Designing a Virtual Learning Environment for Critical Media Literacy Education

Ali Söken & Kysa Nygreen

In this reflective practitioner essay, we describe our redesign of a large undergraduate course, "Education and Film" (EdFilm), which teaches Critical Media Literacy (CML) to 181 students at a large state university. Using Practitioner Inquiry methods, we discuss the significance of the broader social context in shaping our design, show how we used Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to inform five design choices, and share outcomes from the course. Our findings indicate our course redesign increased flexibility and accessibility without sacrificing student learning outcomes. Reflecting on these findings, we argue for a redesign process that puts student learning goals at the center, considers the impacts of social context (especially with regard to social inequalities), and applies UDL to maximize accessibility and social justice.

Introduction

The summer and fall of 2020 were marked by a once-in-a-century global pandemic. In addition to fear, illness and death, the pandemic caused increased job loss, financial strain, and intensified caregiving responsibilities to many as businesses and schools abruptly shut down. In education, the shift to remote instruction revealed inequities in students' access to technology and suitable working/learning conditions. These challenges disproportionately affected students from lower-income households, and those who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), widening inequalities already present in the educational system.

We were among the many educators who redesigned courses for a virtual learning environment during this crisis. In this reflective practitioner essay, we describe the redesign of a large undergraduate lecture course, focusing on how Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was used as a framework to inform five design choices centering on equity, accessibility, and social justice. The first section describes the aims of our instructional design – to develop students' Critical Media Literacy (CML) in a course called "Education and Film" (EdFilm). This section also discusses our social identities and roles within the course. Second, we review the methods used for this paper, which we describe as Practitioner Inquiry. Third, we describe our instructional design process including the conceptual framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the contextual factors and student characteristics considered, and our five design choices.

Last, we share outcomes of the course focusing on two themes: student feedback and student learning. Data indicate our five design choices increased flexibility and accessibility, allowing students to develop and demonstrate the learning outcomes of CML. Reflecting on these findings, we argue for a redesign process that puts student learning goals at the center, deeply considers the impacts of social context (especially related to social inequalities), and applies UDL to maximize accessibility and social justice.

Instructional Design Aims

Our instructional design setting was a large undergraduate course, Education & Film (EdFilm), which serves approximately 180 students per semester at a large state university in the US. The central aim of the course is to develop students' Critical Media Literacy (CML) meaning the ability to decode and analyze media messages, and social contexts of media production, with attention to systemic inequality and power (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). While mainstream approaches to media literacy emphasize the decoding of media texts and components of media production, CML adds a critical-theory lens that considers the larger social context, the realities of systemic oppression, and the social and ideological effects of media messages (Kellner & Share, 2007). As applied in EdFilm, CML also includes the ability to self-reflect on one's own media socialization and implicit biases (Share & Thoman, 2007). CML aligns with social justice because it aims to develop students' critical consciousness to challenge inequality and enact social

change (Kellner & Share, 2005; Butler, 2019).

EdFilm is a lower-division, general-education course that meets an institutional "diversity" requirement and draws students from every campus department and major. The course addresses diversity in education through analysis of major Hollywood films about education, using a CML lens. Students analyze movies such as *Freedom Writers* and *Mean Girls* considering three questions: (1) What does this movie teach about diversity and inequality in education? (2) How does it do that? and (3) So what? To engage the "so what?" question, students read research-based texts about diversity and inequality in education as well as media studies texts about the social impacts of media narratives and representations. The course introduces concepts such as systemic racism, the meritocracy myth, and heteronormativity to help students name the social structures that impact media and education, identify the ideologies present in media narratives, and describe how dominant narratives hurt certain groups. Students also reflect on their own media socialization and explore implicit biases.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, EdFilm was taught in-person following a traditional lecture-style format consisting of a large weekly lecture led by the professor, smaller weekly discussion sections led by TAs, and periodic movie nights featuring a film screening followed by discussion. The instructor and TAs met regularly to reflect on the course, share pedagogical approaches, and align assessment. Nygreen, a faculty member, created EdFilm and has taught it for 16 semesters since 2011. She is a white, US-born, able-bodied, cisgender woman who identifies as LBGTQ. Söken, a doctoral candidate, has been a graduate Teaching Assistant (TA) for EdFilm since Fall 2019 and currently teaches an independent section of the course. He is an international student from Turkey, member of a religious minority, able-bodied, straight cisgender man and first-gen college student from a single-parent family. In the summer of 2020, we collaborated with other TAs to redesign EdFilm for a remote learning environment. Although three other TAs gave input into the process, we led the redesign effort, collected and analyzed the data, and developed the analysis presented. In this article, we utilize student data to answer two practice-driven questions:

