

# **Beyond the Traditional Essay**

Increasing Student Agency  
in a Diverse Classroom with  
Nondisposable Assignments

Edited by

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Series in Education



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# Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures</b>	v
<b>Introduction</b>	vii
Kerry Kautzman <i>Alfred University</i>	
Melissa Ryan <i>Alfred University</i>	
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
<b>A Model of Relational Learning and Knowledge Production: Using Podcasts in a Writing Intensive Native American/ Indigenous Literatures Course</b>	1
Francisco D. Delgado <i>Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY</i>	
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
<b>Adding to Archives, Stories, and Conversations: Dramaturgy, Collaboration, and the Non-terminating Essay Assignment</b>	17
Aoise Stratford <i>Cornell University</i>	
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>Comparative Reading by Students in the World: For Promoting Better Understanding of Literature and Peace in the World</b>	33
Akiyoshi Suzuki <i>Nagasaki University, Japan</i>	
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>DEI, NDAs, and the Value of Literature: Dismantling Educational Privilege with Nontraditional Assignments</b>	53
Melissa Ryan <i>Alfred University</i>	

<b>Chapter 5</b>	
<b>Renewable Assignments, from Paper to Trees</b>	71
Allison M. Cummings	
<i>Southern New Hampshire University</i>	
<b>Chapter 6</b>	
<b>Renewable Assignments and the Integrity of Intellectual Work</b>	89
James M. Skidmore	
<i>University of Waterloo</i>	
<b>Chapter 7</b>	
<b>Learning Outcomes of Non-disposable Assignments: An Approach to Measuring the Results</b>	107
Kerry Kautzman	
<i>Alfred University</i>	
<b>Contributors</b>	123
<b>Index</b>	125

# List of Figures

Figure 6.1: Criteria Distinguishing Different Kinds of Assignments	93
Figure 6.2: The 5Rs	95
Figure 6.3: The CC Licences & The 5R Activities	96
Figure 6.4: Relationship between OER and Creative Commons licenses	96



# Introduction

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Literature classes often follow what seems like an inevitable arc toward a thesis-driven literary analysis essay. But while it's certainly true that being able to make evidence-based analytical arguments is a fundamental exercise of critical thinking skills, this collection explores other – perhaps more engaging – ways to demonstrate those skills, using tools and forms that transcend academic boundaries. Instead of what open pedagogy advocate David Wiley terms “disposable assignments” – written only for the instructor to grade, and then tossed away and forgotten (“What Is Open Pedagogy?”) – the scholars collected here discuss a wide range of assignments that contribute to public knowledge: work that is shared across networks of learning, that *does* something, that isn't just for a teacher's grade.

For many of us, the value of what we do is self-evident – but we recognize that the value of the humanities in general, or literature in particular, is not necessarily self-evident to others, whether colleagues across campus or society at large. As the precipitous decline in humanities majors over the last decade suggests, literary study in an outcomes-focused society is, like the assignments Wiley targets, seen as eminently disposable. Liberal arts advocates spreading the word in the popular press consistently demonstrate that the value differential is a matter of perception; yes, engineers outearn English majors, but on the whole, the earnings differences between the seemingly practical STEM majors and the dilettantish humanities are not significant. What matters, as Benjamin Schmidt writes in the *Atlantic*, is that since the financial crisis of 2008, students have learned to think that they *should* want a STEM degree, in what he characterizes as “a largely misguided effort to enhance their chances on the job market” (“The Humanities Are In Crisis”).<sup>1</sup> Faculty may know that

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<sup>1</sup> For evidence of the decline in humanities majors, the National Center for Education Statistics offers this table recording degrees conferred by major: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_322.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_322.10.asp). For related data and interpretation, see Schmidt, “The Humanities Are In Crisis.”

literature courses strengthen core skills in critical thinking and communication, but outside of our hallways English seminars are seen as cloistered and arcane, or narrow in their postgraduate applicability; the core professional skills developed in the writing of five pages on a line of Dickinson poetry are not universally clear. In short, traditional, disposable assignments don't necessarily make our value visible, even – or perhaps especially – to the student completing them.

