



The Power of Choice in Teaching and Learning¹

UDL 3.0 Consideration 7.1: Optimize individual choice and autonomy — Provide learners with options for assignments, tools, and approaches to demonstrate their understanding.

What is it?

Choice and autonomy are fundamental human needs that significantly impact motivation and engagement in learning environments. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) emphasizes autonomy as one of three basic psychological needs (along with competence and relatedness) that fuel intrinsic motivation.

When learners have opportunities to make meaningful choices about their learning, they experience greater ownership, engagement, and persistence. Autonomy involves providing students with options that allow them to direct their learning path while maintaining alignment with learning objectives.

Providing choice involves offering students various options for completing assignments or demonstrating their learning. Instead of requiring all students to complete the same type of assessment, instructors present a menu of authentic choices that allow students to select the option that best highlights their knowledge and skills.

Why do it?

Research shows that providing students with choice enhances their intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and academic performance (Patall et al., 2010). Choice supports diverse learner needs by allowing students to leverage their strengths, interests, and preferred ways of demonstrating knowledge. Additionally, autonomy develops essential skills that extend beyond the classroom, including decision-making, self-regulation, and ownership of learning.

¹ Content developed with AI, based on [the CAST UDL Guidelines™](#), scholarly sources, and web resources. Icons courtesy of [Flaticon.com](#) contributors.

How can I apply it?

Here are some ways to implement choice in your courses.

- **Provide content choices.** Design opportunities for students to select topics, themes, or examples that connect to their interests while addressing learning objectives.
- **Offer assessment format options.** Give learners varied ways to demonstrate understanding through different products (e.g., essays, presentations, podcasts) or assessments.
- **Provide assignment options:** Create multiple versions of assignments that cover the same content but use different approaches (e.g., different worksheets that cover the same content, selection of different problem sets or case studies, different contexts or applications).
- **Allow process choices:** Let students choose their topics, research methods, or groups.
- **Provide learning resource options:** Offer multiple text options, media formats, or research paths.

Essential Factors in Offering Choices

While the UDL 3.0 Guidelines emphasize the importance of optimizing choice and autonomy to honor learner variability, effectively implementing choice requires careful attention to several key factors.

- **Limit options:** Offer 2-3 choices instead of overwhelming students with too many options.
- **Maintain rigor:** All options should have equivalent complexity and learning objectives.
- **Ensure fairness:** Develop clear, consistent rubrics that can be applied across different modalities.
- **Balance structure with freedom:** Some students may need more guidance in making effective choices.
- **Consider your workload:** Begin with 2-3 options and gradually build a repository over time.

Summary

Providing choice and autonomy creates more inclusive and engaging learning experiences that honor learner variability. By offering meaningful content, process, and product options, we can remove barriers to motivation while supporting all students' need for self-direction. This approach recognizes that learners are more engaged and successful when they have agency in their educational experience, ultimately fostering lifelong learning skills and intrinsic motivation. Finally, remember to start small, making manageable changes in your practice that facilitate learning.

Resources

Anthropic. (2025). Claude Opus 4.5 [Large language model]. <https://claude.ai/>

Brooks, C. F., & Young, S. L. (2011). Are choice-making opportunities needed in the classroom? Using self-determination theory to consider student motivation and learner empowerment. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 23(1), 48-59.

CAST. (2024). Optimize individual choice and autonomy. *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 3.0*. <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/interests-identities/choice-autonomy>

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum Press.

George, M. J., & Thompson, J. E. (2024). Giving choice in assignments. In C. Harrington (Ed.), *Creating culturally affirming and meaningful assignments* (pp. 87-100). Routledge.

Liu, W. C., Wang, C. K. J., Kee, Y. H., Koh, C., Lim, B. S. C., & Chua, L. (2014). College students' motivation and learning strategies profiles and academic achievement: A self-determination theory approach. *Educational Psychology*, 34(3), 338-353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2013.785067>

Patall, E. A., Cooper, H., & Wynn, S. R. (2010). The effectiveness and relative importance of choice in the classroom. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(4), 896-915. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019545>