1. How did students respond to the redesigned EdFilm course? What design elements increased accessibility of course content and engagement? (design questions)
2. Did students meet our desired CML learning outcomes? What does evidence of these learning outcomes look like? (student learning questions)

Methods

This paper builds from and reflects the tradition of Practitioner Inquiry (Anderson & Herr 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2004; Cochrain-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Lagemann, 2000). Practitioner Inquiry is an umbrella term referring to educational research in which the researcher is the practitioner, the research site is the context, and the focus of the research is the teaching practice (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004). Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) argue despite the differences in the individual genres under the category of practitioner inquiry, the shared features are noteworthy: (a) the practitioner is the researcher; (b) it aims to improve the practice by generated knowledge in the local context; (c) research questions arise from the site; (d) inquiry and practice are inseparable; (e) validity and generalizability do not follow the traditional definitions; (f) the research process is systematic and intentional; and (g) the knowledge is shared with a larger community to make the practice visible. The authors note "unlike the knowledge generated by outside researchers, the knowledge generated through practitioner inquiry is intended primarily for application and use within the local context in which it is generated" (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006, p. 508). In line with these features, we did not initially set out to design a research study about the EdFilm class; rather, we collected student data in order to continuously reflect on and improve our instructional design. We then systematically analyzed the data to answer our practice-driven research questions. While our primary purpose was improving our practice, we also believe our findings contribute insights to the instructional design field.

Data Collection

To answer the design questions, we used student surveys administered during the Fall 2020 semester consisting of: a pre-course survey distributed one week prior to the first class; two surveys distributed in weeks three and seven respectively; and an end-of-semester course evaluation. Surveys were distributed via email to the class list and posted on the course Moodle page (i.e., the Learning Management System) with frequent reminders. Surveys asked students about general wellbeing, accessibility issues, feedback on the course, and self-assessment of their own learning. While teaching during the fall 2020 semester, we reviewed responses to each survey immediately to identify recurring themes. We discussed the themes in our TA meetings and made adjustments to course design based on student feedback. To answer our student learning questions, we analyzed two types of student work: reflective journals (formative assessments) and student papers (summative assessments). These assignments were given three times throughout the semester. It is important to note, in addition to student

data, this paper draws on our collective reflections and notes from our instructional design process.

Data Analysis Procedures

To analyze student survey responses, we reviewed our TA meeting notes from the Fall 2020 semester to re-visit our initial interpretations of survey data. Second, we re-examined the data to identify additional themes and larger recurring patterns. To analyze student work, we reviewed work samples to identify examples considered evidence of CML competency as well as evidence of superficial learning or misunderstandings. To narrow the quantity of papers to review, we selected student work from one of the six Discussion Sections (30 students). We skimmed all 30 papers and journals for exemplary examples, and conducted a close reading of those in the top and bottom third of the grading distribution. We also reviewed meeting notes from teaching-team meetings in which TA's discussed the quality of student work and shared work samples to align assessment. Before turning to our findings, we first describe our instructional design process.

Instructional Design Process

This section describes our instructional design process, including the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework guiding us, the contextual features and student characteristics we considered, and our five design choices.

Universal Design for Learning

We began the redesign process by (re)articulating and clarifying our CML student learning goals and the importance of CML in the present historical moment. We put these learning goals at the center and then worked backwards to design learning experiences that enable students to develop and demonstrate goal achievements. While centering CML learning outcomes, our redesign process was guided by UDL our consideration of the social context and our students. UDL is a learning design framework emphasizing accessibility of learning design for students of diverse backgrounds, strengths, abilities and prior knowledge. UDL is not a teaching strategy or a way to promote use of technology in the classroom; rather, it is a framework advancing social justice by ensuring that instruction is accessible to all learners (Pliner & Johnson, 2004). UDL aims to "maximize learning opportunities for every student" (Rose & Meyer, 2002, p. 5) by creating multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression. According to CAST (2001), guidelines for implementing these three principles in the classroom include: (1) recruiting interest, sustaining effort and persistence, and self-regulation for *engagement* [the why of learning]; (2)

perception, language and symbols and comprehension for *representation* [the what of learning]; (3) physical action, expression and communication, and executive functions for *action and expression* [the how of learning].

