

Choose Your Own Learning Adventure: Promoting Academic Integrity by Designing Choice in Learning Opportunities for Online Courses

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Abstract

In higher education, is it necessary for every learner to take the same path through the course to complete the course? Detecting a number of plagiarism instances in a course resulted in the need to research and implement strategies to promote academic integrity. In a reflective study of teaching Indigenous Studies online over the past four years at two different institutions, I propose how designing choices in online learning opportunities can promote academic integrity. I identify three distinct challenges and share recommendations for implementation.

Keywords: academic integrity, Canada, course design, higher education, online learning, personalized learning, plagiarism

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Engaging students from diverse disciplines in online courses is not without its challenges, let alone having to consider how to best design courses that promote academic integrity. In 2001, I decided to study business online because of the flexibility of completing the work on my own schedule each week and not having to take time off work to attend class and lose income. Without ever having taken an online course before, I signed up for three! In retrospect, this was quite ambitious back in the days of dial up internet and the fact that online learning was a new way of learning. Decades later, the joy of online courses has come full circle as I now teach 100% online. After several instances of academic dishonesty in an online course, I realized the need to make some changes to promote academic integrity. A reoccurring reflection connected the idea that the ability to personalize an online course for learners could increase academic integrity. What could this look like?

This paper follows my reflective study of teaching Indigenous Studies online over the past four years at two different institutions. I reflect on the strategies that I have implemented in order to promote academic integrity in online learning, as well the constraints that I have encountered in implementation.

Background

While teaching Indigenous Studies at a college, I detected plagiarism by a number of students on their term research papers. The institution protocol required conversations with the students to determine the necessary course of discipline action. From these conversations, I discovered several scenarios: Sometimes students will plagiarize out of desperation of not knowing the English language, or because of extenuating family circumstances or challenges to meet deadlines because they have to work part-time or full-time while studying. Another reason presented itself: not seeing any relevance or value in the course content and its assignments. Noticing the scenarios determined the need to investigate strategies to increase academic integrity if I were to ever teach this course again.

I took the information from the conversations seriously and began to investigate my own practice of why I rarely had challenges with academic integrity in my K-12 online career in comparison to teaching in higher education. Prior to higher education, I worked in K-12 distributed learning. Each time a learner would come to enroll in a course, there would be an intake conversation and guidance in choosing courses. Once the courses were selected, we were able to decide if a prior learning assessment was warranted and some content could be omitted for the course or the course could be granted credit as is. This conversation set the stage for developing a relationship with the student and learning about their goals or career path. Building a relationship allowed for some tailoring of each course in a personalized way to create or match assignments to the course content and learning outcomes with the needs of the learner at the centre. My K-12 teaching experience demonstrated that engaging the learner in courses with content and assignments that were relevant to their goals promoted academic integrity, and certainly reduced plagiarism. Reflecting on this, I wondered how I could use strategies to personalize learning with choice for teaching higher education online.

Choose Your Own Learning Adventure

In the 70s and 80s, there was a growing genre of books for youth called *choose your own adventure*. Each person who read the book would make it to the end of the book, however, based on the twists and turns that they chose in the book, their adventure could be completely

different. In these books, readers were in control of the path as the books had various endings and outcomes depending on which activities (pages or chapters) that are chosen along the way. Who doesn't love following through a novel where the outcome may be different from one reader to another depending on choices made? I connected to the idea that a student can personalize an online course by making choices along the way, very similar to this genre of adventure novels. In fact, I had already been doing this in my educational career.

In higher education, is it necessary for every learner to take the same path through the course to complete the course? Taking cue from how I personalized learning in K-12 education, I decided to develop a similar format of course design in higher education. "Choose your own learning adventure" is an idea that has formed where a course is designed with giving choice in online learning opportunities. To "choose your own learning adventure" in higher education, the instructor needs to set up a course online with attention to more than just content maps and learning guides. The ability to flip between my experience as an online learner and my ability as an educator have been beneficial in navigating the needs of how to create this personalized online learning opportunity, but it's been a work in progress for four years in my Indigenous Studies course.

Designing Learning Opportunities

Designing a course is not a quick process. For many institutions, the course syllabus must be created prior to the course start date. I was fortunate that with a job change, I would find myself teaching the same course again and able to develop my idea of "choose your own learning" on a small scale, expanding the learning opportunities each time I taught the course again. At the beginning of the online course, I ask students to create an intentional introduction to reflect on why they had chosen the course and what their personal and professional goals may be. I noticed that learners were coming from an increasing wider number of disciplines and their goals were becoming more diverse. The need for more choices in learning opportunities also increased.

The Indigenous Studies course is my only course that requires a textbook. Each week there are assigned readings like many online courses. Each week there are grouped forums with discussion questions. Additional forums are where I design learning opportunities as choices to expand and extend learning connected to the themes in the course. Table 1 depicts recent choices on Moodle. While I designed a bank of 10 learning opportunities, I am able to review the introductions and select the most relevant, making these visible and hiding the remaining choices each term that the course is offered.

