

Exploring the Use of Personalized Learning Plans in the Journalism Capstone Environment

Sally Haney
School of Communication Studies
Mount Royal University

This paper assesses the role of student-authored Learning Plans (LPs) in a senior journalism capstone course at an undergraduate university in western Canada. Students, working as senior editors of a community online news publication in a masthead course, developed and regularly updated individualized LPs. Their LPs were used as a means to strategize and revise learning activities, assess progress, and negotiate grades. A qualitative analysis of data revealed ways in which students engaged with their LPs. Results suggest the plans played a role in increasing student responsibility for learning, creating flexibility for students to manage their unique roles, and helping students to better identify their learning achievements and challenges. The analysis also showed a high degree of alignment between student-proposed evaluations and professor-determined evaluations of student learning. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of ways LPS could be incorporated in other environments, as well as some cautions about implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Designing new courses can be both a daunting and invigorating endeavor. This study has its roots in one such course—a fourth-year capstone entitled *Online Editorial Board* in which fifteen senior students assumed editorial roles associated with managing our journalism program's online news website. The new course presented a formidable array of “real” problems for the student editors and me, their faculty supervisor. We would need to simultaneously learn and manage the site's content management system, edit dozens of incoming content packages, develop expertise in delivering online content, determine a manageable publishing schedule, and create an effective

communications plan to support information flow among the editors, their professors and more than 150 student contributors across the program.

Prior to teaching the course, I investigated learner-centered strategies that would hopefully calm the chaos, promote learning, and support students in assuming more control over their learning. I wished not to *do this course to them*, but rather give them space to find their own way into this experiential learning endeavor, especially since each was assuming a unique editorial role. I turned to personalized learning plans (LPs) whereby each student authored a detailed and personalized set of learning activities that aligned

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Correspondence: Sally Haney, Mount Royal University, shaney@mtroyal.ca

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with the overarching objectives of the course—to develop students’ editorial, production, and leadership skills.

Two semesters later, informal feedback from several students suggested many experienced learning gains as a result of authoring their own LPs. Wishing to move beyond these snippets of feedback—or what Silverman (2005) calls the “anecdotalism” that sometimes plagues our qualitative claims—I designed a classroom-based Scholarship of Teaching and Learning or SoTL study¹ that would support a more rigorous examination of the role of student-authored LPs in a capstone environment. The research questions were: (1) How do students use learning plans in a senior production course? and (2) How do learning plans impact assessment, evaluation and learning?

THE LITERATURE

Before exploring the literature on learning plans in post-secondary education, it is important to provide context with respect to the journalism education landscape. This study comes at a time when calls for journalism education reform are urgent and numerous (Picard, 2015; Lynch, 2015). Journalism educators have faced ongoing criticism—external and from within the academy—about whether their programs are sufficiently innovative, relevant and academically sound. While Martin (2011) captures journalism educators’ desire to effect meaningful change to the curriculum, she also notes difficulties, including resistance by some in the professoriate in making even modest alterations. In their survey of media-writing instructors, Popovich and Massé (2007) highlight this resistance, especially among faculty at U.S. accredited institutions. This *resistance to change* theme continued when a group of foundations that offers grants in journalism education and innovation published an open letter

¹ An accessible review of doing SoTL research is offered in Peter Felton’s 2013 paper, Principles of good practice in SoTL, in *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal*, 1(1), 121-25.

to American university presidents. In it, Newton et al. (2012) criticized journalism educators and administrators for not responding quickly enough to changes in industry. The authors, in imploring journalism schools to “recreate themselves ... as news creators and innovators” (para. 2), also proposed a solution whereby journalism schools would invite top industry professionals to play critical mentoring roles, similar to how interns are mentored by physicians in teaching hospitals. These, and other notable calls for change fuel scholarly investigations into fundamental questions about the nature of journalism, the role and purpose of journalism education (Deuze, 2006), and the curriculum itself (Skowran, 2009; Robinson, 2013; Claussen, 2009; Lynch, 2015).