Hackman and Rauscher (2004) underline the connection between social justice and UDL as both prioritizing accessibility of learning materials to students from diverse backgrounds, and call for structural change not only leading to students' higher academic achievement, but also empowerment. Accessibility in this sense is deeper than criticizing the one-size-fits-all approach in teaching. As Pliner and Johnson (2004) state, "it is our ethical and moral obligation to transform the practice of accessibility" (p.112) to democratize higher education where certain populations do not have the same chances due to the systemic inequalities. There are many areas of synergy between the frameworks of CML and UDL. For example, both recognize how social inequality systematically disadvantages certain students, and both seek to advance student empowerment and social justice. Additionally, both consider the importance of social context on student learning and equity and support student-centered approaches to instruction. These aims and overarching values provide the theoretical underpinnings of EdFilm and informed our redesign process. Next, we discuss features of the social context and student characteristics considered in our redesign process.

Context and Student Characteristics

The social context of the summer and fall of 2020 was defined not only by the Covid-19 pandemic but also by a series of truly historic events: an uniquely-contentious and polarizing U.S. presidential campaign and election; a wave of racial justice protests in response to the police murder of George Floyd; media disinformation campaigns about the pandemic, the election, and the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) movement; and rising poverty and inequality caused by the pandemic's disproportionate effects on low-income and BIPOC communities. These socio-political factors caused heightened feelings of stress, fear, sadness, and anger for many. The pandemic also created particular challenges for undergraduate students including social isolation, mental health struggles, and financial stress. The summer of 2020 was also a time of collective grief for those who missed out on adolescent rites of passage such as graduation, prom, athletics, dating, and the experience of "going away to college." We simply could not ignore the gravity of our historical moment when considering our course redesign for a remote learning context. We felt strongly that CML could empower students to understand, analyze, and meet the challenges of the current historical moment. We also recognized the need for flexibility, compassion, and humanization of the learning environment in order to

support students through this unprecedented and grief-filled moment in history.

To gather information about our students' needs, constraints, and accessibility issues in relation to this context, we designed a pre-course survey distributed a week prior to the first day of class. The survey asked students about their general wellbeing, their hopes and fears for the semester, and their access to technology and other resources needed for success in college courses. The findings revealed that 64.7% of our students would be first-year college students, 11.8% were first-generation college students, and 22.1% held a full-time job. In open-ended questions, 47 students (34%) explicitly mentioned technological issues such as not having a reliable computer or internet connection. With these inputs, we recognized a need for asynchronous options to provide the most flexibility and accessibility. We also recognized the need for intentional support of first-year students transitioning to college.

Next, we considered what we knew about our students from teaching EdFilm previously. We reflected on three long-standing challenges of the course: large class size, uneven academic preparation, and uneven exposure to diversity. We knew these challenges, which we had wrestled with prior to the pandemic, could be exacerbated by the remote learning environment. First, with a class size of 180, it can be difficult to build community, forge personal relationships with students, or intervene if students disengage. Second, students come to the course with a wide range of academic preparation. While some require use of class time to review content from assigned readings or receive explicit instruction in academic reading/writing strategies, others come prepared to *use* texts and writing prompts as a jumping-off point for deeper engagement with overarching themes. Balancing these diverse academic needs while keeping everyone engaged has been a continual challenge, especially given the large class size and limited staffing.

The third and most difficult challenge, however, has been students' uneven exposure to diversity and social justice themes. A majority of our students are white, middle-class, U.S. citizens from college-educated households. It is common for students to begin the semester with a rudimentary understanding of, and sometimes dis-information about, diversity and social justice. Some students enter the course from a stance of resistance and skepticism, making it difficult to build a supportive community of learners. At the other end of the spectrum are students who are immersed in social justice work, or major in a cognate area of study (e.g. media studies, sociology, African American studies, Latinx Studies, Women/Gender/Sexuality studies), or identify as BIPOC or other marginalized identity. In addition, there are many

international students bringing a distinct set of experiences and lenses to issues of social diversity in the U.S. The teaching team has long struggled with how to honor and validate minoritized students' experiences and the knowledge they bring to the classroom. Equally, the team grappled with how to provide these students a meaningful learning experience while also attending to the majority of students, unfamiliar with or holding misinformation about diversity, who need basic instruction.