One response to our relevance crisis is to rethink assignments in a way that students might find more vital and engaging. Innovative assignments may productively disrupt the routine, giving students a fresh perspective just by asking them to put materials together in a different way. For example, instead of asking for a formulaic comparison-contrast essay, instructors might have students write the introduction to a hypothetical anthology putting multiple texts in dialogue. Or, instead of analyzing a legal case, an assignment might have students pretend they're judges applying a precedent in making a decision. Assignments like these – of which there are many examples online, shared both by individual instructors and at the institutional level through Teaching & Learning Centers – are more engaging because they give students a more active role, and they may actually address core objectives even more directly than a traditional essay with its tired structure can. But they're also pretend. They defer the real value until later (when I actually become a judge, when I actually become an editor). Really moving beyond disposable assignments means not just simulating the way writing works in the world, but engaging in the real thing: creating public resources and participating in the learning of others.

This emphasis on nondisposability – on what are known as “renewable” assignments – emerges from the Open Pedagogy movement and related interest in Open Educational Resources and OER-enabled pedagogy, all of which resist the limitations on learning embedded in the model of intellectual production as commercial product. Traditional assignments are organized around the closely related concepts of privacy and property. The assignment is a private transaction between teacher and student, taking place primarily in the margins of the paper (like the private space of the office hour), and the results are a closely kept (FERPA-protected) secret. This intellectual production is then a product, the student's private property (students are consistently surprised to learn that they can, in effect, steal from themselves by plagiarizing their own work). In contrast to this pedagogy of private property, renewable assignments see learning as public in both senses: something that happens in the open, for the general welfare.

Open pedagogy fosters a reexamination of how we learn and what we can do with the artifacts of learning. Open Educational Resources (OERs) in any

medium are defined by open licensing, usually through Creative Commons licenses, and are characterized by the 5 Rs: materials in this category can be reused, retained, redistributed, revised, and remixed. As its name implies, OER-enabled pedagogy uses OERs and their 5R permissions to achieve the goals of open pedagogy. All of the media transformed by open pedagogy and OER-enabled pedagogy (books, lessons, videos, podcasts, websites, audio-visual materials) result from the technological, digital advancements that allow students and faculty to learn by doing as well as by what others do, without the limits of geography or time. OER-enabled pedagogy addresses four outcomes proposed by Wiley and Hilton as a test that serves to eliminate materials that claim to be open pedagogy when in practice the materials are privately licensed. First, students create new artifacts or revise/remix existing OER. Because students can both (#2) publicly share the materials and (#3) openly license them, the remixed or newly created artifact adds value to the world and therefore passes the fourth test by not only supporting the learning of its author (Wiley and Hilton 137).

Open Pedagogy is more broadly defined not just by licensing but by ideology, by its ethics of collaboration and accessibility. It issues both practical and theoretical challenges to the traditional classroom model – that is, the model that imposes cost prohibitions on learning and assumes a hierarchy from teacher as agent-expert to student as passive consumer of educational content. In so doing, this approach reconceptualizes institutional power dynamics in ways that make meaningful education more available to all students: “Knowledge consumption and knowledge creation are not separate but parallel processes, as knowledge is co-constructed, contextualized, cumulative, iterative, and recursive. In this way, Open Pedagogy invites us to focus on how we can increase access to higher education and how we can increase access to knowledge—both its reception and its creation” (DeRosa and Jhangiani). Thinking from an open pedagogical perspective means re-seeing the goals and structures of educational institutions in a way that recognizes student agency.

With its emphasis on equity and inclusivity, Open Pedagogy overlaps with another relatively recent pedagogical development: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which seeks to create a flexible learning environment in which students with learning differences can thrive. UDL is a framework governing course design that seeks to maximize the value of the curriculum for diverse learners. Instead of normalizing a certain student population (nondisabled, nonmarginalized) and providing accommodations for others, UDL recognizes that thoughtful course design removes barriers to learning for all students. An accommodation like a sidewalk cutout may increase access for a person in a wheelchair, but it’s also useful for someone pushing a stroller or someone riding a bike. In an educational context, students with documented learning

disabilities might be allowed extra time on an exam as an accommodation, but a UDL perspective might instead ask whether a timed exam is the best or only way for students to demonstrate their learning.

Based on extensive research in the science of learning, the UDL guidelines follow three core principles. First, they remind educators to “provide multiple means of representation.” Instructors can reach diverse students – those with sensory or cognitive disabilities, or second language learners, or just those with different processing strengths – by providing information in multiple forms (audio, visual, textual, supplemental context, etc.). The second principle is to “provide multiple means of action and expression”; that is, to be mindful of the way diverse learners will interact with physical and digital tools, to support students in their planning and self-monitoring, and give them multiple ways to demonstrate what they know. And finally, UDL guidelines encourage instructors to “provide multiple means of engagement.” What might motivate one student will cause another to shut down, so instructors should devise a range of strategies for generating interest, enthusiasm, and a sense of self-efficacy – that is, for activating the affective dimensions of learning (CAST).

