

The somethingness of learning plans: A scholarship of teaching and learning project

Abstract

Every attempt to teach or learn occurs in the context of what the learner already knows. This project investigates how the use of learning plans (constructed through instructor and student collaboration) facilitated learning. These plans were used as a means to identify previous knowledge and to motivate students to reflect on their own learning process. During fall semester 2004, 30 undergraduate students developed learning plans in the undergraduate course, "Training Systems in Business and Industry". Results suggest that learning plans facilitate learning by focusing students on the goals of the course. At the end of the semester, students evaluated the use of learning plans. Data imply that learning plans were helpful to their learning process and promoted deep learning.

One important factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. “Ascertain this and teach accordingly” (Ausubel, 1968 as cited in Cerbin, 2000). Learning plans are one way of discovering what the student already knows and what they hope to acquire from a college course. Knowles (1986) was a strong advocate for the use of learning *contracts*. However a contract often implies a legal and bureaucratic focus. The term *learning plan* is more accurate in describing the outcome of a process of negotiation (Williams & Williams, 1999). 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. The structure imposed on this learning experience included predetermined course objectives and assignments. However students fashioned their own version of objectives. Learning plans are a vehicle for making the planning of learning experiences a mutual undertaking between learner and teacher (Knowles, 1986).

The purpose of this paper is to describe how learning plans were used in the context of an overall teaching approach in an undergraduate level course.

Project Summary

In April, 2003 a request for proposals was forwarded to faculty members from the Teaching and Learning Center at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Instructors were asked to identify an intriguing problem, a new class project, or an assignment that might address the issue of student learning. My investigation into the use of learning plans with undergraduate students seemed an appropriate quest. After three years of using learning plans, I wanted to focus more sharply on how these plans facilitated student learning. Cerbin (2004) suggests that students create knowledge by using what they already know to make sense of new information. Having the opportunity to study learning plans was further extended through the award of a statewide teaching fellows grant.

Over 30 students were enrolled in two course sections of Training Systems in Business and Industry in the fall 2004 semester. Learning plans were required in an effort to have learners identify their objectives, strengths, and competencies relative to this course. Ideally this research project would have been strengthened if one of these course sections used learning plans and the other was taught without learning plans, however the potential benefit of learning plans prohibited this disparity. I felt it unethical to provide this opportunity for some

students and deny it to others. Results from student survey data, collected at the end of Fall 2004 term, describing the extent to which learning plans facilitated learning suggest that students found these plans helpful to their learning process and effective in promoting deep learning.

Course & University Context

The key learning goal of Training Systems in Business and Industry is to develop an understanding of how training systems enhance employee development and productivity and thus increase organizational effectiveness. This course is an elective for several majors at the University of Wisconsin-Stout: Hospitality and Tourism, Service Management, General Business Administration, Industrial Management, Telecommunication Systems, and Graphic Communication Management. Consequently students from a variety of majors take this junior level course. The typical student profile is male, 22 -28 years of age.

The University of Wisconsin-Stout is a minds-on, hands-on institute of higher learning with over 8,000 students. It is located in northwestern Wisconsin in the rural community of Menomonie. Most of the students come from this area as well as border cities in Minnesota. Some students live at home driving as much as one hour to come to class. The majority work at least one job creating the need to return home over the weekend or during the week. Working-class

backgrounds and first generation college students are common University of Wisconsin-Stout student characteristics.

Key Learning Activity

I was curious how the use of learning plans facilitated learning. Self-directed learning is a theoretical underpinning of learning plans. Key to this strategy is creating a climate that encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning. Part of this process requires students to uncover what knowledge they have regarding the intellectual goals of this course. The evolution of my use of learning plans began in 2001 with my first undergraduate course. Over the last 3 years there were a number of iterations which resulted in a document inviting students to reflect on past experiences to develop a plan that would truly guide their semester studies. The current document represents the combined efforts of many students from past semesters as we wrestled with how learning plans could be used to facilitate their learning. The following 6 items comprise the current Learning Plan document.

Learning Plan Document:

1. List and describe 7 of your learning objectives for this course
2. List and describe your strengths as they pertain to the goals of this course
3. List and describe competencies you wish to develop

4. All courses have a level of importance to each of us. Using a scale of 1-5 with 1 signifying that this course is highly important, please rate the importance of this course to you.
5. What is the grade you seek?
6. What will you do to work towards this grade?

The research and data collection process was carried out within the context of action oriented research. The intention of this type of research is to influence or change a system. Values that ground this research are those of participation, self-determination, empowerment through knowledge, and change (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Action research has the potential to generate authentic improvements in education. It provides educators opportunities to reflect on and assess their pedagogy, to explore ideas and methods, and to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004).

