



Why do students choose the option of the Open Syllabus in a conventional university?



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Abstract

The purpose of the presented mixed qualitative-quantitative research is to examine college students' diverse reasons for choosing the Open Syllabus, which allows students in a conventional university to define their goals for education, curriculum, instruction, assessment, ways of learning, and so on—what traditionally constitutes "Self-Directed Education." Most of those students articulated their interest in self-education, which consists of self-directed and responsive education.

Keywords: *Open Syllabus, self-education, self-directed education, responsive education, autodidact*

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Self-directed learning does not work well for university students

Several democratic educators committed to Self-Directed Education reported that Self-Directed Learning does not work well for many university students (e.g., Duberman, 1969; Holt, 1972, pp. 87-92). To promote Self-Directed Education (SDE) in their classes, these professors diminished their teacher authority, gave their undergraduate students the freedom not to follow their suggestive offerings – suggested reading and learning activities, free attendance, etc. – and encouraged the students to choose what they wanted to study in each class meeting, minimized or completely eliminated grades, etc.

Their version of Self-Directed Education radically differed from the concept of Self-Directed Learning used by conventional or progressive educators. For conventional education aimed at making all

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students arrive at well-defined curricular endpoints preset by the teachers, administrators, state, employers, and so on, Self-Directed Learning is the student's own diligence, industry, self-discipline on the thorough and unconditional accomplishment of the learning task assigned by the teacher by "internalizing" the teacher's learning tasks and goals (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1994). As my former student wrote in response to my chapter discussing the concept of self-education, "Before reading this chapter, I always thought that it [i.e., Self-Directed Learning] equals individual studying with the teacher's task. Now, I believe my understanding was wrong" (Matusov, 2024a, p. 134).

The Progressive Education concept of Self-Directed Learning is based on exploiting, hijacking, and manipulating students' motivation, subjectivity, interests, desires, and needs through providing assignment choices, creating "learning contracts," moralizing the student's "responsibility to themselves," and so on (Mercogliano, 1998). The guru of progressive Self-Directed Learning, Malcolm Knowles, defined Self-Directed Learning: "In its broadest meaning, 'self-directed learning' describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). Although students seem to have a lot of freedoms, these freedoms are still channeled to the learning outcomes defined by the teacher. These learning outcomes can be ill-defined. The ideal of Progressive Education is to make students accept these overall learning goals as their own. As the father of Progressive Education, Jean-Jacques Rousseau advised a progressive teacher, "...let him [the student] always think he is master while you are really master" (Rousseau, 1979, p. 120).

In contrast, the Democratic Education concept of Self-Directed Education is about the recognition that the student is the final authority for their own education (Klag, 1994) who defines *whether to study*, what to study, why to study, toward what goal to study, how to study, with whom to study, when to study, where to study, when to stop to study, how good was the study, and so on (Matusov, 2021b). The student can make these decisions alone or with the help of peers and/or educators. For some reason, Democratic Education is much more established in K-12 education than at the higher education level. That is why the efforts and pedagogical experimentation of democratic higher educators like Holt and Duberman are so valuable.

However, according to those democratic higher ed educators, most of their college students "abused" these freedoms by "doing nothing": not reading the relevant academic literature, not engaging in any learning activities, and not attending class meetings. Often, their students got angry at the professors for not forcing them to learn, for providing choices about what and how to study, and for lack of structure. According to these democratic educators, some of these undergraduate students used the given freedom to "grab easy credit" (Holt, 1972, p. 90). In the eyes of the democratic professors, the students were immature, passive, dull, and hopelessly spoiled by their past experiences in conventional schools based on educational paternalism and foisted education: "All of which raises the pessimistic possibility that curriculum reform on the college level may be an enterprise of marginal value only. By age eighteen, it could be said, it is too late to salvage curiosity" (Duberman, 1969, p. 286).

Being involved in Democratic Higher Education for the last 14 years, I definitely recognize, share, and sympathize with the frustration of colleagues engaged in similar efforts (see, for example, Matusov, 2023a; Matusov & Brobst, 2013). However, instead of blaming my students for immaturity and other deficits, which I also did initially, I gradually shifted to focus on myself, critically examining my own pedagogical desires heavily colonized by Progressive Education (Matusov, 2021a) and the conventional institutional settings in which my innovative democratic efforts occurred (Matusov, 2023b).

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Instead of following my SDE ideology, I decided to pursue my pedagogical fiduciary duty to my students to see where it would lead me. In short, pedagogical fiduciary duty is the educator's deep commitment to supporting the student's educational desires as well as helping to develop such desires when the student asks the educator for such help. The educator's pedagogical fiduciary duty is based on the student's conditional trust in the educator's helpfulness perceived by the student (Matusov, 2024b). This shift redefined my overall pedagogical goal: instead of implementing my favorite pedagogical ideas about Democratic Higher Education (e.g., the introduction of the Open Syllabus in 2010, see below), I have concentrated on the student's own educational desires – existing and emerging, – regardless of how much I approve of them. Instead, my goal became to better serve my students' educational desires, if they have any. To that end, I introduced the Multi-Syllabi pedagogical regime in my classes in 2018 (Matusov, 2024b). For example, now before the semester starts, I send a survey to my upcoming students, mostly asking them what they want to study in our class and what kind of students they envision to be in our future class:

