these courses, many anticipated that they might not have had the same experience in different contexts. Several participants said they might have struggled with too many choices offered within a single course or too many courses providing choices. One student reflected, "I think if every class gave a choice, then that would be more confusing because then you would have too many things to juggle around, to try and see what fits" (P4). Another student added, "if there [are] too many choices then I get anxious or stressed because there are too many directions to go into" (P5).

When asked how they would feel about choice if the assessment were worth a larger percentage of the course's final grade or if the assessment were longer (e.g., an essay), some students said the ability to choose under such circumstances would add stress. Interestingly, others said the choice would still be beneficial.

Several participants also reported that flexibility and choice worked well for them but expressed concern about how they might have experienced these options if they had low motivation, poor time-management skills, or heavy course loads (P1, P2, P4, P6, P9), or were in their first year of study (P8). When asked how they would feel in a course with no deadlines (the sole requirement being that all work must be submitted by the end of the semester), most participants reported that this would not be ideal. Those who said they could manage it reported strong motivation or time-management skills (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P10). Many participants also noted that in such situations, they would need to make deadlines for themselves, making it clear that structure is important to students.

DISCUSSION

As educators and SoTL researchers, we aim to create environments that empower all students to be engaged, confident, and self-directed learners and to achieve learning outcomes, irrespective of their individual circumstances. Within these learning environments, assessment is both a means for

evaluating learning and a learning opportunity, allowing students to practice and demonstrate skills and receive feedback. Flexibility and choice in assessment align with the Universal Design for Learning framework since they foster learner autonomy by offering multiple means for students to learn and demonstrate their learning (CAST 2018). In the courses we studied, the instructor wanted to enable students to choose based not only on their perceptions of their aptitudes (which may be incorrect) but also on their perceptions of their interest and engagement (which, it is fair to assume, they know better). These courses also offered deadline flexibility in case of personal emergencies and workload crunches.

Other studies have investigated the learning- and engagement-related outcomes of flexibility and choice in assessment. Our survey and interview data support the benefits reported in other studies: for example, students' ability to produce higher-quality work and balance other demands (Hills and Peacock 2022; Kumar and Wideman 2014), increased enjoyment (Spinney and Kerr 2023), and increased motivation (Kessels et al. 2024; Pacharn, Bay, and Felton 2013; Pattal, Cooper, and Wynn 2010). Our interviews also captured autonomy's importance to student learning experiences, as reported in other studies on flexible assessment (Kumar and Wideman 2014; Spinney and Kerr 2023; Withington and Schroeder 2017).

Few studies, however, have explored the motivations behind student decisions, particularly when there are multiple elements of choice offered. In our study, the survey suggested that students found all three elements of choice important to their decision making. The student interviews reinforced this finding and provided additional insight into the varied and complex ways students considered these choices, along with the individual priorities, motivations, and circumstances that impacted students' decisions about which assessments to complete. For example, while students may have perceived one factor, such as text, as most important to their choices, their decision may have ultimately been made due to another factor, such as deadline. Some students, however, noted that their engagement with a particular text or question and the ability to produce higher-quality work were the deciding factors, even if the associated deadline added significant stress.

Many participants alluded to grades and choosing an assessment that they believed they could do better on (either because of deadline, interest, or perceived ability to answer the question) as motivating their decisions. This finding is similar to that of Coyne and Woodruff (2022), who explored a flexible assessment weighting scheme where written student feedback revealed that self-perceived strengths often motivated student decisions. Ultimately, these observations indicate the importance of providing deadline flexibility and additional elements of choice in order to accommodate students' variable circumstances and complex learning priorities and motivations. Incorporating multiple elements of choice may also promote equity by expanding the benefits of choice in assessment to more learners, as educators cannot predict students' individual learning priorities, motivations, aptitudes, or circumstances.