Five Design Choices

Taking into account contextual factors, student characteristics, and the principles of UDL, we radically redesigned EdFilm. Our redesign is summarized through five design choices: (a) synchronous-asynchronous instruction; (b) modular structure; c) building an inclusive learning community; (d) using multimodality; and (e) collecting constructive feedback. The five choices align with UDL guidelines to provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression. They also support CML's emphasis on self-reflection and social justice.

Synchronous-Asynchronous Instruction

Our first design choice was to structure the course with a balance of synchronous and asynchronous instruction. The results of our pre-course survey suggested the importance of asynchronous options to provide the most flexibility and accessibility. Instead of weekly 75-minute lectures, the instructor recorded mini-lectures (7-10 minutes each) and posted them on the Moodle, with closed captioning and transcripts, for students to view at their own pace. Instead of movie nights, students could view films on their own time and submit written answers to a set of analytical questions. Although possible to succeed in the course through solely asynchronous participation, use of synchronous participation would support student learning and engagement. As such, we provided synchronous activities during all scheduled class times (i.e., three times each week) and strongly encouraged students to attend. Synchronous instruction included open office hours, interactive review sessions, virtual watch parties replacing movie nights, and discussion sections. The aim was to provide multiple opportunities each week for students to plug into the course, make contact with an instructor, (re)engage in their learning, and interact with peers and class material in a synchronous setting. This mix of synchronous-asynchronous learning opportunities supports the UDL principle of *engagement* because it allows for multiple forms of engagement, allows learners to follow the course at their own pace, and provides opportunities to build effort and persistence.

Modular Structure

Our second design choice was to shift from a week-by-week course schedule to a modular structure. Each module followed the same format, flow, and assignments – making an easier to follow pattern – allowing students to complete work at their own pace within each module. The content of every module included a set of readings (i.e., print and multimedia texts), one movie, and a few recorded mini-lectures tying the material together and connecting it to assessment prompts. To engage with materials, students completed five activities (i.e., formative assessments) which offered a variety of ways to engage with content and represent what they learned. This reflects the UDL principles of engagement and representation. After two modules, there was a one-week pause when papers were due, called "breather week." This provided students time to catch up, catch their breath, and complete summative assessments thoughtfully before moving on to new material.

Building a Learning Community

Our third design choice prioritized community-building and humanized the learning process. We accomplished this by checking in with students about their general well-being at the beginning of each session, using energizer and community-building exercises, and using fun ways to engage with the material such as having students co-create memes in small breakout groups. For every module, TAs hosted live 50-minute discussion sessions and used the collaboratively created lesson plans. Friday discussions were a safe space for students to explore the course content in a deeper way with their peers. On alternate Fridays, TAs hosted virtual office hours for students who wanted to talk about the course or share concerns. Building an inclusive community of learners who trust each other supports the UDL principle of *engagement* and creates a setting that fosters the CML competency of critical self-reflection.

Using Multimodality

In the fourth design choice, we carefully curated course content to address students with different backgrounds and learning styles. In our redesign process, we radically updated the content to feature more up-to-date texts, a more explicit thematic focus on systemic racism, and more multimedia texts such as TED Talks, YouTube videos, podcasts, documentaries, and blogs. The rationale for centering the topic of systemic racism was a response to the social context marked by a summer of racial justice protests. The rationale for incorporating more multimodal texts was to engage diverse learning styles, maintain student interest, and provide multiple means of representation of course content. Reflecting UDL guidelines, multimodality made the content more engaging, relevant, and accessible to a broader array of students. This choice also reflects CML's emphasis on multimodal literacies.

Collecting Constructive Feedback

In the fifth design choice, we collected data from students continuously throughout the semester and used the feedback to make adjustments. As already noted, the teaching team reviewed survey responses immediately, discussed them in meetings, and adjusted course design in light of student feedback. In recorded lectures and weekly emails, the instructor shared what the teaching team had learned from each survey and what changes we would make as a result. This demonstrated to students that we cared about and were listening to their feedback.