What type of student do you expect to be in this course? (feel free to select a combination):

1. **Professionals** who are involved in professional discourse about their own ongoing practice, who seek help from and provide help to each other — never-ending education enriching and supplementing their professional practice (53%¹);
2. **Hobbyists** who enjoy the targeted practice as a part of their non-professional life; life-long learners, learning as a way of life; there is no expectation of arriving at the end of their education — never-ending education enriching and supplementing their life (34%);
3. **Critical learners** who want to evaluate the practice critically; test ideas, values, and truths against as many alternative ideas, values, and truths as possible; engage in critical dialogue and self-growth; play with ideas; or jailbreak the existing practices. Education is viewed by them as an achievable goal in itself (rather than a professional aspect) with a potential exit point (66%);
4. **Novice practitioners** who want to socialize into the targeted practice in order to be recognized by the relevant practitioners (and relevant others) as capable, joining a community of practice, apprenticing into the practice, getting a job involving the targeted practice, becoming skillful and knowledgeable practitioners, joining a professional discourse, worldviews, attitudes, orientations, networks, and knowledge, getting involved into legitimate peripheral participation, observing and lurking on the professional forums, playing with ideas, jailbreaking the existing practices. Education is viewed by novice practitioners as successful socialization into the existing practice (38%);
5. **Credential students** who want to get credentials established and recognized by society to prepare and pass exams, tests, and other summative assessments aiming at credentials, to follow the roadmap of assignments that will help them pass the credential summative assessments, to cooperate with the teacher who is helping in getting the desired credentials, to ask the teacher and all other participants for help. Education is equated with getting credentials (e.g., diplomas, degrees, class credits, certificates, mark grades) predefined by society through curricular endpoints, tests, and exams. Education is viewed as space- and time-bounded (e.g., during a classroom meeting), having a clear end (e.g., course term, semester, degree term). Credentials are viewed as a gateway to a desired profession and economically good life (50%);
6. **Uncommitted visitors and lurkers** who want to observe a classroom practice of what other participants do there to see if one can enjoy the practice and learning, test one's own commitment to the practice and learning, find and meet interesting people, and enjoy time spent online. Education is viewed as exposure to something new and potentially interesting and as window-shopping (13%);
7. **Survivors** (Prisoners of Education) want to survive (i.e., institutionally pass) the unnecessary class imposed on them with minimum efforts and expenses (0%);
8. **Dunno**, I don't have any idea as it is now (0%);
9. **Other** (please describe below) (0%).

¹ These are responses from the students in the undergraduate course on cultural diversity in education in the 2022 fall semester that I chose to study here. Out of the 35 enrolled students, 32 students (100%) replied to the survey that I sent a week before the semester started.

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To address the diversity of students' attitudes, I developed a so-called "multi-syllabi pedagogical regime" in which my students can realize these and other options that may emerge (see below).

One well-defined option of this multi-syllabi pedagogical regime for my students is "Open Syllabus," which allows students to design their own syllabus: whether to study, what to study, how to study, where to study, with whom to study, why to study, how to assign the final grade for the class, and so on.

In this research, I want to examine the students' self-declared reasons for choosing the Open Syllabus option. By my pedagogical design, the Open Syllabus lets the students in a conventional university define their education, curriculum, instruction, assessment (the final grade), ways of learning, and so on – what traditionally constitutes "Self-Directed Education." However, the students who choose the Open Syllabus can redefine this option in whatever way they want, including "grabbing easy credit" or simply assigning a good final grade to themselves without any study (i.e., the "Prisoners of Education" option of the multi-syllabi pedagogical class regime).

Disclaimer: for this research project, I did not examine the students' actual educational practice and their emerging attitudes to it (i.e., "theory-in-action," Argyris & Schön, 1978), but rather I focused on the Open Syllabus students' "espoused theory" (Argyris & Schön, 1978) reflected in their declarative statements about why they chose the Open Syllabus before engaging in it. As scholars of organizational learning Argyris and Schön (1978) show that the relationship between the practitioners' espoused theory and their theory-in-use can be complex and not straightforward. These scholars argue that both espoused theory – the reflective, deliberate subjectivity – and theory-in-use – the subjectivity shaping the actions – together characterize the practitioner's practice.

This study addresses skeptics (including myself) of Democratic Higher Education who wonder if there is a demand for Democratic Higher Education, understood as self-education, among conventional university students or not.

Design of the multi-syllabi class with the postponed Open Syllabus

I try to run all my classes democratically by engaging my students in decision-making about their own education through dialogue as much as possible. One of these opportunities for decision-making was to let the class choose what to study: at the end of each session, the students decided what topic to study next from a list of curricular topics ("The Curricular Map") that we created together (similar to what was described by Duberman, 1969). A student would propose a topic from the Curricular Map and then try to convince their peers to choose it (among other topics proposed by other students). Then, the students usually voted on all proposed topics to select the topic for the next class meeting.