Assessment is a significant contributor to student anxiety (McKendrick-Calder et al. 2024), and educators experience strain in managing student mental wellness, most commonly around assessment (McKendrick-Calder and Choate 2023). In both our survey and interview findings, students reported a reduction in their stress due to the choice offered in this assessment, suggesting that structured flexibility in assessment is a practice that may support student well-being. Reductions in student stress as a result of this flexibility have also been observed in other studies (Cook 2001; Hills and Peacock 2022; Kumar and Wideman 2014; Nickels and Uddin 2003; Pretorius, van Mourik, and Barratt 2017). For educators, this flexibility may reduce the need to manage students' assessment-related stress and anxiety (McKendrick-Calder and Choate 2023).

The assessment strategy used in these courses benefited the instructor (Copland) in other ways, too. The deadline flexibility reduced the need to manage extension requests. There was no net increase in grading workload. Since this strategy distributed grading evenly across the term, the offered choices did not lead to student procrastination: the number of students who completed the last two assignments was not considerably different from those who completed the first two (14 vs. 10). Furthermore, because the instructor required students to read all texts on the course for class discussions and other assignments, being able to select a text for this assignment did not result in students skipping readings.

While few students indicated any negative consequences due to the choice provided, they were thoughtful about potential pitfalls of choice in assessment. Specifically, they acknowledged that too much flexibility and choice could add stress or overwhelm students. It is worth noting that in the survey results, two students who indicated that the choice in this assessment increased their stress explicitly mentioned overthinking the choice and the challenge of making a decision. Other research reaffirms that choice can be overwhelming or cause confusion for students (Spinney and Kerr 2023; Wanner and Palmer 2015). It may also have the potential for students to make choices they later regret (Coulter, Coyne, and Andrews 2024; Coyne and Woodruff 2022).

Our study has limitations: our sample size was small and based on a single assessment design from courses in one discipline at one institution. Furthermore, the survey and interview data are self-reported, and students self-selected to participate. Even with these limitations, the benefits of choice in assessment observed in our study align with other research on flexibility in assessment from various disciplines. Additional research across disciplines and post-secondary contexts may facilitate a better understanding of how multiple elements of choice impact student learning and what factors influence their decisions. Higher education would also benefit from research exploring the impact of assessment flexibility on students from equity-deserving groups to potentially mitigate disproportionate learning barriers. There is also a need to further explore faculty perspectives, including the opportunities for and barriers to implementing assessment flexibility in diverse academic contexts. As El Galad, Betts, and Campbell (2024) and Huyer et al. (2024) demonstrate, studies of flexible assessment must also investigate student and faculty perspectives simultaneously to develop the fullest possible picture of flexible assessment's benefits and challenges.

ISSOTL's grand challenges for SoTL (Scharff et al. 2023) frame significant considerations for scholars and educators. Our study contributes to ongoing discussions about grand challenge numbers two (how to encourage students to be engaged in learning) and three (the complex processes of learning). Our findings demonstrate that, for various reasons, choice in assessment enhanced participants' engagement and improved their learning experiences. Our findings also offer insights into the nuanced factors that influenced students' choices and overall engagement. Implementing flexibility in assessment to benefit student learning experiences may be influenced by many factors, including learning goals, course structure, disciplinary contexts, institutional policies and norms, and individual faculty circumstances.

Based on the results of this study and our experience with offering choice in assessment, we suggest other faculty consider the following core principles when implementing such an approach: 1) Expand the kind of choice to provide students with the flexibility to make decisions based on the factors that are most important to their learning, engagement, and individual circumstances; 2) Balance this flexibility with sufficient structure by limiting the degree of choice so it does not to overwhelm students or create an unsustainable faculty workload; 3) We also suggest balancing structure and flexibility based on students' year of study, needs, aptitudes, etc.; for example, first-year

students may benefit from more structure and less flexibility, while the degree and kinds of choice may be expanded as students gain more experience and confidence.

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ETHICS

The MacEwan University Research Ethics Board approved this research. All authors have TCPS2 certification, required in Canada for research involving human participants.

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