This action oriented research process involves four steps:

Procedure:

Step 1: Orient the learners to the process of self-directed learning through group activities and individual coaching. For example during the first week of class we discuss overall course objectives and the profession of Human Resource Development. Students engage in individual writing assignments and assemble in groups to investigate how this relates to their lives. Fortunately,

class size is small enough for one-on-one conversations with learners when they request one.

Step 2: Negotiate the learning plan. Learners prepare the first draft; through individual coaching I review (assuring plans are grounded in course content) and make recommendations. If necessary, students revise their plan.

Step 3: Provide support and monitor progress. Individual coaching sessions are held at mid-term and students revise their plans (if necessary).

One-on-one coaching was an added activity that evolved from the process of this action oriented research project. By putting a spotlight on the use of learning plans, students took charge of their learning by expressing the desire to meet and discuss their learning. This became a sort of “check in” at the half way point in the term.

Step 4: End of Term – Student Survey Reflection

Students were asked a series of questions (see finding #3) at the end of the term. Their survey responses were analyzed to determine how learning plans facilitated learning.

KEY FINDINGS

Finding #1: Through reflective writing students describe significant learning that occurred for them at the culmination of the semester.

Support: At the end of the term students were given a survey which asked them to review their plans and address these questions:

- Describe how your objectives were met this semester.

The majority, 97%, of students felt their objectives were met during the class. Comments such as “I feel that I’ve become more in touch with how ‘training people’ works.” “I now understand the problems associated with training. I feel that if I have people under me I will now be able to better access their learning strengths and weaknesses.” “This will allow me to implement a training plan much more suited to the individuals needs.” “Before when I thought of training I always focused on the objective of the training not the people...”

- How were your strengths enhanced?

Many students, 86%, expressed improvement in their strengths, for example: “My strengths were enhanced because I learned the tricks of the trade from doing the Proposal. It gave me a real life example to apply...” Another student commented: “My 2nd strength was my passion for training. This course enhanced my passion for training. From this course I have a better understanding of how training and human development have a great importance in the workplace. In addition, by recognizing this importance it has increased my interest and passion to become an effective service manager and implement effective training programs in my future occupation.” Of the 14% who indicated their strengths were not changed many expressed “my strengths remained the same throughout the semester”.

- How were your competencies developed?

Responses to this question varied according to individual goals. Most students, 82%, reported progress was made in developing competencies. "...especially the one about learning when training has failed or succeeded. After covering that in the class...I started thinking about previous experiences I've had with training, and was better able to identify what went wrong, or right..." Some students expressed an interest for more "real world" practice in order to fully address their competencies. Others felt "group work" was motivating stating they wished all classes were like this.

- At the beginning of the semester you provided a numerical ranking of importance for this course. Upon reflection would you change this?

Explain.

Most (77%) said they would apply the same or an improved rating. This suggests that once students developed their learning objectives, they were able to assess the level of importance with accuracy. At the end of the semester they recognized that their improved rating was more indicative of the personal value of course content. Eli states: "I did give the course a '2' rating and I honestly felt it was somewhat important to me, but never did I imagine I would change my mind throughout the semester and if so I was expecting to lower it in importance. As it turns out, I would say I feel this course became ... highly important to me, and I know that by taking it I have better prepared myself for the business world..."

- Please describe how your learning plan has facilitated learning in Training Systems in Business & Industry.

The majority of learners, 73%, provided detailed comments that their learning plans were instrumental in their learning. Comments such as; "...it's relatively clear that it played a crucial role in my learning process." "...knowing there were things that I really wanted to learn helped me pay greater attention in class." "...it helped me stay on track and made me think what I wanted to get out of the class." Of the 27% responding that their learning plan did not facilitate learning or that they felt unsure, many stated that they did not look at their learning plans unless directed to do so. Some reported that, as an elective course, they felt little investment in learning course content. It is not surprising that students taking this course merely to fulfill a requirement might be less engaged by the learning plan. However, it is possible that there were long-term positive effects of being required to reflect on one's own learning process. The process of reflection required in the construction of a learning plan is intrinsically useful. Its value is not tied to specific course content.

Finding #2: Students are able to locate themselves in the course. Through completion of a learning plan within the first 2 weeks of the semester, students were not only familiar with the intellectual goals of the course but were able to plot out their personal objectives. "The learning plan forces you to look at what is ahead (student, 2004)." Learners find their unique place in the content through consideration of university mandated course objectives and development of their personal learning objectives. Analysis of the learning plans collected at the 2-

week point revealed that all students had at least an adequate understanding of these issues.