Findings

The data indicate our five design choices helped create a virtual learning environment that increased student engagement, provided multiple entry points from different prior knowledge, and allowed students to show their understanding in multiple ways. As a result, the majority of students in the course achieved CML learning outcomes. In the following subsections, we first report on student feedback using surveys as a data source. We then report on student learning using student work as a data source. Finally, we address exceptions, limitations, and areas for improvement.

Student Feedback

In our end-of-semester course evaluation (N=147), we asked students to reflect on what aspects of the course supported their learning. As this was an open-ended question, students were not led to comment on our design choices specifically; however, we coded responses according to our five design choices. Regarding the synchronous-asynchronous balance of instruction (design choice 1), 18 students (12%) identified asynchronous options as supportive to their learning as it helped them juggle multiple responsibilities. At the same time, those who took advantage of synchronous learning opportunities offered positive comments about them, noting it helped them "keep up with school work" and "feel more connected to my professor and my peers." Regarding the modular course structure (design choice 2), ten students (7%) mentioned it reduced anxiety and made it easier to manage their time, and four noted assignments were clearly outlined and predictable. For example, one student indicated "I like how every week is similar materials and homework. When class material changes every week and there is not the same workload, it overwhelms me." Survey responses also indicated the value of "breather weeks." Twenty-one students (14.3%) named them as a strength of our design, noting, for

example, "[breather week] helps me catch up with my work, move at a pace that is comfortable for me, and helps me with my life outside of school."

While students generally appreciated that self-paced modules provided flexibility, some struggled with time management in the face of so much independence. We noticed this after the first module, when numerous assignments were submitted at the last minute and the teaching team received a wave of frantic emails from students who had not kept up with the work. To address this, we implemented a recommended pacing guide with suggested due dates for each item including a week-by-week breakdown of the readings, and activated the "self-check" feature in Moodle so that students had a visual representation of what they had completed and what was still due. Weekly announcements from the professor reiterated the recommended due dates for each assignment and reading. On balance, we believe the module structure with the recommended pacing guide created an optimal mix of flexibility and structure.

Regarding our choice to build a community of learners (design choice 3), surveys indicated that students who participated in synchronous learning opportunities appreciated the community formed within them, especially discussion sections and watch parties. Eleven students (7.5%) reported discussion sessions were helpful and should meet more often. Fourteen students (9.5%) named watch parties as helpful, noting "I was excited to watch movies with live commentary from my classmates" and "watching [movies] with the rest of the class helped me find things I could have missed in my viewing." We note that over 100 students regularly attended virtual watch parties, even though attendance was not required. These became an interactive community where students shared ideas in the chat box throughout the film, and discussed the movie in small breakout rooms immediately after watching. Our fourth design choice was to update course content to include more current and more multimodal sources. In the final course evaluation, six students (4%) mentioned multimedia texts as a strength by commenting "mixing in documentaries and podcasts that add variety and make it easier to engage with the topics" and "learning new things about the media and education through various formats such as podcasts, articles, movies, etc." Several noted the relevancy of the course to "real world issues." We received no negative comments about course content.

Student Learning

In this section we analyze student work to show evidence that students achieved desired CML learning outcomes. While exceptions will be addressed in the last subsection, students in the course overall demonstrated strong evidence of CML conceptual understanding and

competencies. The meeting notes from fall 2020 indicate that all four TAs and the instructor anecdotally remarked on students' rigorous engagement with course content and the high quality of their work in comparison to previous semesters. Our analysis of student writing provides evidence that CML learning outcomes were in fact met. In this section, we use examples from student work to illustrate evidence of CML learning. The examples are grouped based on two key competencies: self-reflection on media socialization, and conceptual understanding of systemic oppression. Space limitations allows use of only a few examples for each competency; however, excerpts included is representative of the general quality of student work produced in the course.