The goals articulated in these guidelines and the measures CAST offers for evaluating course design dovetail with the aims and purposes of nondisposable assignments. For example, Checkpoint 7.2 in the CAST rubric for Engagement, “Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity,” reinforces the objectives we encounter in this volume: class work should be “personalized and contextualized to learners’ lives,” “culturally relevant and responsive,” and “socially relevant,” and instructors should “design activities so that learning outcomes are authentic, communicate to real audiences, and reflect a purpose that is clear to the participants.” Similarly, Checkpoint 5.1: “Use multiple media for communication,” a way of eliminating barriers to Action and Expression, is central to several of the projects described in the essays collected here; having students create podcasts or video presentations, for example, puts this principle into practice. As the UDL guidelines point out, fluency in a variety of media is useful for all students: “It is important for all learners to learn composition, not just writing, and to learn the optimal medium for any particular content of expression and audience.” In other words, a student whose ADD has produced debilitating writing anxiety may benefit from an option to record an idea verbally rather than in writing, but so would a student who will need to present ideas verbally in professional life.

UDL guidelines, like nondisposable assignments, invite us as educators to examine our learning goals and think more broadly about how students could achieve them, rather than assigning tasks because those are the tasks that were assigned to us (or because those are the things we’re good at). They seek to separate the means from the ends, so that we can get beyond the idea that a

literary analysis essay is the only way to demonstrate literary analysis. And both open pedagogy and UDL seek to remove artificial barriers – restrictive licenses or restrictive course design – that limit access to education.

In other words, the pedagogical context for the essays that follow revolves around empowering students – giving them the agency to build and collaborate rather than absorb and regurgitate. For Francisco Delgado, this takes the form of having students create podcasts as an optional alternative to the traditional researched essay in a Writing Intensive Native American/Indigenous Literatures course. Breaking down the steps of podcast production as parallel to and overlapping with the conventional writing process, Delgado draws connections between the thematic work of the course – what it means to live relationally – and the collaborative ethos of this project. Instead of working in isolation (or in competition), students forged relationships through this podcast assignment. They worked as a class to develop a rubric, and they transformed the traditional univocal argument into a set of ideas advanced through discussion, making this nondisposable assignment one way to “truly decolonize the classroom.”

Aoise Stratford also emphasizes the productive potential of building connections in “Adding to Archives, Stories, and Conversations: Dramaturgy, Collaboration, and the Non-terminating Essay Assignment.” Writing from the perspective of a playwright and dramaturg and offering collaborative techniques borrowed from theatre, Stratford details three easily adapted assignments for increasing student agency and engagement. One assignment invites students to participate in the making of the syllabus; another asks for a creative response to a work they’ve explored together; and a third functions as a dramaturg’s casebook, a collaboratively developed collection of resources. Entering into these larger academic conversations, as Stratford shows, individual students produce work that contributes “ongoing pedagogical value for all the learners in the class (including the instructor).”

For Akiyoshi Suzuki, the collaborative framework is even more far-reaching. Offering a wealth of examples to illustrate how literature defies attempts to neatly categorize East and West, Suzuki proposes strategies for building international interpretive partnerships. A joint class of Anglophone and Asian learners might explore connections between Anglophone modernism of the twentieth century and tenth- and eleventh-century Japanese literature; or such a class could discover both cultural affinities and differences reading a classic Anglophone text like *The Great Gatsby* from Eastern and Western vantage points. As Suzuki demonstrates, online resources facilitate projects that foster a deeper understanding of cultural Others.

Melissa Ryan describes another kind of web resource that also seeks to develop cultural competence. She articulates concerns about the relationship between traditional literary analysis assignments and educational privilege,

seeing disposable assignments as in some cases more than a missed opportunity. Reflecting on the capacity of nondisposable assignments to address diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, as well as to make the value of literature more available to all students, she shares lessons learned from some preliminary steps toward rethinking literature assignments.

