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Welcome to the education table, where your burning questions about innovative and inclusive education are answered in ten minutes or less with stories, stats and concrete strategies. I am your host, Katie Novak, and I'm excited today to tackle the question when universally designing instruction, how much choice is too much choice? So I'm going to start off by telling you a very well loved story. When I was little, I absolutely loved Goldilocks and the three bears. You know the one. The one where the little girl gets lost and wanders into the woods and then makes herself at home in a cottage. And when I was little, I didn't quite recognize how incredibly dangerous this was. But bear with me. Pun intended. So Goldilocks goes in and she has very clear, firm goals for herself. She wants a meal and she wants to take a rest.

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And luckily for her, the cottage was designed in a way that she had three options for all of these things. And as it turns out, three is pretty much the perfect number of options. But we'll get into that more in the research and stats section. So Goldilocks tries all three of the porridges, and as the self aware little person she is, she decides that one of them is just right. And she uses the same process for the chair and the bed. And then she falls asleep in the house, which again, is not a safe choice because then she's woken up by the bears and freaks out and goes running off. But that is not the purpose of this story. What's important here is that Goldilocks had perfect opportunities to become more self aware.

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Not only was she incredibly purposeful, but she was strategic and she was resourceful. But it turns out that the design of the bears cottage really set her up for this. So today we're going to be talking about how do we create a perfect number of choices to ensure that our learners are all working towards their goals as well. So let's dive into the stats and the research. As I shared, the three bears nailed it by having only three options. For Goldilocks, this is because providing too much choice actually creates barriers. An amazing researcher and TED talk presenter Barry Swartz from Swarthmore College says, and I quote, one effect, paradoxically, is providing choice produces paralysis rather than liberation. With so many options to choose from, people find it very difficult to choose at all, end quote.

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And then he goes on to explain that if one can overcome this choice paralysis, evidence suggests that the quality of performance will deteriorate with increasing the number of options. So isn't that so wild when we provide too many choices in an effort to minimize barriers, we are actually creating additional barriers. So let's go back to Goldilocks for a second. If Goldilocks rolled into the house and they there were 15 bowls of Porridge, she probably would have been super overwhelmed and she would have just gone hungry or just settled for something. And our students actually struggle with the same. So at this point, you're probably asking, okay, so how much choice then, is too much choice? And research actually has answer. For us, the answer is seven. Seven is too many choices.

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So in 2000, Iyengar and Lepper published a study called when choice is demotivating, can one desire too much of a good thing? In this study, they share some really concrete advice. They argue that choice paralysis and dissatisfaction increase exponentially after a limited array of six choices. So I love that they note a limited array because we have to be really intentional. And that doesn't mean that six is the magic number. It just all goes downhill after six. So that's really the maximum number of choices that you can offer before you get into this space of choice paralysis. And additional research, which was a meta analysis of the impact on choice and motivation published in the psychological Bulletin, suggests that two to four choices is the sweet spot.

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So our task as designers is to leverage this research and ensure we're providing options and choices for our students to work towards firm goals. But those options and choices need to be fewer than six, ideally two to four, so we can actually increase the outcomes of our learners and worry not. There are strategies for doing that effectively and efficiently. So we told a story, we dove into the research and statistics, and now it's time for the strategies. So the first thing, the most important thing about universal design for learning is to always start with the firm goal. We do not want to get into providing options and being flexible until we're able to say, this is what is non negotiable, this is what all students have to know, or this is what they have to be able to do.

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And UDL becomes a lot easier if you start off by identifying the goal or the standard that students are working toward now. The next is to reflect on what that lesson would look like if there were no options and choices. So, for example, imagine that all students are working towards learning how to write a summary, and in the original lesson they're going to read an informative text that outlines the process for writing a summary as an example. And I want you to think about who would be excluded if that was the only pathway. If were to hand out a hard copy of procedures to write a summary. You can imagine that in a really inclusive class that would exclude students who are not decoding at grade level are multilingual, who struggle with visual processing, for example.

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And so we have to think, is there another way for students to learn what makes an effective summary? And of course, there are lots of different ways. So you can then provide options to students using an academic game of would you rather, you can say, the goal is that you have to be able to produce an objective summary. And I want to make sure all of you know what makes a really effective objective summary before we start. And then you can ask them to decide whether they would prefer to read a hard copy of the text and annotate it. Maybe read the hard copy of the text while listening to a digital version so they can hear the pronunciation. Maybe they want to watch a video or explore some high quality resources on their own.

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And what we want to do is say to students, these are all options, and which of these do you feel like would be the best thing to support you and to challenge you today? Now, like Goldilocks, students probably need to try all of the different options so they really understand the benefits and the challenges of each and how that plays to their strengths or their needs, because that will allow them to consider the goal and the task, and which option is the most responsible choice. Now, we're only going to have between two and four options, and so it would not be outrageous to have students try all of those. And when I was in the classroom, I used to call this the no thank you bite.

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And I would tell my students the story of Goldilocks and the fact that she tried all the different bowls of porridge before she decided what worked best for her. And the truth is, if the weather were different, she might have chosen differently, because context is really important, and on a cold day, you might want some really hot porridge. So, to review, we want to start off with a firm goal, and we want to communicate that to learners. The next is to ideate an academic game of would you rather and think about what are the potential pathways that would lead students to the same goal? And then allow students to explore and take no thank you bites of the different options. And once they become familiar with the options, then they can make much more responsible decisions.

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So, for example, imagine teaching students two to four ways that they could take notes during explicit instruction, or different ways that they could annotate or make their thinking visible when they're accessing high quality text, or even how they can share their understanding of content under study. So they might write a response or record a video or make a presentation, but they have to know how to do all of those things well first. And once you get those options and choices down, you can begin to offer an additional option, whereas students can come up with an alternative that wasn't a part of the original choices. So make your own porridge as you will. So if we as educators are always coming up with the options, we might not get it right. But when we say this is the goal, this is non negotiable.

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Here are some options and if you want to propose another pathway that will lead you to the same place, then I am open to that. As long as the option leads them to the same firm goals. I say go for it. Try it. And when you use these practices, you can create a flexible, inclusive classroom where students really do have opportunities to be creative, to be resourceful, to be reflective, and to determine what works for them. But the key is to try to balance out those options and choices so there's no more than six, so they really can try them all. So give it a try in your own learning environment and let me know how it goes. In this episode of the education table, we answered the question how much choice is too much choice in UdL?

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Thank you so much for tuning in. I'm so grateful you took a little bit of time to listen. If you loved it, please subscribe so you can get notified about future episodes.