We hope the changes we make in journalism education result in improved student learning. A review of the literature suggests the use of personalized learning plans, or LPs, benefit learners on several fronts. Results from Lui’s research (2005), which saw 30 students develop individualized learning objectives in an undergraduate course, suggest LPs not only worked well to focus students on the “intellectual goals of the course” but may have also promoted deep learning. Lui’s description of LPs captures how they were understood and operationalized in the present study:

A learning plan is an agreement between the learner and the instructor in which students outline their individual learning objectives, strengths they bring to the course, competencies they wish to develop, and what they are willing to do in pursuit of their objectives. These plans are highly self-directed; they act as a mechanism for learners to build on past experience and determine needs as they carry out learning activities. They can also be used to negotiate for grades. Typically, learning that is self-directed and based on individually developed

objectives leads to a deeper, more permanent understanding. (para. 2)

Personalized LPs align with a student-centered inquiry-based approach to learning and are further described as useful in helping students identify individualized objectives, strengths, areas for improvement, and opportunities for future learning. Challis (2000) offers an extensive guide to setting up LPs and suggests the process allows learners to “prioritize and justify areas for development which may be set within both individual and team priorities” (p. 235). Lemieux (2001) utilized learning contracts in a cross-section of social work courses and reports their use increased feelings of student empowerment and accountability, while also shifting some power from instructor to student as the learning contracts were used to negotiate grades. Malone’s extensive four-year mixed methods study, which drew on data from 139 early childhood education students, indicates students believed personalized LPs “helped them learn more about their educational needs, prompted them to become more independent learners, and increased their understanding of course content” (p. 54, 2008b). Malone further reported students perceived LPs as playing an important role in the development of their critical thinking skills.

While the use of LPs may well assist the journalism educator in supporting the development of students’ independent learning and critical thinking skills, such plans are not without criticism. Malone (2008a) and Schapiro (2003) warn educators not to assume all learners can independently chart and manage their goals without timely support from and critical collaboration with their teachers. Schapiro questions programs that too readily adopt the self-directed learning paradigm, and reminds us that students come to learning environments with varying degrees of readiness. Perhaps recognizing the unevenness of student readiness, Malone (2008a) operationalized LPs in a directed manner in which students were advised to draw on detailed lists

of existing learning goals tied to professional practice, as well as associated learning activities. Malone reminds those considering personal LPs that educators who use them effectively devote large amounts of time to their management and evaluation. Brookfield (1995) identifies another pitfall, suggesting that if improperly executed, LPs can be viewed by students as a tool used by lazy teachers. Brookfield and others (Dochy, Segers, Gijbels, & Struyven, 2007) remind practitioners that the use of such plans demands rigor. Dochy et al. further advise that when introducing new modes of assessment, students must be able to learn about the new mode and be given time to understand its goals. Implementing a learning plan represents for many students not only a new way of approaching learning within a course, but also a new way of assessing for learning through ongoing reflexivity and revision of learning objectives and related activities.

COURSE CONTEXT

To understand how data were collected and analysed, it is important to review how LPs were used in this course. Fifteen students, enrolled in a fourth-year capstone course entitled Online Editorial Board, were provided materials and guidance to author their plans. In addition to writing an “envisioning” statement about their hopes and aspirations in their new roles, each student was required to also detail specific editorial, production and leadership objectives and associated activities they felt would help them achieve overarching course goals, which included students being able to effectively work with colleagues (leadership), effectively edit contributor content (editorial), and effectively share and promote digital content with an audience (production). They were also given a list of learning activities (Table 1) that could assist them in achieving their stated objectives.