Allison Cummings considers the topic of nondisposable assignments from the perspective of renewable (human) resources in “Renewable Assignments, From Paper to Trees.” Mapping tools have inspired a range of innovative projects for building ecological literacy; her survey of the field, grounded in pedagogical scholarship around what makes assignments meaningful, describes projects in the Environmental Humanities that foster “an ethic of connection to community or planet.” Her digital Nature Log assignment, for example, pins student contributions to google maps, resulting in a public multimedia story of place; similarly, a video project gives students an opportunity to “read” landscape in a way that generates questions about land use. But at the same time, Cummings is realistic in her view of what such public-facing assignments actually do, and she offers a moving defense of private writing that creators – like her own great grandmother – could have disposed of but chose not to.

James Skidmore also questions whether all writing should be made public in the sense defined by OER advocates. Open licensing may raise questions about protecting the integrity of student work – and in experimenting with renewable assignments in his course titled “Truth – Reconciliation – Story,” he found that students weren’t ready for all he was asking them to do. However, to get students to engage with content dealing with human rights abuses, it’s necessary to minimize the “transactional” element so that students don’t see it as just another requirement on the way to a degree, and rethinking the usual essay (the disposable “receipt” in the work-for-grades transaction) plays a crucial role in this process. Skidmore describes modifying the renewable assignment to balance idealistic goals with the realities of the semester while shifting the focus from product to process.

One of the challenges with nontraditional assignments is, in fact, determining how successful they are. While we may intuitively or anecdotally recognize increased engagement, Kerry Kautzman in “Learning Outcomes of Renewable Assignments” demonstrates an approach to measuring the results. She focuses on two different kinds of renewable assignments: a critical edition to be submitted to an OER anthology of literature offering in-depth study of a canonical text and its socio-historical context, and a blog created by international-domestic student pairs exploring the developing of intercultural competency. Both assignments are writing-intensive, collaborative, multi-step projects, and both result in a digital product available both for the students’ own future use and for assessment purposes. Kautzman models how to analyze

the effectiveness of these assignments using rubrics that describe learning outcomes associated with traditional disposable assignments.

Taken together, these essays offer both scholarly context and practical advice, both the thoughtful rationale for going beyond the traditional essay and lessons learned from a wide range of pedagogical experiments. They gesture toward the possibilities of our digital present, in which enhanced technologies of communication and expression meet our sharpened awareness of what higher education can do, and for whom.

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# Index

## A

*All My Relations*, 4, 5  
Antología abierta de literatura  
hispana, ed. Julia Ward, 114  
Association for the Study of  
Literature and the  
Environment (ASLE), 74

## C

collaborative learning, 9, 24, 28,  
50, 66, 74, 111  
Creative Commons, 72, 95  
Cronon, William, 75

## D

Diaz, Junot, 61  
Digital Humanities, 74  
diversity, equity, and inclusion, ix,  
14, 19, 53, 59  
dramaturgy, 18

## F

Fuchs, Elinor, 23  
funds of knowledge, 58

## H

*hongaku*, 42  
Humanities, value of, vii

## I

intercultural competence, 8, 62,  
114

## K

Kamo no Chōmei, 41

## L

*La Sorcière*, Jules Michelet, 48  
Lin Yutang, 36  
*Love Medicine*, 10  
Lullaby, by Leslie Marmon Silko,  
62

## N

*Norwegian Wood*, Murakami  
Haruki, 48

## O

*Of Mice and Men*, 49  
online teaching, 18, 49, 82, 104  
Open Educational Resources  
(OER), viii, 72, 92, 95, 109  
*Orlando* (play by Sarah Ruhl), 28  
Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 41

## Q

Quarantine, by Rahul Mehta, 64

**R**

Rodriguez, Richard, 57  
rubrics, 6, 25, 65, 111, 116, 118,  
119

**T**

*The Clash of Civilizations and the  
Remaking of World Order*, 40  
*The Geography of Thought*,  
Richard E. Nisbett, 35  
*The Great Gatsby*, 44, 49  
*The Joy Luck Club*, 63  
*The Meaningful Writing Project:  
Learning, Teaching and Writing  
in Higher Education*, 78

*The Reader's Thoreau*, 74  
*Trifles*, 23  
Truth and Reconciliation  
Commission of Canada, 100

**U**

Universal Design for Learning  
(UDL), ix

**W**

Wiley, David, vii, 3, 56, 72, 91, 108

**Z**

Zhang Longxi, 34, 37, 45