A second opportunity for decision-making concerned the "pedagogical regime" (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017) the students would prefer for themselves. The students have a choice of four pedagogical regimes that I provide to them, and they change according to their wants and needs:

1. **Open Syllabus** for "self-responsible learners and lurkers," where students can make all decisions about their own education – what to study, how to study, with whom to study, and when to study – including their final grade. This option is not available and will not be seen until the 5th week of the semester to give the students the flavor of self-education. The reason for this postponement, which was initially proposed and insisted by my past students, was a concern that many conventional students, unfamiliar with democratic dialogic education, cannot make an informed choice about the Open Syllabus without experiencing this education for at least a few weeks – all other options below were available immediately at the beginning of the semester (Matusov, 2023b). In the class I studied for this research project, 19 students, or 54%, chose the Open Syllabus out of the 35 total students enrolled in the class.
2. **Opening Syllabus** for "other-responsible learners," where I made the initial decisions about the organization

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of the class and then gradually transferred responsibility to the students. The students participating in this pedagogical regime can choose “virtual attendance” instead of attending the class meetings, which, in fact, generate possibilities for a variety of versions of the Opening Syllabus pedagogical regimes for the students based on their own choices, creativity, interest in the subject, and life circumstances. The students are required to submit at least one posting on the class online forum (WebTalk) and complete the Main Learning Project on the topic of their interest by the end of the class. That was the default pedagogical regime for all my students at the beginning of the semester, from which the students could switch later on. Of the studied class, 14 students, or 40%, chose the Opening Syllabus after 5 weeks of the grace period.

3. **Non-traditional Closed Syllabus** for credential students who just want to be certified via passing exams, similar to receiving a driver’s license. None chose this option in the studied class.
4. **Non-Syllabus** for “prisoners of education,” i.e., students who were forced to take this class by the university but felt that the class was unnecessary and painful. They were given any grade of their choice and said “goodbye” to avoid education being a “cruel and unusual punishment”² for them. Two students (6%) selected this option.

The students have the first six weeks of the 15-week semester to decide on one of the four pedagogical regimes. However, after this grace period, I accept students’ requests to change their regime.

Third, the default Opening Syllabus pedagogical regime, which the students experienced immediately from the start of the semester, provided the students with the freedom and flexibility to attend the class face-to-face, via Zoom, or study asynchronously via the class website that has many instructional resources for self-studies either on the topic of the class meeting or the student’s own. In the fall 2022 class that I chose to study, the attendance (face-to-face and via Zoom) varied between half and two-thirds of the total class. Most of the students attended face-to-face rather than via Zoom.

Fourth, I try to turn any emerging problem or organizational question in the class into an opportunity for collective deliberation and democratic decision-making (e.g. should we have a break in our nearly three-hour class meetings?).

Finally, the fifth area of decision-making was how to make collective decisions—by majority vote, consensus, flipping a coin, making individual decisions, delegating decision-making to me, splitting into groups having common curricular interests, studying solo, and so on.

I used to believe that students’ decisions about their education would promote their learning activism and ownership of their education (Matusov, 2015b). I was not afraid of their “bad” decisions because I expected that they would experience the consequences of these “bad” decisions and correct them through democratic decision-making. That was my philosophical belief in democracy in education (and elsewhere) (cf. Hayek, 1994). However, my views gradually changed as my students, and I experienced the educational consequences of this approach (Matusov, 2023b).

At the end of each class meeting, I asked the attending students to write “Exit Reflections” on their class experiences. The Exit Reflections included the students’ discussion of what attracted their attention in the class and why, something new they learned in the class, the questions they did not ask in the class, what worked and what did not work in the class meeting, suggestions for improvements, and what they wanted to study next. The students frequently wrote that the class was very interesting and exciting. I think that the class was often interesting for the students because of the presented material, dialogic provocations, emergent controversies, and deep discussions. I often “recycled” the students’ questions, critical comments, reflections on the class, and suggestions for class improvements on the class online forum and/or in the next class. Very few students skipped writing Exit Reflection either sometimes or systematically.

² Cf. the wording of the United States Constitution.

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However, in contrast to many of my past classes, the class online forum (WebTalk) did not work in the researched class, in a striking contrast with all my previous classes. The students rarely submitted substantive online postings and rarely discussed those substantive postings. Often, their postings were like: "I'm looking forward to our next class's discussion!" or "The past class was super interesting and exciting. I've learned a lot of new things for me." At the Mid-Term Town Hall Meeting, the students discussed this phenomenon and decided to make participation in the online forum voluntary for the Opening Syllabus students. Still, many kept participating with rather shallow, non-substantive postings. My hypothesis for their deep participation in the class and the Exit Reflection but shallow participation in the asynchronous online forum is that most of the participating students were Responsive Education students who needed intense guidance from me and their peers to generate their own deep opinions and formulate their thoughts. Further research of this phenomenon is required.

Data collection and analysis

To examine the students' diverse reasons for their choice of the Open Syllabus – i.e., my research question – I selected a recent undergraduate class (discussed already above) I taught on cultural diversity for elementary school majors – the class that I have been teaching for the last 25 years. The class had 35 students majoring in Education, except one student majoring in Family Studies. I had two male students. Almost all students were Caucasians, coming from middle-class suburban families. During the first class meeting, I asked my students who would take this course if it was not required by the institution in any way – including having the mandatory number of elective classes – and only 6 students raised their hands.