Students did not have to choose from the learning activity examples; the lists were simply provided to stimulate ideas. I was committed to giving them a lot of room to find their way into

Table 1
Examples of Learning Activities Designed to Help Students Achieve Personalized Learning Objectives

Editorial activities	Production activities	Leadership activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will develop special weekly thematic content from contributors from all years of the program. • I will independently research, report on, and produce 4 content packages through the semester. • I will research and incorporate innovative ways to produce interactive content. • I will engage in meaningful interactions with our audience through the regular use of social media, polls, or surveys. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will refresh content in my section 3 times per week until mid-October, after which I will move to a daily refresh goal. • I will ensure % of the content I am responsible for is associated with awesome visuals. • I will ensure any text I have vetted or produced, is easy to scan, accurate, and journalistically sound. • I will take responsibility for learning our content management system asap. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will work diligently to be a positive helpful leader. • I will not raise my voice with contributors or colleagues. • I will offer constructive feedback to contributors. • I will turn to the literature on mentorship and leadership to further expand my leadership skills, sharing my findings with colleagues. • I will attend all editorial meetings. • I will develop a communications plan designed to promote connection among the online editorial team.

the course. All composed their plans and in the second week of class uploaded them to a private area in the university's learning management system. It was at this point that I reviewed the plans to ensure each student's proposed learning activities not only aligned with course goals, but also were achievable and sufficiently robust. This check for fairness and feasibility resulted in some students being asked to include more or different types of learning activities in their plans while others were asked to reduce or change some planned activities. Students were also reminded to view their plans as fluid; they would be given opportunities to change aspects of the plans through the term as they learned more about the unique and often changing demands of their unique editorial positions. My hope was that the learning plan process would not only make more visible to student editors their learning in the course, it would also help me better identify their learning challenges. Rosenberry and Vicker (2007) in their review of capstones in mass communications summarize what educators aim to do in such courses — help students integrate and synthesize past knowledge, encourage them to apply theory to real-world situations, support their acquisition of new knowledge, and

assist them in their transitions beyond the university. To this end, it was my hope that the use of such plans would serve as both a teaching and learning support to all involved.

Evaluating student progress in relation to their LPs was both challenging and time-consuming. Because their editorial roles were unique, one plan tended to look markedly different from the next. In addition to working with students in class each week, I also met with each editor three times through the semester to assess and evaluate progress. These sessions were recorded. At each of the review meetings, students took me on “a tour” of their learning, and were asked about the degree to which they were achieving their stated learning objectives. Students were also required to present evidence to support their claims. Evidence included a range of items, such as completed content packages, in-class presentations on new technologies and trends, and logs and surveys detailing their interactions with others. After a review of the evidence, we used the grading schema (Table 2) to negotiate and determine their grades. Each of the meetings determined 25% of each editor's grade, totaling 75% of their final grade.

These face-to-face meetings also resulted in some students adjusting existing learning activities, introducing new ones, and in a few cases, scaling back. The remaining 25% of the course was tied to student reflections (10%) and participation in discussion board forums about theory and practice (15%).

METHODOLOGY

As my role in this course was both teacher and researcher, I took the necessary steps to protect students from the conflicts that sometimes arise with this dual role. While all students used LPs in this course, not all agreed to be participate in the study, with one of fifteen opting out. The study was conducted at a mid-sized Canadian university, received institutional human research ethics clearance, and was supported by the university's scholarship of teaching and learning institute.

All of the research data for this study existed within the course. In other words, students were not asked to participate in any activities that

extended beyond the course. Furthermore, students were assured I would not know who agreed to participate in the study until after final grades were submitted. Data were drawn from a number of areas, including electronic Blackboard journals containing the students' LPs, as well as their various course deliverables including stories and research papers; this paper concentrates primarily on data provided in student answers to end-of-semester reflection questions indicated in Table 3, audio recordings of student-professor evaluation meetings, as well as end-of-semester letters that students wrote to their successors.

The data were examined using interpretive description, a qualitative exploratory approach common in the applied health research field where "the researcher is invited to work within pressing problems of his or her own disciplinary field and to generate credible and defensible new knowledge in a form that will be meaningful and relevant to the applied practice context" (Thorne, 2008, p. 51). Interpretive description

Table 2

Grading Schema Used to Negotiate Grades in Learning Plan Evaluation Meetings

Student is meeting all or nearly all objectives, responding to all challenges with an open and inquiring attitude. A+, A, A-

Student is meeting most objectives, and is actively working on revising plan to meet all objectives. Student demonstrating a positive and open attitude toward the process. B+, B, B-

Student is meeting some objectives, but is not fully engaged on working to revise learning plan to meet stated objectives. C+, C, C-

Student is not meeting most learning objectives and/or is not available to revise learning plan. D, F

Table 3

End-of-semester Reflection Questions Used to Analyse Student Experiences with Using Learning Plans

What did you think about using the learning plan?