Support: A variety of activities conducted in the beginning of the term facilitated personal interest and investment in the course. The first week of the semester focused on why training is important to business and industry. Students participated in discussions and activities designed to familiarize them with course content. In the beginning of week 2, I provided an in-depth orientation to the concept of learning plans and invited students to create their individualized plan. By the end of week 2 students submitted their plans. In order to develop their learning plan, they reviewed the text, text outline, glossary, associated online presentations, and course syllabus. They listed their competencies and strengths as they understood them to be at the beginning of the semester. Students commented that this activity forced them to review this material in a way that prepared them for course content. "It helped me to consider what I hoped to gain in this class (student, 2004)." In addition, they analyzed their backgrounds to determine how their strengths applied to this course and to discover what competencies were important to develop.

Finding #3: Students use mid-semester coaching in order to reflect on their plans, asking questions and seeking information to modify their plans. Course activities shift.

Support: Mid-semester coaching involved a one on one meeting with each student. We reviewed their learning plan and discussed what was working for

them and what they needed to change. Some students took this opportunity to revise their plans, discarding objectives that no longer held meaning and developing others that were pertinent to their interests. For example, one student used this opportunity to discuss his interest in the field of Training & Development, expressing a desire to investigate internship possibilities. Another student commented, "This is a great idea, I don't know why we don't do this in all of our courses." An unexpected benefit of this mid-semester check in was that students did a grade check to determine if they were on target with what they hoped initially. If their current performance fell short of their initial estimate, we talked about strategies to assist with what they initially set out to accomplish. Perhaps of equal importance, shifts happen when learners request additional information that enhances their understanding of the training and development profession. We agree to have one week devoted to guest speakers. Students engage in a process of researching speakers, asking questions in advance of class, and setting up opportunities for focused dialogue.

Summary of findings: The most important conclusions that arise from this study are that learning plans act as a vehicle for focusing students on the goals of the course. In addition, mid-term coaching served to uncover learning needs of students resulting in shifting course activities. This focus on course goals and participation in mid-term coaching seem to be key components in the success of learning plans.

The depth of learning continued to build throughout the semester. Overall, students appeared to learn based upon their reflection in the areas of objectives and strengths. Some students were unsatisfied that competencies continued to need development. This suggests that more applied, real world, activities may have been helpful to their learning process. Course ratings regarding level of personal importance remained the same or increased throughout the semester. The majority (75%) of students rated this course a “2” (somewhat important) at the beginning of the course. At semester’s end, 41% indicated they would now rate it as “1” (highly important).

Developing a learning plan invited students to reflect upon course content and what they brought to the learning environment through their experiences. This has industrial applications. As Garavan and Sweeney (1994) suggest, a learner centered approach generates “commitment and allows the trainee to take responsibility for his/her own learning.” Mid-semester coaching was highly effective for me as well as students. It was an opportunity for students to take stock of where they were, based on what they said at the outset. More importantly, coaching was a key factor in this investigation. Industrially speaking, a learning plan is most effective when supported by a framework which includes the active involvement of a manager (Garavan, Sweeney1994). This suggests why my earlier attempts to use learning plans may have failed. I simply was not involved enough.

Finally, end-of-the semester reflective writing of 81% of students suggested that their learning plans helped build deeper meaning. This is perhaps best summed up by Emma (student) when she says: “I think the learning plan gave *me* expectations for the course...students tend to concentrate on the expectations of the instructor, school, or their parents...the learning plan shifted that focus so that I was forced to look at what the actual content was...at the end of the semester it’s pretty satisfying to look at my learning objectives and feel like I have a good working knowledge of those topics.”

Lingering Questions

I am left with some questions regarding one of the premises of learning plans. Knowles (1986) suggests that learning plans are based on the assumption that self-directed learning is a mechanism for learners to build on past experience and determine needs as they carry out learning activities. Typically, learning on one’s own implies that a deeper, more permanent learning takes place. Schapiro (2003) questions this assumption and suggests that we view self-directed learning as a psychological disposition and as a learning process. Students may have the disposition but may not have the skill needed to design, manage, and direct their own learning. There are differences in students’ capacities for self-directed learning. It is inaccurate to assume that learning solely on one’s own creates deeper learning. Connected learning (with each other, between student and instructor) seem important to learners at the undergraduate level. One of the

essential pieces of this project appeared to be the mid-semester coaching sessions when students were able to discuss their learning. This facilitated learning in a way that my earlier attempts at learning plan utilization failed. Collaborative learning implies a level of reciprocity. Students need faculty input and guidance in their learning endeavors. Faculty need student input regarding their perceptions of learning in order to adjust and provide necessary resources. This input was key in adding activities that met learners' needs.