When I started practicing Democratic Education in 2010, in the form of an Open Syllabus for all students, some of my Open Syllabus students complained that it was difficult for them to design their own studies in our class because they did not have an idea of how to do that. They said that they felt lonely. As a solution, they asked me to develop a public online space for them on our (closed) class website where the Open Syllabus students could share their initial Open Syllabus designs. Initially, other Open Syllabus students and I objected to this idea. I told the Open Syllabus students that if they had trouble designing their own Open Syllabus, it might mean that this option was not for them. However, the Open Syllabus students disagreed, and I felt that I, as an educator, must follow their educational desire rather than insist on my own. The other Open Syllabus students opposed this public space because they had clear ideas of what they wanted to do and felt it was their private business not to share. However, the first group of the Open Syllabus students begged the second group to share their Open Syllabus initial designs to get inspired by the designs. The second group agreed. Together we developed the following guidelines for the initial Open Syllabus design:

Please provide the following information about your initial Open Syllabus Design:

1. **Open Syllabus reasons:** Why did you choose Open Syllabus? What kind of student do you feel you are in this class?
2. **Curriculum:** List the initial topics of your interest that are relevant to the class and that you plan to study. Why are you interested in these particular topics? (when you find new topics, please post them in reply to your initial posting here). You can explore the Curriculum Map [the link to the Curriculum Map located on the class web was provided] to find good topics to study and to get inspired. Feel free to add new topics of your interest which might not be on the list.
3. **Self-Guidance:** List your initial learning activities – readings, projects, practicum, writings, research, class attendance, self-exams, educational diary, Internet searches, projects, and so on – that will help you to study the topics of your interests. When approximately do you plan to do this learning activity?
4. **Assessment:** What are your initial educational goals for the course? Why would it be helpful for your learning? What are you trying to accomplish? Do you need grading for your self-directed education or not? If not, let me know what unconditional grade you want -- unfortunately, I need to enter the final letter grade for you. If so, why do you need grading (summative assessment) for self-directed education? How is it helpful

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for you as a learner? How do you want me to assign the final grade that the university requires me to assign? Please provide detailed guidelines for your final grade if your grade is conditional (it can be unconditional). You may find the following essay on grading useful: Eisenstein, C. (2006). "Confession of a hypocrite." Retrieved from <https://charleseisenstein.org/essays/confessions-of-a-hypocrite/>;

5. **Help:** List initial sources that can provide help for you: what, who, and how will provide this help? What help do you need from your instructor and peers?
6. Any questions for Eugene?
7. Other?

Note: This is not a learning contract but a tentative beginning of your own learning journey. Feel free to amend/correct the list in reply to your initial posting. When you make changes, please do not ask me for permission – in the Open Syllabus, you are the final authority for your education. However, feel free to contact me if you need my help or advice.

Initially, I planned to use only the first section of the students' Open Syllabus design, Reasons, as my research data. However, later, I noticed that the two other sections—Curriculum and Instruction—were often helpful in deducing the students' reasons for choosing the Open Syllabus.

In my data analysis, I abstracted emerging themes defining the students' reasons. This was a grounded analysis inspired by the so-called "Grounded Theory" methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In contrast to the classical Grounded Theory approach, my goal was not to develop a (grounded) theory but *grounded patterns* of the students' reasons for choosing an Open Syllabus emerging from the data. I defined each theme, operationalized it, provided an example, and counted how many students articulated this thematic reason. I also grouped some of the themes into major types of reasons.

Findings

Analyzing the data, I abstracted the five types of reasons, organized into three major groups, for the student's initial choice of the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime. The first major reason is the student's desire to engage in Self-Directed Education, where they have the freedom to choose why, what, and how they *want* to study. Those broadly defined autodidact students need freedom and flexibility to define their own education, and for that, they chose the Open Syllabus (see type#1). Three out of 19 total OS students (16%) articulated this type of reason.

The second major reason for selecting the Open Syllabus (OS) is the OS student's desire to define the conditions for their Responsive Education. Responsive Education is education emerging in the student's response to "dialogic provocations" and "offerings" (i.e., learning activities) organized by the professor and/or peers that the student highly appreciates (Matusov, 2015a). Those students wanted to either limit their commitment to their Responsive Education due to their interests (type#2) or reduce their anxiety and stress and balance other demands of their lives (type#3). Most of the students choosing the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime, twelve students (63%), articulated this second major type of reason.

The first and second major reasons involve what I call "self-education," where students define their own education but not necessarily completely or even mainly on their own (Matusov, 2024b).

The third major reason is that the student wants to ease the "education" foisted on them (types#4 and #5). Four students (21%) articulated this reason.

Self-Directed Education

1. Autodidact learner who needs freedom, relevance, and flexibility

Definition: The student truly wants to study some particular, well-defined, class-related topics on her own or with peers, with or without the teacher, that the OS student finds interesting, important, or needed for her personal and/or professional development. The OS student selects the Open Syllabus because she needs freedom, relevance (to their particular interests), and flexibility to study what they want to study.

Operationalization: In the Reasons section, the OS student articulates their true interest in learning and the importance of learning choice. Also, the OS student emphasizes a need for flexibility, relevance, and balancing other demands. The Curriculum section is clearly different from the Self-Guidance section, as it clearly lists the desired topics to study. In the Self-Guidance section, the OS student explains how they plan to study the desired curriculum. Often, there is an emphasis on the enjoyment, freedom, and excitement of learning throughout the initial design of the Open Syllabus.