How did the learning plan (process) impact your learning?

What would you have changed to make the learning plan process better?

Who did you think most steered your learning in this course? How so?

Did you take on any risks or learning challenges you might not have in the past? If yes, please explain.

If not already answered, what helped your learning in this course?

If not already answered, what hindered your learning in this course?

borrowed from grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography, and offers the journalism educator a rigorous yet flexible framework with which to examine the pressing pedagogical and practice-based issues facing our discipline. In sum, the very real student-run online newsroom/classroom is to the journalism educator what the clinical setting is to the nursing scholar — a “real” space filled with problems in need of solving.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What follows is a discussion of benefits and challenges associated with implementing student-authored learning plans in a journalism capstone course. The results and discussion focus on students’ engagement with LPs, as well as the author’s observations about implementation, assessment and evaluation issues. Also included is a brief discussion of possible application of LPs in other learning contexts.

Student-identified Benefits of Personalized Learning Plans

A thematic analysis of data revealed students reported more benefits than challenges with respect to authoring and managing personalized LPs in the capstone course. The majority of students reported the learning plan process had been helpful. Further study revealed the emergence of benefits in four key areas—choice, accountability, organization, and assessment.

Theme 1—Choice.

Most student editors indicated that authoring their own LPs helped them achieve course goals by giving them choice and flexibility to chart their own paths through individualized activities. Student M wrote, “I thought it was helpful because you create your own goals and deadlines, so what you do is on your own terms, not a strict course plan.” Student H’s sentiments were similar as she recounted having flexibility in choosing her learning plan activities. “I enjoyed picking and choosing what content I would be producing myself.” Student J’s enthusiasm seemed directly

connected to the freedom afforded by the process: “(T)his allowed me to experiment with my learning, to take chances, to make mistakes, and to grow. Again, in a more structured course, I think my learning experience would have been different.” Several editors also remarked their LPs allowed them to better respond to problems as they arose because the editors could, with permission from their professor, revise their objectives and related learning activities. Student E described this evolving process as effective “because we were able to re-adjust our personal goals throughout the semester in order to adhere to the ever-changing roles as an editor.” Two students also connected flexibility and choice in the course to creativity and freedom, with one indicating her LP allowed her to wander off “on my own to learn in the way that I did.” Interestingly, while the implementation of the LPs required detailed planning, review and revision by students, no student in the study described the LP process as structured. The approach appeared to instead obscure for learners what was a scaffolded and structured process that required ongoing facilitation from their professor.

Theme 2—Accountability.

Most editors commingled the terms “accountability” and “responsibility” when discussing the impacts of using LPs in this course. Whereas Zdanis (1998) suggests responsibility can be shared while accountability can rest with no more than one person, students used the terms interchangeably. The majority of students reported they, as opposed to others, steered their learning in the course. They also indicated the LP promoted personal accountability. Student B, who at times reported struggling in the course to stay motivated and focused, wrote: “It made me more responsible for the things I was doing. It made me think harder about the things I was doing in a more critical way.” Several editors expanded on the LP’s role in developing their sense of responsibility for their learning, as evidenced by Student E:

I felt more responsible and more in control of my grade and work put into the course. The feeling of personal responsibility ultimately made my role as editor feel more of a job than a regular class because there were specific expectations of me, and certain responsibilities that I placed on myself. It also played an important part in allowing me to identify my capabilities.

All students were required to attend regular meetings with me to discuss and evaluate their objectives and associated learning activities throughout the term. Several students identified these meetings as helping them to maintain responsibility for their own learning, as indicated by Student J who wrote, “I know I was ‘checking in’ with the instructor by way of updating my learning plan throughout the semester. But the learning plan also forced me to ‘check in’ with myself regarding my progress.” This comment and several others illustrated how some students attributed their success in areas of responsibility and accountability to the instrument itself—the learning plan—rather than the decisions they were making and executing.