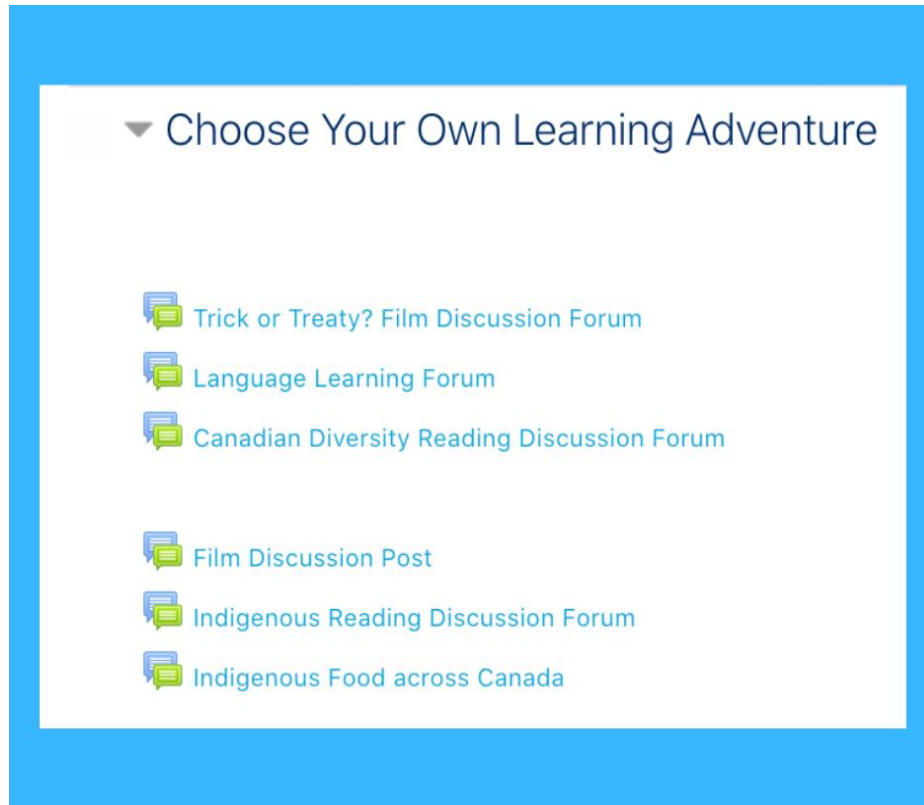


Figure 1. Example from Moodle of Indigenous Studies learning opportunities

In the recent offering, students had six learning opportunities. They chose three to complete in the six-week term. In promoting academic integrity, students were able to choose the learning opportunities that were reflective of their personal or professional goals or even whichever one they found engaging. To make the discussion forums manageable, the first set was open for the first half of the course, the second set was open for the last half. To promote academic integrity, students were able to plan the learning opportunities based on their work-study-life balance, which may reduce dishonesty when there is time and flexibility for completion. In a few cases, learners did not have time to complete any activities in the first set, thus, they had to complete all three in the second set.

Table 2 displays my ongoing data for detected academic dishonesty in my Indigenous Studies course. In 2017, I did not have any personalized learning opportunities in my course. The assessment was entirely on four assignments completed in the term. A term research paper worth 30% of the overall grade was identified as the assignment that decreased academic integrity. Since changing this pedagogical approach, I have yet to detect any cases of plagiarism.

Table 2.

Summary of plagiarism detected on the same assignment over a 4-year duration

Year	Detected Plagiarism
2017	12.5%
2018	0%
2019	0%
2020	0%

Effectiveness and Constraints across disciplines

Throughout the past four years of this project in course design implementing choices in learning opportunities to promote academic integrity, I have tried variations in other courses that I teach across disciplines. Implementation is not without failure. The following are hurdles that I am encountering in implementation:

- Pre-designed courses
- Continuous enrolment courses
- Online class sizes

First, while “choose your own learning adventure” works well when the instructor is also the course designer, pre-designed courses may provide constraints. In graduate courses that I teach, the learning outcomes and content are pre-created to ensure standardization for the target learner audience. Recent experience demonstrated that some learners have extensive knowledge and experience already but require the credit; in these cases, choice in learning opportunities would be highly beneficial, however, pre-designed courses may not give the instructor access or autonomy to make changes that benefit the learners.

Second, in taking on a position teaching a continuous enrolment course, where students enter and exit the course at any time, working at their own pace, I thought this would be similar to past experiences of continuous enrolment where I would build a relationship with the student and from their personal and/or professional goals, be able to offer choices in learning opportunities. This has not been the case in my situation as I am not in control of the content or course design, however, I do envision how this could be effective for continuous enrolment courses online

Finally, online class size matters. I started this course design with 24 students. There is

professional value in teaching a course more than once. Changing jobs, the class size cap is 40 for my current offering. While this is working well, I recently tried to implement the idea in a different undergraduate course where the class size is capped at 60. Unfortunately, the large class size and the number of assessment items required by the faculty created challenges in not only building a relationship with each student but making assignments relevant and engaging. If the number of assignments could be reduced by 25%, the class could be separated into 2 groups of 30 online for a more intimate learning environment and enable choice in learning opportunities; however, this would result in the experience of teaching two separate classes, which is not ideal.

Moving Forward

The best way forward to implementing “choose your own learning adventure,” to promote academic integrity is to start small with three learning opportunities where the students choose one and increase the choices each time the course is offered. Next, increase the expectation in how many choices the students are expected to complete. “Choose your own learning adventure” is most effective when the course designer and instructor are the same person, or the course instructor is able to make content revisions.

Optimal class sizes online under 40 have been optimal for building relationships with the students to personalize the choices of learning opportunities for the students. Lastly, a key to promoting academic integrity in this style of course design has been spending the time teaching the course several times in order to make changes, but also having started from a situation where instances of academic dishonesty were detected and having conversations to discover why students were dishonest academically. The benefits of choice allow students to take part in personalizing the course, making it more relevant for their own goals personally or professionally.