Help or Hindrance?

An examination of how student-authored learning plans impacted student learning in a capstone course
Today’s presentation

- Introduction (1 minute)
- Situate the study (5 minutes)
- A brief look at the literature (5 minutes)
- Methods and Lens (5 minutes)
- Results and Discussion (20 minutes)
- Conclusions (5 minutes)
- Q & A session (20 minutes)
Introductions

- About me
  - Sally Haney, Assistant Professor,
  - Faculty of Communication Studies, Journalism
  - Mount Royal University
  - Former journalist with CBC
  - Teaching for 11 years

- About this presentation: student-authored learning plans, not earning plans $$$$$$$
Study Genesis

- 2011
- New position, and a new course
- Online Editorial Board
- In a few weeks, 15 senior students would arrive and assume 15 editor roles
- They would manage CalgaryJournal.ca, a relatively new online news site – a sister site to our long-standing print edition
For students:

- Learn the publication’s content management system
- Edit dozens of content packages submitted by students in core journalism courses in years 2, 3, and 4
- Develop expertise in delivery of online content on a variety of platforms
- Understand ubiquitous 24/7 online news environment
- Develop leadership skills by interacting with other editors, contributing journalists, professors
- Engage with a real audience
Initial reaction?
Calm the chaos

- Rather than “do this course to them” how could I develop an environment where they might exercise much control over their learning in this turbulent environment?

- With help from ADC, began researching idea of student-authored learning plans
Learning Plan defined

- an agreement between the learner and the instructor
- 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
- highly self-directed;
LPs act as 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.

Evidence they might lead to a deeper, more permanent understanding. - Lui, 2005
Used learning plans for 2 semesters (prior to study)

- I ❤️ learning plans!

- Move past anecdotalism

- Assess in a more robust way whether personalized learning plans, or PLPs, help or hinder learning in a capstone course

- With help from the Nexen Scholar Program at MRU, took the course into full-blown SoTL study in fall of 2012
Study aimed to uncover the impacts of using student-authored learning plans by offering:

(a) Insights into how students use learning plans in a senior production course, and,

(b) Analysis of the ways in which student-authored learning plans might help and/or hinder learning.
Literature review

- Host of potential benefits in variety of disciplines
  - promote deep learning
  - help learners to prioritize
  - Increase (self-perceived) critical thinking abilities
  - Increase student accountability and independence
  - Increase student empowerment

  - Challis, 2000; Lemieux, 2001; Lui, 2005; Malone, 2008
Some challenges too

- Student readiness
  “Students may have that disposition but may not have the knowledge and skill needed to design, manage, and direct their own learning.”
  - Schapiro, 2003

- Learning plans take a lot of time on the management and evaluation front

- Used improperly, may be used as tool for lazy teachers (Brookfield, 1995)
How learning plans were used

- Students authored comprehensive learning plans, submitting to private Blackboard space early in the term.
- I reviewed to ensure rigour.
- Then met each student in months 2, 3 and 4.
- In each 15- to 30-minute meeting, students asked to bring to the table “evidence” of the degree to which they were meeting their objectives (leadership, editorial, production).
Example of a goal, activity, and evidence.

If students were meeting all or nearly all objectives, they would receive an A; most a B; some, a C; few, a D; none, an F.

Each meeting concluded with awarding a grade worth 25% of final grade.

In all cases, students were asked about the grade. In nearly all cases, I agreed with their assessments and entered the grade.

At end of each conversation, we had opportunity to also revise learning plan to meet changing demands of their roles.
The data from 14 participants (of 15)

- Early and **end-of-semester surveys**
- **Student deliverables**
  - Content packages
  - Presentations
  - Feedback from their peers
- **Learning plans** (located online) and subsequent entries and revisions through the term.
- **Letters written to their successors**
  - “Dear incoming editor...”
Methodological Approach

- Interpretive Description (nursing scholarship)

- “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
Results and Discussion

- The Benefits
  - Choice
  - Responsibility
  - Organization
  - Assessment

- The Challenges
  - Inexperience
  - Enabling scaled-back efforts?
  - Academic risk-taking?
Choice

“(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.”

- Student J
Choice

Student E described the process as effective “because we were able to readjust our personal goals throughout the semester in order to adhere to the ever-changing roles as an editor.”
Choice

Another student indicated her learning plan allowed her to wander off “on my own to learn in the way that I did.”
Accountability/Responsibility

- Majority of students reported they as opposed to others steered their learning in the course.
- Most discussed increased personal responsibility/accountability.
- Some suggested the LP process made the experience feel like a real job, not a course.
- Some also experienced what might have been a shift in responsibility.
Accountability continued

“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.”

- Student L
Organization

- Majority talked about LP process as providing them a “check list” “check back” “stay organized”

- More disorganized students saw benefits as well:

  “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.”

  - Student I
Assessment

- “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)
Inexperience

- Majority were uncomfortable at first
- Inexperience with authoring their own learning
- How can one author a plan when unfamiliar with role?
- Misunderstandings for some about rigidity of plans, not realizing the plans can (and should) evolve with the roles
Letters to Successors

- “You’ll want to make sure you manage yourself and not overburden yourself.”
- “When you go to create a plan ... make sure you’re realistic. Only write what you really think you can accomplish or you never will reach your goals....”
- “(K)eep your deliverables to a minimum, and try to do them early in the semester.”
Risk-taking

The act of accepting an editor role with CalgaryJournal.ca was viewed as a risk.

Student J added a year prior to the course, she would have run away from the opportunity because of a lack of self-confidence.
Risk-taking

Although students had control over learning plan, they had little control over all the elements that were beyond their grasp – the moving parts, the fact they depend on others for content, working so closely with their professor, and one another.
Some closing thoughts

Calming the chaos

LPs helped learning. As used in this course, LPs helped students stay organized, exercise choice, and take responsibility for their own learning.

From a course management side of things, learning plans provided a strong framework with which to approach what was a messy learning endeavor.

The LP process also invited students into the assessment arena.
Assessment conversations about LPs not only helped students understand their progress in the course, but also allowed all involved to make adjustments to the learning plans.

Assessment seemed to become much more about making changes to facilitate future learning, rather than wrestling over whether any past project was a B or B+.

Next paper unearth data from those recorded conversations about assessment.
Transitioning to the “real world”

Using LPs in capstone courses may well position students to more effectively transition into settings that are in search of people who know how to set and monitor goals, assess knowledge gaps, and know what it means to marshal resources to fill those gaps, and change goals when necessary.

Transitioning into journalism – demand for innovation, creativity. Future study plans could include examining LPs role in fostering innovation and creativity.
Questions

- Would a learning plan work in any of the courses you teach?
- Is it a problem that fourth year students have no experience authoring such plans?
- Do you see any gaps in this study, as presented?
- Other questions, comments?