

## Scaling Student Assessment Podcast Series

### [Episode 7 – Scaling Student Projects with Courtney Summers](#)

#### Intro

Courtney Summers: I guess where my starting point is for alternative grading is, is I don't care the path that they get to. As long as they learn the material. Now, other aspects of being a student is and this is discussed, I think, with a lot of people and like large online courses is time management. Right. And students don't necessarily have the best time management.

But is that what we're doing for the course. Right. Is that part of the curriculum is they are needing to manage time or.

Drew Vartia: Hi I'm Drew Vartia. I'm a documenting learning specialist here at the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas. This is the Scaling Assessment podcast series, and this is episode six. Alternative grading is an umbrella term for reducing or eliminating grades, points, or other vogueish indicators of performance in favor of providing enhanced feedback and alternative grading strategies include things like upgrading or contract grading and several others, and the underlying hypothesis, which happens to be well supported, is that extrinsic rewards tend to distract students from what's important and reduce learning.

Curiosity in those kinds of things, things that we care about. So learning in these models, these alternative grading strategies is rooted in a more meaningful and robust practice and feedback cycles. So our question today is what are the challenges of alternative grading in larger classes, and which of them seem most addressable? Joining me for today's conversation about this is Trevor Rivers.

Courtney Summers: I will say one final thought on this kind of approach. I guess with maybe project-based learning on providing specifically in class time to work is I know every single one of my students and I have every semester. I'm mostly knew, everyone's name the first semester when I was just lecturing, but I really know my students and

I appreciate that, but I also know that the students really appreciate that, and I've gotten a lot of really positive feedback, and I don't think they're really aware of when that, you know, relationship or trust happens in the class. But for me, it's pretty evident that it's in those times where I can just sit with a group on the same level, not standing over their shoulder, not just writing on canvas, but actually engaged in a conversation with them like I'm a collaborator in their project.

Drew Vartia: Welcome to the Scaling Assessment podcast series. This is our seventh episode and I am your host, Drew Vartia. I am a Documenting Learning Specialist here at the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas. Our topic today is on scaling student projects. Many instructors use projects to promote and observe better student learning. In terms of assessment, course projects and especially those that are well, scaffolded, require considerable instructor time and attention.

Drew Vartia: The trade off, though, is increased student autonomy, interest, and enthusiasm. not to mention greater durability and application of the resulting learning. Given the costs and benefits of using projects in combination with the increasing number of students. What steps can instructors take

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to continue to use projects in their courses while still honoring their time? Joining me to discuss this challenge today is Courtney Summers.

Drew Vartia: Courtney, would you introduce yourself?

Courtney Summers: I'd love to. I'm a multi term lecturer in the Speech Language Hearing Department so, I do a lot of teaching, obviously, primarily in undergraduate, courses. So my undergraduate courses are typically 40, although I do have one online course for autism that has both a graduate and undergraduate section that's capped at 15 per section. So 30 total.

I have students in all levels in pretty much every course. So I'll have freshman all the way up through seniors in a single class at the same time. And just one thing that I've observed specific over the last few years in our department is as far as what the students look like, the overall student population is that we have, I think a good portion of students who are returning, for kind of a second career.

So, they maybe have a bachelor's, they have an associate's, they've had a professional career. They didn't like it for one reason or another, and come back to SPLH doing prerequisite classes to get ready for grad school to have a more rewarding and fulfilling profession. So that's just, I think one difference with some students in our department. And then like many other departments, I'm sure we have a lot of students who are planning to pursue a graduate degree.

So they either go on to get an MA or an MS in speech pathology or a doctorate in audiology. So my only other observation of my students in my classes is that they've constantly got grad school applications and acceptances on the mind, so.

Drew Vartia: That is a pretty broad swath of students. And yes, you know, first time students, returning students, nontraditional. And you'd mentioned freshmen through seniors. So it sounds like you already have a fairly significant teaching challenge, right. multiple audiences. And in at least one of these courses, you use a project then, to help either teach or reinforce specific ideas in that course.