I am confident that learners' past experiences impact and engage them in future learning. This fits the constructivist view of learning which takes into account prior ability and knowledge of the learner in determining their approach to skill acquisition (Moon, 1999). However, labeling learning models as self-directed is misleading (Schapiro, 2003). This often implies a solitary pursuit of knowledge when in reality co-directed and collaborative learning is what fosters progress for both faculty and students.

In the end, reflection seems critical to student learning. As Moon (1999) posits, reflection can be generated by asking the kinds of questions that do not have clear-cut answers. After presenting this project at a national conference this summer (Lui, 2004) participants suggested rewording the end-of-the-semester reflection questions so they are not value laden. For example the first reflective question ("Describe how your objectives were met this semester") could be reworded allowing students to consider whether their objectives were indeed

met. A revised question might be: “Were your objectives met this semester? Why / Why not?” In addition, questions which assess more explicit aspects of learning plan content could be developed as well as a rubric for the evaluation of students’ reflective writing.

Conclusions

One way to improve teaching and learning on campuses involves the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). SoTL goes beyond trying to facilitate student learning and reading the pedagogical literature. It involves in depth reflection on teaching and learning as well as the public sharing of this work (McKinney, 2003). I have appreciated the opportunity to take time to reflect on my use of learning plans with undergraduate students. This process of reflection is liberating.

As Palmer (1997) suggests teaching emerges from inwardness and a review of the tangles of teaching. I am struck by the reciprocity and mirror image for both instructor and students. Learning plans invited students to reflect upon their learning from the beginning. I was able to investigate and review learning plans from looking inward and outward as I worked with students. As this project is a work in progress I am beginning to untangle the somethingness of learning plans.

References and Resources

- Bass, R. (1999). The scholarship of teaching: What's the problem? *Inventio*.
Retrieved 7/8/2004
<http://www.doit.gmu.edu/Archives/feb98/randybass.htm>.
- Bentz, V., Shapiro, J. (1998). Mindful inquiry in social research. CA: Sage Publications.
- Boyer, N. (2003). The learning contract process: Scaffolds for building social, self-directed learning. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*. 4(4). 369-383.
- Buckley, M.R., Novicevic, M., Halbesleben, R., Harvey, M. (2004). Course Management and students' expectations: Theory-based considerations. *The International Journal of Educational Management*. 18(2). 138-144.
- Bullock, K., Wikeley, F. (1999). Improving learning in year 9: Making use of personal learning plans. *Educational Studies*, 25(1), 19-33.
- Cerbin, W. (2000). Investigating student learning in a problem-based psychology course. In P. Hutchins (Ed.), *Opening lines: Approaches to the scholarship of teaching and learning* (pp. 11-21). CA: Carnegie Publications.
- Cerbin, W. (2002). *A thumbnail sketch of teaching for deeper understanding*. Paper presented at Faculty College. UW-Richland. June, 2002.
- Fileva, M. (2004). Change-adept classroom. *Journal of American Academy of Business*. 5(1/2). 183-188.
- Garavan, T., Sweeney, P. (1994). Supervisory training and development: The

- use of learning contracts. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 18 (2), 17-26.
- Garrison, D.R. (1997). Self-directed learning: Toward a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 18-33.
- Hogan, C. (1995). Creative and reflective journal processes. *The Learning Organization*. 2(2). 4-17.
- Hutchins, P. (2000). *Opening lines: Approaches to the scholarship of teaching and learning*. CA: Carnegie Publications.
- Knowles, M. (1986). *Using learning contracts: Practical approaches to individualized and structured learning*. CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lemieux, C. (2001). Learning contracts in the classroom: Tools for empowerment and accountability. *Social Work Education*. 20(2). 263-267.
- Lui, K. (2004) Mixing Fielding approaches with learning in traditional higher education: Experiences of a new tenure track faculty member. Presentation at Fielding Graduate Institute Summer Session, July 14, 2004. Alexandria, VA.
- McKinney, K. (2003). Applying the scholarship of teaching and learning: How can we do better? *The Teaching Professor*. 17(7), 1,5,8.
- Moon, J. (1999). *Reflection in learning and professional development*. London. Kogan Page.
- North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. (2004). Action research. Retrieved 7/30/04 from <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/drugfree/sa3act.htm>

- Palmer, P. (1997). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. NY: Jossey-Bass.
- Schapiro, S. (2003) From andragogy to collaborative pedagogy: Learning for academic, personal, and social empowerment in a distance-learning Ph.D. program. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(2), 150 -166.
- Williams, A., Williams, P. (1999). The effects of the use of learning contracts on student performance in technology teacher training. *Research in Science & Technological Education*. 17(2). 193-201.