Self-Reflection on Media Socialization

One core competency of CML is the ability to self-reflect on one's own media socialization. This requires students to conceptually understand the impacts of media representation on socialization, and to identify their own relative privilege or marginalization within social structures. For students with multiple dominant social identities (e g. white, male, heterosexual, middle/upper class, American, etc.), CML starts with the recognition of unearned privilege. We found evidence of this awareness in many student work samples. For example, one student reflected "the media helped me believe that my story was everyone's story. I'm very fortunate to be a middle-class student who went to a good high school, and the media helped me believe this was a common thing." She went on to acknowledge "the narrative I had grown up with was inherently racist, so now I know that I have to 'unlearn' some of the biases that I grew up believing." Another student who identified as white and upper-middle class reflected:

> If I had been asked in my youth if I believed in a meritocratic America, I would have answered, "yes." The meritocracy ideal was served to me on a silver platter by my teachers and the media alike. How would I have known any different? Being born into an upper-middle-class family and attending private schools gave me the opportunity to see myself reaching upward mobility. I had multiple resources, connections, and influences that allowed me to get to where I am today. I never saw the value of this until I went to college and realized that many people did not get the same opportunities as I did.

These excerpts all demonstrate students' ability to identify and name their own privilege, critically reflect on

long-held biases, and consider how media messages have shaped or influenced their views.

A second set of papers shows how students with marginalized identities questioned dominant media narratives about themselves. In one example, a student who identified as Asian American and male reflected "American media has taught people like me that the place of Asians in society is at the fringes of whiteness -- just legitimate enough to be graced with white presence, but not virtuous enough to be respected among them." Recalling his childhood in a "rich white community," he noted "without strong Asian protagonists to give us a positive image of our own ethnicity, we instead turned to the characteristics of white heroes as a model." He also identified how positive media representations had benefited him "thanks to movies like *The Farewell* and *Crazy Rich Asians*, my sister and I have been able to look at each other for the first time in our lives and go 'look, it's us. That's our culture!'"

In another example, a student who identified as Asian American and female described how "tiring" it was to be judged by "Eurocentric beauty standards" that create "the sense of *white is beautiful*." However, she found solace on the social media platform Tiktok, where she found "different types of Asians who choose not to conform to stereotypes and share pride in Asian embodiment." She suggested media literacy helped her develop a more positive self-image:

> The way the media deforms and underrepresents me is something I will let go in the way of how I perceive myself. Instead, I will choose to stand by my people, love my culture, and myself. I am choosing to unlearn and decolonize Eurocentric beauty standards and cherish my Asiacentric ones. Media is powerful, especially to the more influential and progressive generation. Once the media portrays positive images of POC the more accepting the world can be as young girls are internalizing and deconstructing these types of messages.

These reflections from students with marginalized identities provide evidence of naming and challenging dominant media narratives, and understanding how representation impacts people in both positive and harmful ways.

A third set of students offered complex accounts of marginalization *and* privilege with regard to media representation and socialization. For example, a student who identified as white and female observed "I have been

fortunate enough as a white woman to see myself reflected in various films and books throughout my lifetime." However, she realized even though her identity was well represented, she had been harmed by unrealistic beauty standards and gender roles "I unknowingly internalized the beauty standards and gender roles that films like these portrayed. Magazines and television showed me a specific ideal that girls are expected to live up to, and I desperately wanted to live up to them." In another example, a student identifying as white and female reflected on contradictory media messages about womanhood, including "the idea that strong women still change for men." She shared personal anecdotes about specific films she had seen as a child, which had shaped her ideas about womanhood, leading to disempowerment and internalized sexism. This was true even of films praised for having strong female characters, causing her to observe "movies can show a strong female role but that doesn't mean there are no embedded negative messages." These excerpts demonstrate students' ability to reflect on their media socialization, and conceptual understanding of how media messages may simultaneously support *and* undermine positive self-esteem based on one's multiple, intersecting social identities.

Taken together, these samples of student work provide evidence students developed the CML competency of self-reflection on media socialization. Even though students brought different life experiences, identities, privileges, and prior knowledge to this process, resulting in very different types of reflections, all types of students were able to meet the CML learning goal of self-reflection.