Could you maybe tell us a bit more about one of those?

Courtney Summers: Yeah, I use, semester long project. Oh, great case studies for my SPLH 571, which is Introduction to Speech Pathology. And it's not the 100 level intro to communication studies or anything like that. It's a huge overview, in my opinion, of everything in the entire profession. So from settings to populations to assessment intervention across all client types and the entire life span, birth to geriatric populations.

So, it's a lot to cover. In my first semester teaching it, I felt that it was just a lot of content. It was readings, reading quizzes, receiving lectures on the information that you've just read and quizzed over. And then the motivation to be in class was random lecture attendance. So after doing the Course Design Institute, I really thought a lot about, first of all, where the class falls in our curriculum and obviously students are coming from a lot of different places, but thinking more about what's the next step.

So, for SPLH 571, it's a prerequisite for students to do either undergraduate clinical practicum so they can see real clients on campus, or maybe they're going on to grad school, maybe not. The next

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semester, but in a few years, probably. So, I really took that and said, okay, they will get the content eventually. They will learn about aphasia, about fluency in stuttering, about speech, sound disorders.

They're going to get that. What underlying skill set, though, do they need to be successful in their practicum experiences? So that's kind of how I rethought the class structure overall and kind of completely just flipped it to be they work in groups. I have them prep, they get little referrals at the beginning of the semester. Very basic. I mean three sentences, super minimal information.

You couldn't do anything with it even if you were the most skilled SLP speech language pathologist ever. So they get to prep those, and then I put them in groups based on which ones they're most interested in. So hoping that that intrinsically motivates them a little bit to be more engaged with the project. And they kind of follow their client.

This case study throughout the semester, and it builds on itself. So, they're submitting six different steps. and it's six steps to solving a clinical case. So, then I've built my class like my instruction to follow that to kind of follow, okay. we talk about referrals and taking a case history first. You submit that initial hypothesis what you think.

Then we talk about ethnographic interviewing. Then you submit some interview questions and what information and data you're trying to gather. And then we talk about assessment planning. You submit, you know, some assessment measure. So. everything kind of follows and builds upon it's self.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, this is the game of clue for SLP.

Courtney Summers: It is. It really is. It's it is problem solving. So, really trying to get them you know to see this is I say it I think once a week this is what you will do. And I think that's part of the purpose of the class. Right. Is just to expose them to speech language pathology. What is it? You know, for a lot of them at this point in undergraduate, they maybe know a little bit about what it is.

They maybe received therapy as a kid or know someone who has received speech therapy. But you don't get a really good idea or picture of what it is you would actually be doing on like a day to day basis. So my hope in, in doing that is to give them just the most realistic understanding and picture of what you do, how you start with a client and move them through this assessment and evaluation process.

Write goals. Do therapy with them, kind of what that looks like. And so it's really this semester long project. It's not something that they just submit at the end of the semester. It's been building and they get new data. We always do a little in class. All right. You're about to get your assessment results. And they watch me publish them on canvas so they don't get to see all of that ahead of time either.

But the kind of final aspect of this is that we do oral presentations the last Friday of this semester. this was actually something you and I talked about last summer, is also creating not only space for the students to showcase what they've done, but to showcase it to our clinical faculty and the graduate and undergraduate students who are doing clinical practicum.

So they give their presentations all at once. It's just kind of, sort of this open-ended presentation where people can move throughout different posters, and not one group is going all at the same time, and we do snacks and treats and stuff so that it's a bit less stressful. but that's kind of the culmination at the end

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of this semester of this project that they've worked through and problem solved through, and just an opportunity for them to really showcase what they can do, get their names out there for clinical faculty who might be working with them in the future.

Again, a lot of them want to go to grad school at CU because we have a really highly ranked program, so I also pitch it to them like, you know, say your name at the beginning of the presentation so that they know who you are and and what your work is.