Example:

1. **Open Syllabus Reasons:** "I chose to do the open syllabus because I love how it gives me a lot of flexibility in choosing what I want to learn about. I will be able to balance my workload with my other classes, and allow me to enjoy what I am learning about."
2. **Curriculum:** "I am interested in learning about online teaching, school violence, face-to-face vs. online teaching, diverse family structure and its influence on education, what is bullying and why does it occur?, and race issues in education. I'm excited to learn about these topics because they relate to my career path and it will help increase my knowledge."
3. **Self-guidance:** "I enjoy posting and reading webtalks [online forum postings], they help me learn about what information my peers have found and they help me gain new knowledge as well. I will attend four classes a month, and for those classes, I'll be posting a webtalk and exit reflection for the topic of those weeks. For the other weeks, I will be posting a webtalk once a week about the current topic I am learning and researching, which will count as my attendance."

Responsive Education

2. Responsive dutiful learner who wants to limit their commitment to their Responsive Education because of their interests or ways of learning

Definition: The OS student is genuinely interested in the class subject and finds it attractive and important to them, although their interests might be ill-defined, emerging as a response to the offers and dialogic provocations by others (i.e., peers and the instructor), and not self-generated. The OS student likes the class so far. They also see it as their duty to themselves to study. They want the Open Syllabus to find flexibility and reduce their workload while committing to their duties and interests. This duty can be toward themselves as a learner and as a future professional.

Operationalization: In the Reasons section, the OS student justifies the reduction of the assigned study-work. The Curriculum section is different from the Self-Guidance section, but it is not specific, and it does not follow and trust the class choices. The Self-Guidance section alternates between the OS student's self-duty and interest in their studies (and the importance for their future).

Example:

1. **Open Syllabus reasons:** "I really enjoy how this class works and the freedom we have in it. However, there are a couple of things I want to change because I know myself best and what is going to work best for me. The first thing is the attendance requirements when missing class. The only times I will ever miss class will either be for religious reasons, emergencies or if I am sick. I believe it should be up to me to review the things I missed in class instead of having to write up a response to be submitted. I also do not plan to do the main learning project. Personally, for me, I find it best to have no pressure to turn an assignment like that in but rather research in my own time and space. I also do not want points to be taken off if I forget to do an exit

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ticket [i.e., Exit Reflection] or Webtalk. I will still do my exit tickets and web talks; however, this is a new website, as I am used to using Canvas³, so if I get confused or forget something, I don't want to be punished for it."

2. **Curriculum:** "I plan to follow the same curriculum/topics as the class besides the attendance, main learning project and no points lost due to missing web talks and exit tickets [i.e., Exit Reflections]."
3. **Self-Guidance:** "I still need to come to class and be active in participation, as well as post my web talks and exit tickets. The only difference is that there is no loss of points or extra work for missing class or any assignments. Since I am not doing the main learning project, I do believe it is my duty to still pick a topic and do the research on my own. I also plan to each week go over what we had learned in class and review anything I might find important for the future."

3. Stress-reduction for a responsive, peripheral, and responsible learner

Definition: The OS student is a responsive learner but is concerned about the stress that class's Opening Syllabus imposes on them. By choosing the Open Syllabus, they want to reduce stress to lower anxiety or to balance their workload and other demands of their life. Also, they strongly feel like being a responsible learner.

Operationalization: In the Reason section, there is a clear articulation of stress reduction. Stress on being a responsible and active learner. However, there is not much enthusiasm for learning or the class in the Curriculum section or otherwise. The "Self-Guidance" section focuses on responsibility, which is understood as duty and commitment.

Example:

1. **Open Syllabus Reasons:** "I wanted an open syllabus because I do not want to have to stress and worry about my grade in this class. I am a person who gets very anxious about exams and stresses out about them so I do not want to have to worry about it. I feel like this is a discussion based class where we just discuss topics in class and reflect on them through the webtalks and exit reflections. I feel like I am an active participant in this class as I attend every class. Even though I don't normally speak, I participate in weekly webtalks, exit reflections, and in class activities on the classboard [i.e., shared online space for writing in class projected on the blackboard during the class meeting, similar to Google Doc] and in my group at my table."
2. **Curriculum:** "I will continue to follow and learn about the topics discussed throughout the class with other students and do the webtalks and exit tickets when in attendance because I do not want points being taken off if I accidentally forget to complete something because I was not able to attend class and am not used to the website. I will not be graded on attendance and/or make up work and I will not complete the final project. However, I will only miss class if I am sick or am away and if so I will try to make it over zoom."
3. **Self-Guidance:** "Although I will not be graded on attendance and make up work, I will still be responsible for weekly webtalks and daily class exit reflections as well as engaging in what we discuss with my table members as well as on the class board since I am more on the quiet side. Additionally, unless I have a valid reason not to come to class, I still need to attend."

Easing the foisted "education"

4. Credential transactional student: Negotiating efforts and gains

Definition: The OS student wants to get a desired credit (e.g., final grade) for their assigned study-work that does not have any (or much) intrinsic educational value for themselves. By choosing the Open Syllabus, the student tries to reduce the assigned study-work while securing the highest credit for the class.

Operationalization: In the Reasons section, the OS student justifies reducing the assigned study work by referencing fairness. The Curriculum section is equated with the (self) Guidance section, listing assigned study work the student agrees to do for the credit. There is no listed curriculum that the student truly wants to study. However, there is a credentialism discourse focused on the fairness of the assignments' load, punishments, and/or grading.