Theme 3—Organization.

Half of the students described the learning plan process as helping them to stay organized. Most editors fulfilled the requirement to upload their completed LPs to Blackboard, to regularly update them, and to evaluate them in regular one-on-one discussions with me, their professor. Student E’s comments were illustrative of many who found the process especially helpful on the organizational front:

I enjoyed using the learning plan. It was like a checklist for me ... it helped me stay on track. It provided me the space to really sort out what I wanted to take away from the course. Especially when it came to course goals.

Student J in an early-semester survey conveyed some concerns about staying organized, later reported that the LP had helped her stay on track. Another student indicated she appreciated “having it all written down” and being able to “go back and check” goals and progress through the term. Even Student I, who described herself as disorganized, said the LP served a purpose, as it made more visible some of her challenges: “It affected my learning by showing me how poorly I act out what I plan on doing as well as showing me the importance of organization and time management.” Despite an overall appreciation that the LP helped students stay organized, at least one student indicated she sometimes forgot to check and update her online plan—an indication perhaps that not all students were equally engaged with the process.

Theme 4 - Assessment and evaluation.

In reflecting on using LPs, students wrote that they appreciated not only the regular conversations they had with me about their LPs, but also appreciated having a “say” in determining how they would be evaluated. While I indicated to students that I was the final arbiter of grades, I also invited them after each evaluation period to review the grading schema (Table 2) and indicate the grade that they believed best represented their learning. In doing so, each was also required to review and present evidence that supported their learning claims. For example, if an editor claimed she had met her objective to improve her copy editing skills, she knew she would need to present evidence of improvement vis-à-vis a quality assurance report from the QA editor or results of improved online test scores over time. In most cases, students presented sufficient evidence to support their claims, and I agreed with most students’ assessments of their work. One student said she still preferred a “professor-based” evaluation model, adding she didn’t think the open learning plan model would work well in some university courses. However, the majority of students indicated a preference for this approach to

assessment and evaluation, represented by the following comments.

- “I liked that I got to outline how I wanted to be evaluated and how I would progress through the semester.” (Student D).
- “(T)he learning plan affected my learning by allowing me to properly assess my own work” (Student C).
- “I was able to chart and get a good sense of my own growth in more of a piece-meal fashion, rather than simply trying to reflect on everything I had accomplished ... at the end of the semester.” (Student J)

With these comments, students seemed to indicate satisfaction with a course that allowed them to both evaluate their progress by regularly reviewing their learning objectives and associated activities, while also taking part in regular and active discussions about their progress. In sum, the process represented a more formative rather than summative approach to assessment and evaluation.

Student-identified Challenges of Personalized Learning Plans

A review of the data suggests the use of LPs in this capstone course resulted in few challenges. While nearly half of the students initially rejected the idea of authoring their own LPs, a comprehensive review of their written reflections and audiotaped conversations showed that anxieties and misunderstandings dissipated over time. Student A reflected, “I wasn’t sure how making up a list of things I was going to be graded on was going to work. It ended up working well...” Similarly, Student E expressed reservations about deviating from a “classic format of structure in a class” but came to appreciate taking over some control of learning with “a less formal learning structure where not only the professor has a say in our work and grade assessment, but we have a say.” However, for at least one student, the act of authoring and maintaining the learning plan created tension. Like others in the course, Student L arrived with little to no experience with using a learning plan. Student L suggested the

LP method didn’t help to keep her on track when motivation levels waned. Student L had done well in the first part of the course (A-) but struggled in the second part (B-). A review of the notes taken during the second assessment period showed the student was especially frustrated with the lack of contributor content arriving in her section of our online news publication. The slowdown, which required the editor to shift from “editor” to “reporter” role mid-semester was difficult because she lacked motivation to temporarily return to reporting duties.

The big complaint I have is that it was almost too relaxed ... and I suffered a little bit in the middle of the course when I didn’t have any deadlines. Obviously it wasn’t just the learning plan’s fault though, I am to blame as well. But on the flip side, I also gained some experience following my own direction which I am sure will help me later in life.