Drew Vartia: Yeah. That's great. So you have this project structure in place now and it sounds really well designed and scaffolded so that students get the information that they need and feedback that they also need.

Courtney Summers: Yes.

Drew Vartia: Before doing a new piece.

Courtney Summers: Yes, exactly.

Drew Vartia: and then there is this culminating presentation piece, and it sounded like that occurs in groups.

Courtney Summers: Yes. within the same groups that they've been working the whole semester with.

Drew Vartia: And so in a class of, say, 40 students, is that what I heard? The population is right.

Courtney Summers: That's what it's been the last few systems.

Drew Vartia: There could be a number of challenges that I could think of. if that population increased to, say, 45 or 50, which might be, you know, another few groups. Yeah. so, you know, one of those might be, you know, how you would handle getting student groups that feedback at each of these different points. Because now your population has increased by, I don't know, let's say 10 to 20%. Do you have thoughts on, you know, how you'd handle that regular cycle of feedback with more students?

Courtney Summers: Yeah. So the way I have the class set up right now is they actually do all of their group work in class. So great. When I restructured and kind of thought about what would be the best use of class time, one of the pros to not doing this purely content coverage, we have to spend a class time talking about every single area of our field.

Was I got some time back to be able to give them. I just think it's really wonderful when you can provide students that time in class where it just takes away. I think a lot of the barriers to working in groups where I don't have to communicate about what time and your schedule and my class schedule are. They're all working for the most part as well, some full time, some have families and children that they're also taking care of.

So, I enjoy giving them that time to sit with their group where this is already on my schedule. It's pre planned out, that also takes the burden and the time off of my plate in giving feedback, because I get to go around and visit with every group and I have a GTA as well who visits with every group.

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I get to sit and hear what they're thinking through and how they're processing the information, which I think is really valuable. You don't always get that if you just get the submission on canvas to see their thought process, to ask them questions and see where they are maybe going with that and then direct in a different way if need be or encourage what direction they're already going.

So, by the time they submit and I've told them in class, my goal is that by the time you submit on canvas, I just have to go in and check mark, you get full credit because I've seen what you've done already. I know that you've written good goals. I know that you've asked the right kinds of questions, and you're planning your assessment properly for this kind of client.

So, I guess when I think about having more, it would be more student groups. Probably. I like keeping them to like 4 to 5. For now. It would probably just be managing my time in those class sessions. You know, with 50 minutes it goes really quick. Yeah. When you're trying to get to right now I have I flex between 8 and 9 case studies that they use for the semester.

So, really it would just be being mindful of how much time do I get to spend then with each group, and when do I spend that time? Obviously when they first get a new piece of information, I like to give them time to sit with it and understand it. I don't find it really helpful to immediately go up to a group and say, all right, what do you think?

Because they're still trying to chew on it and take it in. So I think that's something I've thought about needing to just be more mindful of with bigger class sizes and having more groups, because I don't just want to make the groups bigger, you know, have 6 to 7 students per client. I like having it smaller so that everyone's contributing and being able to put their opinion into the client.

Drew Vartia: Yeah. And you raise a really good point. You know, a strategy might be to increase the group size. But if you're somebody who's concerned about the dynamics with the group and how that translates to learning, you know, the solution might instead be more groups. Yeah, you know, your standard size. Now I'm all for that strategy.

I think it sounds great. Then it sort of introduces another question. you have at the present moment how many case studies that are different that students work on.

Courtney Summers: I have eight to nine. So, this semester we're doing nine okay. But last semester we did eight.

Drew Vartia: So, if each group gets a different case study, one might envision that you'd have to develop some new ones. if enrollment in your course goes up. you know, what does that process look like. How much time or effort does that take? Or, can you tell me a little more about that?

Courtney Summers: Yeah. Well, I, I tried with the initial we started with nine or with eight. Excuse me. We started with eight. And I tried to give them kind of looking both across ages. So I have an, an infant in the NICU and then I have a 76 year old man, you know, going all the way across. and then also across just different areas, different client types that we work with.