Systemic Inequality

A second core competency of CML is the conceptual understanding of systemic inequality as differentiated from interpersonal discrimination. Evidence from student work suggests, overall, students demonstrated this competency as they engaged with course material. One source students named over and over again was the *New York Times* series, "Still Separate, Still Equal" (Meatto, 2019), which examines racial segregation and unequal funding in US education through a series of articles and interactive activities. Students completed one of the articles with accompanying activities in each module. Many reported being surprised by facts about segregation and unequal funding included in these articles. One student wrote "It sucks to admit, but I actually didn't know that segregation within schools is still such a huge issue. [...] [The article] opened up my eyes that there was a racial divide." Another responded with this personal reflection:

> I went to elementary, middle, and high school in predominantly white districts

where I was given laptops to use and bring home each day and new textbooks to read, while students I knew at the schools on the other side of town were getting my hand-me-downs. These schools getting our hand-me-downs were on the other side of town unofficially labeled as lower class and were predominately black.

These excerpts show how students responded to and engaged with new information about racial inequality in US education, even though it may have challenged prior assumptions. They show how students connected course material to their own life experiences, applying what they learned through self-reflection on their own experiences in schools.

Many demonstrated understanding of systemic inequality by critiquing the meritocracy myth – a concept introduced in the course. For example, one student wrote "Through this course, I have learned of the meritocracy myth and have been able to apply it to my own life in discovering why in many cases I was the token person of color [in advanced classes]." Another described meritocracy as a "fabricated ideal" and observed that people with "subordinate identities typically have to work longer and harder to reach the same level of success as dominant, privileged identities." A third student wrote:

> Meritocracy is a toxic myth because if marginalized groups and classes are told that their situations in life are due to their "laziness" or lack of determination, then they will most likely blame themselves. This narrative can deprive them of their confidence and make them believe that they cannot attain upward mobility. The implementation of equal opportunities across the education system coupled with the complete eradication of the meritocracy myth is the only way to achieve equality of outcomes across social classes.

In these three excerpts, students critiqued the meritocracy myth to argue some groups are *systematically* disadvantaged by systems and structures, therefore providing evidence of conceptual understanding of systemic inequality.

These last two excerpts show students integrating multiple CML competencies to advance an independent argument or interpretation. Although such sophisticated CML understanding was not achieved across the class, it is representative of student work in the top one-third of

the grade distribution for the final course paper, a summative assessment drawing on material from the full semester. In the first excerpt, a student applies their critique of meritocracy to the movie *Freedom Writers*, a quintessential urban high school genre film:

> These films [in the urban high school genre] reinforce the false belief [...] that individuals are poor because they lack the necessary values to achieve success. This belief does not identify the countless other barriers that these individuals have to face. Even the best teaching does not always determine success in a student... Instead of blaming the failure of these students on poor teaching, society has to recognize the structural barriers put forth by the government, economy, and cultures that prevent these individuals from "making it" in America.

This student not only identifies the underlying message of the film (i.e., answering what the film teaches and how, but also makes an argument about why this message matters in the larger context of systemic oppression (i.e., answering the "so what?" question). In another example of sophisticated CML understanding, a student writes:

> People in positions of power who have the power to spread dominant narratives are often white, and also often male. This makes for dominant narratives that can be tone-deaf and/or wildly inaccurate, which contributes to problematic representations in the media that become internalized in our society.

This student analyzed a media message by performing a contextual analysis considering the role of systemic inequality and power in shaping media production, rather than focusing on a surface-level textual analysis.

Our analysis of student work indicates learners who engaged with course content were able to achieve the desired CML learning outcomes of self-reflection on media socialization and understanding systemic oppression. A proportion of students were also able to draw independent connections between media messages and larger structures of inequality, demonstrating an even more sophisticated level of CML understanding.

Limitations and Areas for Improvement

Although the vast majority of students in the course

performed well and showed evidence of CML learning, there were notable exceptions. It is important to note that we did not succeed in reaching every enrolled student. There were 26 students (14% of the class) who earned below 80% total course grade, and 13 (7%) who did not pass. Based on logs that track student activity on Moodle, we are able to confirm all 13 who did not pass exhibited a pattern of disengagement or non-participation. For example, eight of these students did not attend a single live discussion session, and an additional ten attended just two or three sessions out of five. Additionally, detailed logs from Moodle show that some did not log into the course for months, did not access the syllabus or other materials, and did not attempt any assignments.