³ I use Moodle-based web platform for my classes while my university uses Canvas because I found Moodle easier to modify for my pedagogical purposes.

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Example:

1. **Open Syllabus reasons:** “I really enjoy this class and how it is run, however, I feel the attendance requirements when absent are tedious, especially because for me, I will be in class unless I have a reason not to be, i.e.: holiday or emergency/sickness, so this seems unfair that I'd have to make work up, more so than what was done in class, if it is an excused absence by the university.”
2. **Curriculum:** “Truthfully I plan to continue doing class as is aside from the main learning project and the attendance make ups. The only other thing I would change is only one webtalk posting at the end of the week discussing the week's discussions.”
3. **Self-Guidance:** “Attendance is still mandatory unless provided an excuse, and if unable to join the Zoom no additional work is required. Exit reflections at the end of class, one webtalk posting a week, and class/group participation.”

5. Limiting an imposed chore

Definition: The OS student perceives the class as an imposed chore, without much internal value for the student, that they want to limit by choosing the Open Syllabus.

Operationalization: In the Reason section, the OS student lists the part of the chore that they agree to do without any justification, which continues to the Curriculum and the “Self-Guidance” section. Almost everything feels technical and mechanical without any personal touch.

Example:

1. **Open Syllabus reasons:** “I really enjoy this class. However, there are some things for me that I know will work well and other things that I know that won't work well for me. The main reason why I'm choosing the open syllabus is because of the attendance. I plan on being at every class unless I'm sick, there's an emergency, or it's a holiday. I feel that for me it's best if I review the content I missed on my own, without the pressure of having to submit a response. In addition, I will still be doing exit reflections and webtalks, but I will not be doing the main learning project.”
2. **Curriculum:** “I will follow the same curriculum as the class, I just won't need to do the attendance make up assignments or the main learning project.”
3. **Self-guidance:** “My attendance is still mandatory unless I am sick, there's an emergency, or it's a holiday. If I am unable to join Zoom, there is no additional work required and I will review the material I missed on my own time without needing to submit an assignment. I will not need to do the main learning project. I will still need to do one Webtalk each week, exit reflections at the end of class, and participate in class/group discussions.”

Conclusions

The qualitative analysis of the students' initial reasons for their choice of the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime revealed the three major groups. The first group of reasons is the students' commitment to Self-Directed Education. The Open Syllabus – its freedom, relevance, and flexibility – allows those students to pursue what they want to study, how they want to study it – i.e., through which learning activities, – with whom, where, when, and so on. The second group of reasons is the students' commitment to Responsive Education, where the students highly appreciate their emergent responses to the dialogic provocations and offerings created by the professor and/or peers for them. Those students need the Open Syllabus to define the conditions and limitations for their commitment due to their interests, ways of studying, balancing life demands, and reduction of stress. Finally, the third group of the reasons for the students' choosing the Open Syllabus is their desire to ease “education” foisted on them by the conventional institution.

As I argued elsewhere, genuine education is always self-education, when the educatee defines their own education with or without the help of other people (Matusov, 2021b). In short, education differs from learning in terms of the educatee's positive judgment about the experienced or designed learning. This positive judgment makes the educatee the author of their own education: it generates two major types

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of educational authorship: the educatee's self-generating authorship of Self-Directed Education (SDE) and responsive authorship of Responsive Education (RE) (Matusov, 2015a). The educatee's self-generating authorship of Self-Directed Education involves the educatee designing, engaging, and committing themselves to educational self-journeys and self-assignments such as learning projects; readings; designing and attending learning enterprises (e.g., classes, clubs, lectures); searching for peers, experts, and sources of information, critical dialogue, and guidance; active trying new things, and so on (Matusov, 2015a). In contrast, the educatee's responsive authorship of Responsive Education is defined by their creative contributions to "dialogic provocations" (Matusov, 2015a) and "offerings" (Cunningham, 2021) provided by the educator and/or peers, such as interest-generating lessons, exposures, sharing, critical dialogue, projects, questions/inquiries, and so on. The responsive educatee constantly assesses the others-designed and emerging dialogic provocations, offerings, and their own contributions to see how interesting, useful, helpful, exciting, important, thoughts- and feelings- provoking they are for them. Thus, the responsive educatee's participation in Responsive Education is always conditional, based on their assessment of their own learning experiences – how educational they are for them.

Both SDE and RE educatees are genuinely interested in the studies. Both are engaged in self-education. Both can attend the class meetings. Both demonstrate at least some elements of self-initiated and responsive educational authorship. Even super SDE educatees responsively learn from other people directly or indirectly (e.g., through texts, media, observations). Even super RE educatees still self-assign their own commitment to studies designed by others by managing their own attention, engagement, attendance, and so on. The difference is in the degree of these two educational authorship types that define a new quality. The SDE educatees are often much more selective, specific, focused, and plan to actively engage in designing their own learning: they know well what and why they want to study much more than the RE educatees. Please note that in the Curriculum sections, in type #1 of the reason for selecting the Open Syllabus, the student was highly selective about what she initially wanted to study, while in types #2 and #3, the students wanted to study whatever the class decided to study. Both SDE and RE educatees wanted to have freedom and flexibility. However, the SDE educatees wanted it for designing their own studies – educational journeys; in contrast, the RE educatees wanted it to shape their commitment to Responsive Education in the contexts of their own (emerging) interests, life obligations, demands, and pressures. Of course, I can envision an educatee, who can be between SDE and RE.