So the great thing about our field is there's no limitation on client types in certain types of clients. There is a limitation, however, on my area of clinical knowledge and expertise. So, I have built some of them

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just around clients that I have seen in the past, changing certain aspects of the client, but being, you know, the basics of the client and what the diagnosis or main concerns were the same.

I've used a case study book for kind of the meat and bones of some of them, and then just fluffed it up, added some information, and then our clinical faculty have been wonderful to also work with me to design some of them. So areas that I feel lacking in or that I just do not have adults, adults in general is a population that I do not work with, didn't work with clinically, and didn't really have an interest in working with.

I had my to who's a licensed speech pathologist help me design and build those case studies. Oh great. Last semester. So now they're just part of the class and they're there. All the information is set. I am hoping to work with our clinical audiologist this summer to add a case study that has a hearing component. That's something that's currently missing and in a major like speech-language-hearing.

Drew Vartia: Yeah.

Courtney Summers: I know that's an important one to include. So I am not working completely on my own to build them. Our faculty and my GTA has been really instrumental in putting those together.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, I think that's tremendous. Yeah. you know, it's topically speaking, you know, and this would go for any discipline. I think any instructor, if you're running out of ideas, you know, find resources, including colleagues. Yeah. You know, there might be information in books. There might be information in working from previous students on their previous projects. Your faculty colleagues are also an invaluable resource that, yes, sitting in offices can sometimes prevent some of that crosstalk.

And I think knocking on a door or two can be good, not just for student projects, but just, you know, collegiality in general.

Courtney Summers: Yeah. And it's really opened up an opportunity for me to ask them. My colleague who teaches some of the courses on augmentative and alternative communication devices to say, okay, what would you hope that students would gain from my class? You teach two whole classes on this for the master's program. But thinking ahead to your class, what kinds of things do they struggle with?

What are even like some., perceptions or incorrect, like preconceived notions about using a device to communicate that maybe the case study could address. So it's also been a good opportunity to kind of bridge some of our curriculum. Yeah. Especially for students who are staying at, you know, do undergraduate at KU and stay at KU for our grad program, too.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, that that sounds like talking with colleagues to make learning intentional. that's fantastic right. All for that.

Courtney Summers: Yeah.

Drew Vartia: You'd mentioned that you have sort of an open ended array of project ideas. Right. so when I was an instructor in chemistry, I had had a project that was focused on helping engineering students recognize how chemistry might actually relate to themselves as engineers. Like where does chemistry show up in engineering. and just that there are a lot of nuts and bolts to the project.

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But the point is that every student had to select an element. And so that was a finite series of choices. And I could picture disciplines where maybe that is also the case. Yeah, right. I didn't have them work in groups just because it was a large class of almost 300 students. And I didn't feel up to managing the logistics of that when I created the project.

Yeah. So rather than also saying, well, here's the periodic table, just pick something. And me also having to get to the end of the semester with all these different projects and wrap my head around evaluating all of these different products that I would get. Instead I said, okay, every semester I'm going to select 10 or 12, maybe 15 elements and have a sign up sheet available in the learning management system.

At the time, that was Blackboard, and once they had looked up some information on a few of these elements and figured out what was interesting to them, they could go in and sign up. And so for every one of these elements that I had selected that semester, there would be a redundancy of student projects. So I might get, you know, 12 on helium or something.

Sure. And, you know, the idea at that point was to maybe select one of those projects that would be used then, in a very public way. That was a strategy that dealt with sort of closed ended options. Like I didn't exhaust all the options all at once. I could reuse this project. But then also I got to see, a pretty good spread of student product, I think, related to just one topic,

and so I wasn't exhausted at the end trying to stretch my head over 118 elements. It was, you know, just a few. Sure. A few being a dozen or so. But I just wanted to throw that out there in case somebody's thinking about using student projects doesn't have sort of open ended or infinite possibilities of project topics to, to create or draw, for sure.