Due to the workload demands of teaching this course and the current staffing-to-student ratio, we were unable to establish contact with every non-participating student despite attempts to do so. As a Covid-19 accommodation, every student who requested a grade of Incomplete to submit work after the semester ended was granted the option with no questions asked. However, of the four students who requested it, only two followed through with submitting assignments needed to pass the class. As such, even though we argue our five design choices increased access to student learning and provided numerous "on-ramps" for students to (re)engage the course, it was not a panacea and we did not succeed in reaching 100% of enrolled students. We note even the most effective instructional design does not guarantee the engagement of all students.

We want to note additional limitations to our course design and areas for growth. First, while we successfully incorporated multimodal texts, room for improvement remains. We originallyplanned to offer students a media production alternative to writing a paper (e.g., creating a video or podcast), however, due to workload and other challenges, we were not able to implement this option during our first redesigned semester (Fall 2020). From the UDL perspective, providing multiple means of action and expression is critical to ensuring we address students' diverse needs. From a CML perspective, media production is an important student learning outcome. For these reasons, we have integrated this option into the syllabus for Fall 2021, but we recognize it as a limitation of the Fall 2020 version discussed in this paper. Regarding our design choice to build an inclusive community of learners, this goal remains a work-in-progress. Overall, we are satisfied with the steps we took to nurture such a community in our Fall 2020 course, especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the remote teaching context. Our survey results indicated students who participated in synchronous learning activities appreciated the sense of community found there. However, all teaching-team members experienced a learning curve with managing synchronous online learning spaces, and not all students were able to be fully present in these spaces. Moreover, due to the synchronous-asynchronous design choice, many chose to complete the course asynchronously undermining attempts to build relationships and create community.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper discussed our redesign of EdFilm for a remote learning environment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our instructional design goal was to develop students' critical media literacy (CML). With this goal, we applied UDL to inform five design choices: synchronous-asynchronous learning; modular structure; building a learning community; multimodality; and collecting student data. We argue these design choices expanded access to student learning and allowed multiple forms of engagement, representation, and action. Moreover, students who engaged with the course developed CML learning outcomes including self-reflection on media socialization and understanding of systemic inequality.

Reflecting on these findings, we identify two implications for practitioners. First, we argue for an instructional (re)design process that puts student learning goals at the center, deeply considers the impacts of social context (especially with regard to social inequalities), and applies UDL to maximize equity and access. We hope this paper clearly demonstrates how we followed these steps. It is important to emphasize our redesign did *not* merely replace in-person components of the course with parallel virtual ones. Instead, we began by clarifying the purpose of our course and its CML learning goals. We then considered the broader social context and our students' likely experiences and needs in light of this context. This meant explicitly recognizing how systemic inequalities impacted our students differently, and being mindful of how our design choices either reduced or intensified these inequalities. Only then did we work backwards from our learning goals to design instructional experiences meant to enable students to both develop and demonstrate CML competencies. We used UDL as a guide to this process, especially the three principles of engagement, representation, and action/expression.

The second implication of our study pertains to critical media literacy education. In the midst of a global pandemic that exacerbated existing social inequalities, both within the US and globally, it is essential for students to develop an understanding of social structures asymmetrically impacting different communities, and to understand the role media plays in shaping "common sense" about social issues and inequalities. Critical media literacy provides the tools to achieve this goal. As a form of social justice education, CML is urgently needed in this current historical moment. Given that CML education can be particularly empowering for marginalized students, it

is essential to expand access to CML learning for this group. This is what we have attempted to do in redesigning EdFilm. We hope our experience provides insights for other instructional designers committed to social justice education.

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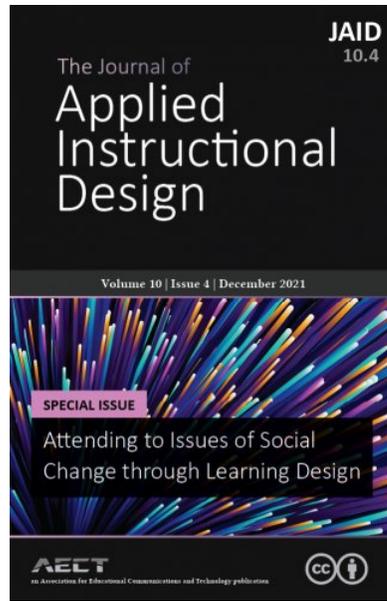
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