In the second evaluation conversation, we strategized a plan to “move forward” that would help Student L generate content in a creative way that might help her to feel more motivated. The student seized the amended plan and managed to meet all objectives in the final portion of the course, earning an A in the third and final evaluation. In studying course grades, this pattern was common with 13 of 14 study participants receiving the same or better grades as they moved from one evaluation period to the next.

Professor Experience with Utilizing Learning Plans in the Capstone Course

Educators interested in utilizing personalized LPs will want to consider a number of issues, including the time it takes to coach students to write their own plans, to co-manage the plans, and to develop fair and responsive assessment and evaluation measures. Educators will also want to consider whether LPs offer a good pedagogical fit in their own course contexts.

Implementation issues.

A real challenge of working with LPs was the time and effort required to enact their use. It took many hours to develop instructional materials to assist students. Before writing their own LPs, students were given several examples of learning objectives as well as examples of the types of learning activities that could support students working toward those objectives. Several semesters later, I provide many more examples to students, though I worry that providing too many examples of objectives and learning activities can have the effect of constraining students' views of what is possible in creating a highly individualized plan. In other words, do exemplars diminish a student's ability to author an innovative and personalized plan?

Professors who are considering enacting LPs should also plan to invest a lot of time in the first few weeks of the course to review student-authored plans and offer detailed feedback. As detailed earlier, when students submit first drafts of their LPs, some propose learning goals and associated activities that are much too large in scope, while others' objectives and activities are too small. Students also require help in connecting their LPs to overarching course goals. Most of these issues are ameliorated after I review the learning plans and negotiate changes. But this requires a lot of heavy lifting in the first part of the term.

Professors considering the use of LPs will also want to spend time helping students to think about what it means to gather evidence to back the claims students make about their learning. For example, an important pillar of this capstone course is the development of leadership and collaboration skills. Students need ongoing instruction about how to gather evidence to assess their growth in these areas. This is why, for example, I require the majority of student editors to actively solicit feedback from their peers. Over time, most editors become adept at gathering detailed evidence meant to support their learning claims during evaluation meetings. By the end of term,

the majority of students arrive at these 20-minute sessions with a variety of evidence such as activity spreadsheets, survey results, screenshots of e-mails and text messages they have shared and received from reporters, quiz scores, research presentations about best practices in online journalism, and informal annotated bibliographies about aspects of online journalism. The gathering of evidence is meant to demonstrate the degree to which they are engaging with and in many cases meeting their personalized LP objectives.

Assessment and evaluation issues.

Colleagues and reviewers have asked many questions about evaluation and assessment of learning in a course that utilizes LPs, which by design are highly personalized and support unique learning journeys for the students who use them. While addressed earlier, what follows is further analysis of how assessment conversations played out, how grades were negotiated, and a brief discussion about agreement levels between student-negotiated grades and professor-awarded grades.

During the semester, I met with each student at regular intervals. In each session, using the LPs to frame the discussion, we assessed and evaluated their learning. Editors used these conversations to both highlight their editorial, production and leadership achievements while also identifying their struggles. Each conversation gave us the opportunity to both celebrate successes and to reframe struggles as rich problems worthy of further study.

These conversations helped to reveal how many students had gone above and beyond their proposed learning objectives and activities over the course of the term. For example, some student editors who were actively engaged in their editing responsibilities chose also to develop and produce additional digital content for the publication. There were many other examples of editors surpassing course requirements including one editor who interviewed local online news experts and then shared those findings with the editorial team, at least two editors developing

and sharing research presentations that explored current issues in journalism practice, and numerous examples of editors who actively supported struggling peers during especially hectic editing periods. I doubt some of these achievements would have come to my attention had we not used LPs to frame our regular discussions.

An unexpected consequence of the LP conversations was that I also gained a much clearer view to some of the larger struggles faced by our senior students. Unprompted, some shared with me their feelings of being overwhelmed, stressed, and in some cases even depressed. While a few of these struggles were playing out in the capstone course, more often, they were broader in scope, relating to money and relationship problems, academic pressures, and worrying about life beyond university. I used these conversations to help guide students to on-campus resources so that they might better navigate problems that were playing out both within and beyond the course walls.