Courtney Summers: And that's something I've thought about, too, when thinking about scaling. This is yes, there's other areas and other client types that I'm excited to build in to the class, but I could see it maxing out at about ten and have thought, you know, if the class does grow and I teach it every semester and it's full every semester, so I anticipate it will grow, you know, quite a bit over the next few years is could I have multiple instead of having all ten available one semester, maybe we just do 5 or 6 and have two groups on each.

because it's also the case. you know, I don't have a key for this. Yeah. because it can be very open ended. You might get, you know, client who stutters and. Right, one goal, and then someone else might write a different goal, and both could be right. you could use different approaches for working with the child with an articulation or phonological disorder.

So it has been good to see now across two semesters, we're kind of in the final stage and seeing, okay, that's not really the way that the group looked at it or took it last semester, but ultimately the outcome for the client is going to be the same and they're thinking about it similarly. It's just that there may be writing goals a bit differently.

And so it could be interesting, I think, to have that contrast and comparison with two groups on the same client in the same semester. Yeah. It's also making me think just right now, in the moment, how that could also build in some peer feedback, because I have had them kind of like cross-pollinate, if you will, at different portions of the semester so that they can see what other student groups are doing.

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And okay, what does it look like to work with an adult with aphasia versus a child with a language disorder? They've kind of cross grouped and given feedback to each other. But, it hasn't been the case that there's been two groups with the same client yet. So kind of you are similar, you know, a similar project that you did with chemistry.

We could also pare down the case studies and have multiple groups with the same client.

Drew Vartia: Yeah. What's sort of interesting about that, thinking about the ultimate culminating experience, right. In this poster session, it'd be interesting to hear from students what they learned from the group that was assigned the same topic. you know, at that poster session, when you look at their work. Yeah. You know, what did you newly understand or understand differently?

Or, you know, pros, cons, etc. but it would be interesting to hear from students kind of how that plays out.

Courtney Summers: What I'm actually really excited for about this semester is my students who works. I have about ten who were in 571 last fall and are now doing the clinical practicum. They are the ones who are invited to the poster presentations. Oh, nice. And so I've run into a few of them before and they're like, who has Silas? Oh, who's working with Martha?

You know, they're referring even to the client by their name. Yeah, even those hypothetical. And so they're really excited and are looking forward to seeing, you know, this is the client that I worked with all semester. What did this new group do with it? So, I think, as you know, each semester builds that's going to happen that there's going to be my undergraduate students who took the class and then go on to even if it's on to grad school, they have to do a rotation at the Lawrence Clinic.

So, I'm excited to start seeing, you know, some of those students working their way through the process and through the curriculum and coming back to see what other groups have done with their with their client, their first client, I love that, yeah.

Drew Vartia: so, what would advice would you give to faculty who want to develop or maintain student projects in their courses, but might be afraid of doing this with larger than they're used to numbers of students?

Courtney Summers: Yeah, I think my biggest fear and what I'm assuming other instructors biggest fear would be is just the additional time, the additional commitment it takes, whether using in class time or out of class time grading. And one reason I'm not concerned about kind of continuing with this structure of a project is because it is so naturally scaffolded that not only are they doing the project in class, and again, like I mentioned, being more mindful of how much time I spend with each group.

Giving feedback will be something I'll have to consider, but it's not that they get. It's not a final project. It's something that has been built on throughout the semester. So it's kind of naturally scaffolded for both me and for them. So when they go to do their final presentations at the end of the semester, they have their grades.

I've seen their work. I've told them you're not being graded on your public speaking abilities, but the content. And this is just the opportunity to demonstrate what you've learned to other people and just

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engage in more of a dialog around it. So I guess that's something that I've thought a lot about, even with other classes that I teach you know, not thinking about it as this final project that everything's done at the end of the semester.

And so I'm stuck grading and spending all this extra time looking at final papers or listening to final presentations. But the time has already been given to each step of the process, so I wonder if that could help. other faculty, you know, think about how to embed something like this in their class. And I wonder, you know, if that could also help, as we're having a lot of conversations, at least in our department.