The three major groups of reasons reflect the tension between the democratic dialogic spirit of the class that I tried to promote and the conventional institution where the class occurs. First of all, the students mostly did not come to the class and to me on their free will because they were very much interested in the subject matter of the class or attracted to me as a teacher, researcher, and educational practitioner. The class was required for elementary teacher educators and education minors, and it was an option for so-called "the university multicultural requirement." Some students reported that they might take this class even if it was not required at the beginning of the class, but it was a hypothetical question. It is unclear how many of my OS SDE and RE students would follow their declared desire without the university pressure or in the absence of credits.

The third group of reasons for the students' choice of the Open Syllabus strongly reflects the effect of the conventional institution. The students tried to ease its oppression on them, as "education" did not seem to have much intrinsic value on them but rather was a transaction or a necessary chore. Some of these students might be hidden Prisoners of Education who distrusted me and/or the institution so that they could get a good grade of their liking without doing any "work" (for the institution represented by me) in exchange for getting necessary institutional credentials (see the evidence for that in Matusov, 2023b). Alternatively, they might also feel that getting a good grade for nothing is unfair either morally or because they personally benefit from credentialism. Further research is needed for that. Also, another effect of the conventional educational institution on my students is that in the second group of reasons, some students

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might want to reduce the stress coming from the educational paternalism of the Opening Syllabus and of the conventional institution (other classes) that takes their energy and time from their focus on genuine self-education.

The quantitative analysis of the students' initial reasons for their choice of the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime revealed that a large majority of the students who chose the Open Syllabus (79%) did it because of their commitment to self-education: either Self-Directed Education (16%) or Responsive Education (63%). Only 21% of the OS-chosen students did it purely to ease the burden of the foisted education. I am highly satisfied that a high percentage of my students were interested in self-education: whether Self-Directed or Responsive. My holistic sense of the entire class, including the students who chose the Opening Syllabus, supports this impression. However, I do expect that some classes might have a different composition. I think it is worth checking this for many of my multi-syllabi classes (undergraduate and graduate) for many years of my use of this overall pedagogical design. Another issue worth checking in future research is whether the postponed Open Syllabus is better than the Open Syllabus available immediately as an option for the students with regard to the students' initial reasons for choosing the Open Syllabus pedagogical regime.

My major interpretation of these findings is that *when students who grew up in conventional educational institutions are given a chance for democratic dialogic education, many of them (but not all!) are attracted and want to commit to it.* Granted, this study does not allow us to examine how many of those students follow through with their desire – another study is needed – but still, it reflects the students' initial intentions.

Can it be that some of the intentions for the Open Syllabus (OS) are fake – to please the professor (me) to tell me what I want to hear from them, to project the socially desired image of themselves, or just copy what people wrote before them? Although I cannot completely discount these possibilities, I judge them as being rather unlikely. This is because the OS-chosen students either announced that they were getting an unconditional “A” or self-grading, which turned out to be more or less an unconditional “A.” An unconditional “A” freed them from me and my supervision and surveillance. Also, the first posted Open Syllabus design was quite frank about coming from the Credential Transactional student who articulated that she wanted to ease the burden of assignments (in a broader sense) without any value to her learning experiences. The other OS students did not follow her in their OS design. I see some evidence that the OS-chosen students, after reading her OS design (there was some borrowing of the wordings), but most did not follow her reason. Thus, this credential OS student did not become “the role model” for many of them. Finally, many of the OS students followed through on their reasons for the Open Syllabus judged by their participation in the class either during the class meetings or on the class website, although, again, this should be studied more systematically in the future.

What are the reasons why the students chose to commit to the *Opening Syllabus*? Why did they choose the Opening Syllabus? Why did they not choose the Open Syllabus? Based on my discussion of these issues with some of my past Opening Syllabus students (not from this class), some of their decisions might be based on what I called “autopaternalism”: for some reason, they were not ready or able to organize themselves enough to conduct studies of their educational desire (Matusov, 2024b). Although engaged in a hybrid of Self-Directed Education and Responsive Education, they needed me to force them to study what they wanted to study. Also, they reported that they trusted me and liked my pedagogical design of the Opening Syllabus, which allowed them to fulfill their educational study desires. In addition, they appreciated the flexibility and possibility of tuning up the class organization (Matusov, 2024b). Also, based on my observations, some of the Opening Syllabus students might be credential students and Prisoners of Education who might not trust me that I would follow through with my promises or want to keep a socially desired image of themselves. Future systematic research of the students' choice for the Opening Syllabus

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is needed. Also, there is an interesting question of whether some of these Opening Syllabus students might choose an Open Syllabus later on if they had an opportunity to take more Multi-Syllabi classes. I have some evidence of that by observing students who attended several of my classes.

In sum, the findings suggest that there are undergraduate students in conventional higher education institutions who have an interest in self-education when the professor follows the students' educational desires.

Finally, I want to return back to Duberman and Holt's critique of their students who "abuse their freedom" for self-education that they granted their students. I think these democratic university educators had the wrong pedagogical expectation that this granted educational freedom would make all their students immediately engage in self-education on the subject matter of Duberman and Holt's courses. However, I have recognized that there are many challenges to my students' self-education.