Colleagues have queried about the fairness and rigour of using individualized LPs to inform grading. They have asked whether students might intentionally set easily achievable objectives and learning activities, and then negotiate high grades based on meeting those objectives. I mitigated this possibility by carefully reviewing the LPs early in the semester, and sometimes in consultation with students, requiring them to include more rigorous objectives and associated

learning activities based on program expectations of where they need to be, academically, in a capstone course.

Analysis of the assessment sessions (shown in Figure 1) shows there was a high degree of agreement between student-proposed and professor-awarded grades. In 71% of the sessions, I agreed with and entered student-proposed grades because students had presented evidence that backed their learning claims. In 19% of the sessions, I raised student-proposed grades because students presented evidence that showed they had met more learning objectives than they had initially proposed. Finally, in 10% of the cases, I lowered student-proposed grades after students were unable to back with evidence their claims about learning progress.

Using Learning Plans in other course contexts.

Student-authored LPs offer a good fit for any course whereby students are expected to synthesize and apply knowledge in the field. If professors are interested in providing students with overarching course goals while also giving them a high degree of autonomy, creativity and ownership of their learning journeys, then the LP framework will likely provide a good fit. I would not recommend the use of LPs to faculty who gravitate to course structures that are highly rigid or require students to engage in nearly identical learning activities. Furthermore, I would

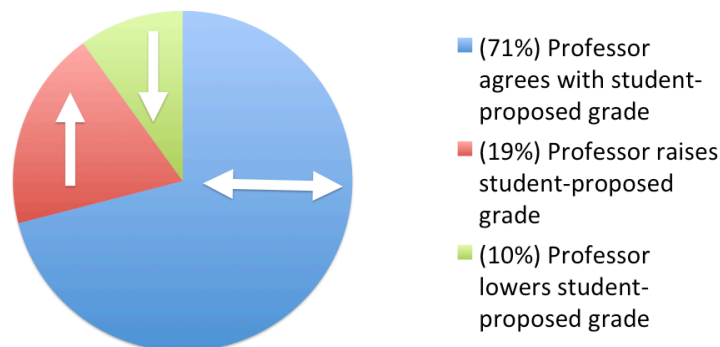


Figure 1. Forty-two negotiated grading sessions.

not recommend their use in large classes. I estimate each student's learning plan requires at least 30 minutes of review early in the semester, as well as 60 minutes of student-professor review through the term. That said, professors could consider using LPs to support specific modules in any given course. I would also encourage their application in more junior courses though in a more scaled-back way. This could give students in our programs much more practice at designing, steering and evaluating their learning using an evidence-based model to track their progress.

CONCLUSION

The learning plan process provided students a framework that supported learning by helping them to set, revise and evaluate learning activities that supported overarching course goals. An important takeaway included how the process created more space for formative assessment. My conversations with students revolved around what was working, what wasn't, and how students could revise and move forward with their learning. These assessment conversations not only helped students understand their progress, but also allowed all involved to make timely adjustments. Assessment became much more about making changes to facilitate future learning, rather than wrestling over whether any discreet activity was a C- or B+ effort. In fact, no individual deliverables tied to learning plan activities were assigned letter grades.

In sum, the LP process supported a holistic and student-driven approach to learning within a capstone course. Though this model requires considerable time to develop, implement and assess, I have continued to use LPs and see evidence that the approach promotes engagement and self-directed learning. Each semester, I make small changes in their execution, the most recent being that I now ask students to produce a nominal number of content packages with specific deadlines.

My hope is that the findings in this study encourage colleagues to explore the learning plan

model as a way to better manage environments in which students assume unique roles and activities in experiential courses. It is hoped the results of this study, though classroom-based and non-generalizable, offer the communications educator a view to a framework designed to support and deepen ways of student thinking *and* doing that hopefully follow learners beyond the conclusion of any given course.

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