And I know some conversations are happening around CTE as well to support more diverse students with varying levels of ability and disability, to support a student's executive functioning skills, to have, you know, something really big like this, broken up into smaller steps and worked on throughout the course of a semester. So that's something that I really appreciated about the way that this project ended up kind of just being a full semester for semester approach.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, yeah, that's great. And I don't necessarily know where this would go within the dialog, but this is a great example of project based learning where the learning that is supposed to happen throughout the semester is really housed in one or at most, a few different projects, which I think varies from courses that emphasize content or even skills, but then hope to show it in a summative way through a project that takes, you know, a couple of weeks at the very end.

Right? Yeah. so that this is more aligned, I think, with what they would call project based learning.

Courtney Summers: and I do still have just one point that I've thought about on assessment while they're working in groups, and they submit these big six steps in a group. I have designed individual assignments that lead up to each. So when they go to write goals as a group, they've already practiced doing that on their own. So I can also get a good feel for where each student is at individually with the content, and they have to do that before, like the those assignments are always do before we even have in class time to work on those steps that was something that I felt was missing in the way that I had structured the class

Last fall was I could see the group's final project. Yeah, but certainly it was the case that with some groups it was maybe 1 or 2 people's final project in there, which obviously happens with groups. So having kind of like mini low stakes assignments that help build and prepare and give extra practice to some of the content areas has been really helpful this semester as well.

Drew Vartia: That's great. I really like that you had people work on parts individually before coming together. and somewhat tangentially, when instructors are like, you know, I want to have class discussions, but then my students don't say anything. One of the bigger reasons is because students haven't had the opportunity to create an individual contribution of their own, and once that discussion starts, it's easy for 1 or 2 voices to dominate and the other people to just kind of go along.

and so making sure that everybody has something to offer in advance of coming together as a group is it's a really good strategy, I.

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Courtney Summers: Think, and it's helpful if I can get to grading those, summer quiz format, summer open ended questions to be able to then go to a group and say, hey, well, so-and-so had a really wonderful idea for a session activity for this client. Maybe, could that be something that you all think to include in this step? So it's also helpful for me to give them feedback.

Maybe if someone is hesitant to share an idea or a thought. So I think that's gone a lot better this semester, and I have a better understanding of where each student is at.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, without eyes on individual work, you'd never be able to do that, right?

Courtney Summers: Right. I will say one final thought on this kind of approach. I guess with maybe project based learning on providing specifically in class time to work is I know every single one of my students and I have every semester. I mostly knew everyone's name the first semester when I was just lecturing, but I really know my students and

I appreciate that, but I also know that the students really appreciate that. And I've gotten a lot of really positive feedback, and I don't think they're really aware of when that, you know, relationship or trust happens in the class. But for me, it's pretty evident that it's in those times where I can just sit with a group on the same level, not standing over their shoulder, not just writing on canvas, but actually engaged in a conversation with them like I'm a collaborator in their project.

Courtney Summers: So, that's probably been also one of my favorite parts about structuring a class this way.

Drew Vartia: I love that. Okay, so just to recap some of what we've talked about, it sounds like, scaffolding is key, that by doing little bits during the semester, you have a pretty good handle on what student projects are going to shape up to look like by the end. And that can save you a ton of time in terms of evaluating those final projects, which is perfect, especially for scaling.

We talked a little bit about considering the balance between individual or group size versus, say, the number of topics. And, you know, there's there going to be an instructor judgment call there. But there are kind of pros and cons to each situation. And then I really liked the point that you made about using class time to work on these projects, and that you, as the instructor, have the opportunity to become a project collaborator when you visit with each of these groups and that there's, a tremendous relationship development that can happen as a result.

So, thank you for raising all of those points. I think that those were really, really great. And thank you so much for being here.

Courtney Summers: Yeah, great. Thank you for having me.