First of all, the students' life outside their democratic classes in a traditional educational setting, as experienced by myself, Duberman, and Holt, is often characterized by significant stress, paternalistic dynamics, and a focus on survival. For instance, at the beginning of some class meetings, I practice inviting participants, including myself, to express their current feelings and reasons for them (for those who wish to participate). Predominantly, students' negative emotions are linked to school-related activities and their repercussions, such as test preparation, quizzes, exams, homework, assignments, deadlines, school-induced boredom, alienation, and the encroachment of school responsibilities on personal time. Conversely, positive emotions frequently arise either from activities outside of school or the conclusion of school-related tasks (e.g., semester breaks and completion of midterm exams).

Second, the concept of self-education as an institutional practice is unfamiliar to many students. The influence of the traditional culture of paternalistic credential education is significant on my students and, to a lesser degree, on me. Some students experience culture shock. One student noted in class that they previously needed permission from teachers for basic needs like asking their teachers' permission to go to a toilet but now have the autonomy to make decisions about their education and life. It takes time for students to adjust to this new culture of autonomy, life authorship, and self-education.

I have observed that when some students take another democratic course with me, their engagement in self-learning increases significantly. They are more comfortable with multi-syllabus courses, trust my promises, engage deeply with the material, and often choose the self-designed syllabus option. These experienced students often guide newcomers to self-education. However, some novice students only fully trust the process by the end of the semester. For example, an Open Syllabus student recently emailed at the semester's end to check if they needed to post more online to maintain an "A" grade. This reflects her distrust in my promise of *unconditional* grading. Despite aiming to empower students in their educational decisions, I sometimes remain a "benevolent dictator" due to my institutional authority (Matusov, 2023b). I assured the student that she had the final say in her educational choices.

The traditional educational system's paternalism and emphasis on credentials have significantly influenced my role as an educator. Most of my students are not given the choice to select my classes or me as their instructor. Instead, both the class and I have been designated to them by the conventional educational institution. My position as their teacher is not a result of their voluntary selection, based on a desire to learn about cultural diversity in education from me, or because of my commitment to pedagogical fiduciary duty (Matusov, 2024b), but rather due to institutional assignment.

In addition, many democratic educators, including myself, have observed "school toxification" and "school detoxification" in students transitioning from conventional to democratic schools. Students from

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traditional schools often lose their ability to act independently without authority's pressure (Llewellyn, 1998; Matusov & Brobst, 2013; Neill, 1960). As one student remarked, "Without school forcing me to do anything, I'd stay in bed all day waiting for my friends to return from classes." These educators suggest a "detoxification" period where students do nothing to recover from the suppressed agency. A.S. Neill of Summerhill School noted that recovery might take about a month of inactivity for each year spent in conventional schooling. Most of my students lack the necessary time for this process in my class, having experienced at least 14 years of traditional education.

Third, external factors distract my students from self-education. The main distraction is the need for educational credentials like diplomas, good grades, course credits, and school reputation, which are required by most employers and all graduate schools. Although some major employers now hire based on competency rather than educational credentials, salary discrimination based on education still exists. As Ivan Illich wrote,

...we need a law forbidding discrimination in hiring, voting, or admission to centers of learning based on previous attendance at some curriculum. This guarantee ... would remove the present absurd discrimination in favor of the person who learns a given skill with the largest expenditure of public funds or what is equally likely has been able to obtain a diploma which has no relation to any useful skill or job (Illich, 1983, p. 7).

Fourth, my challenge to the traditional educational approach of my university has had personal negative impacts. It results in stress and pressure, sometimes leading me to reconsider conventional teaching methods. For instance, when class attendance drops, particularly towards the semester's end, as students face pressures from other courses, I worry about my effectiveness as an instructor. In the past, colleagues have mentioned concerns about "grade inflation." My position within the institution can be uncertain due to my deviation from the established educational practices and credentialing standards.

In summary, instead of wanting all my students to engage in self-education on the course subject matter, as Duberman, Holt, and I previously wanted to do, I now wish to present my primary challenge as follows: How best can I offer my students a possibility for their transition from paternalistic education to self-education within one 3-month semester in the condition of a paternalistic educational institution constantly colonizing my students' mindset, time, activities, emotions, values, and energy? I do not consider this objective to be paternalistic because my students have reported significant stress, anxiety, alienation, and suppression of their authorial agency due to the school environment. However, many students perceive these issues as a normal and unavoidable aspect of life. The students still have a choice to engage or not to engage in this transition.

A major pedagogical dilemma I face is whether and to what extent the use of educational paternalism (beyond autopaternalism) is justified and legitimate when most students who are genuinely interested in my class view their interest as an unaffordable luxury within the context of perpetual survival. Am I doing these students a disservice by abruptly introducing them to self-education? Is this comparable to offering unlimited food to those who have experienced prolonged starvation? Will the freedom of self-education cause more harm than good for these students, leading them to reject it due to their overwhelming survival concerns without even attempting it? Would it be more beneficial for my students to impose a moderate level of educational paternalism for a longer period to provide them with a taste of dialogic education?

Moreover, how should I address the needs of other students (usually a minority) who are ready for self-education? What does a successful transition from paternalistic education to self-education within a 3-

month semester at my American university look like, given the context of a paternalistic educational institution? Currently, I do not have answers to these pressing questions.

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