LEARNING CONTRACTS

INTRODUCTION

The use of learning contracts with adult learners has gained cogency during the past decade. Research on self-directed learning has resulted in the search for appropriate learning resources and guides. The work of Knowles (1980, 1984) and others relative to andragogy has resulted in a need by many teachers of adults to provide some mechanism for learners to build on past experience and determined needs as they carry out learning activities. Finally, the emergence of non-traditional learning programs like Empire State College in New York has mandated that some vehicle be available for learners to mix experience with actual learning endeavors. Thus, in response to these many needs the learning contract method was developed.

An extended description of how to complete and utilize a learning contract is shown below. A blank form is provided for you to use if the described format is acceptable. In reality a learning contract can take on many shapes and forms ranging from audio tapes, to outlines, to descriptive statements, to elaborate explanations of process and product. The intent of utilizing learning contracts in a learning endeavor is to provide a vehicle whereby you can personalize the learning experience.

For supplemental reading on contracts, the following are recommended: Gross (1977), Hiemstra and Sisco (1990), and Knowles (1986).

LEARNING STYLE PREFERENCES

In developing your learning contract, it may be useful if you have a sense of your own learning and cognitive styles. The following figure (Figure 1) is provided to facilitate the learner who has never filled out a learning contract in obtaining some sense of what might be the best approach for this course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner</th>
<th>Self-Directed Learner</th>
<th>Other-Directed Learner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Standard contract with suggested structure used as basic guide</td>
<td>Standard contract using instructor suggestions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Create own contract in terms of content and procedure</td>
<td>Develop own version of contract using instructor suggestions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the range of possibilities is quite extensive.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF LEARNING CONTRACTS

Why Use Learning Contracts?

One of the most significant findings from research about adult learning (e.g., Tough, 1979) is the following: When adults go about learning something naturally (as contrasted with being taught something), they are highly self-directing. Evidence has accumulated, too, that what adults learn on their own initiative they learn more deeply and permanently than what they learn by being taught (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

Those kinds of learning that are engaged in for purely personal development can perhaps be planned and carried out completely by an individual on personal terms and with only a loose structure. But those kinds of learning that have as their purpose improving one's competence to perform on a job or in a profession must take into account the need and expectations of organizations, professions, and society. Learning contracts provide a means for negotiating a
reconciliation between these external needs and expectations and the learner's internal need and interests.

Furthermore, in traditional education the learning activity is structured by the teacher and the institution. The learner is told what objective to work toward, what resources are to be used and how (and when) to use them, and how any accomplishment of the objectives will be evaluated. This imposed structure conflicts with the adult's deep psychological need to be self-directing and may induce resistance, apathy, or withdrawal. Learning contracts provide a vehicle for making the planning of learning experiences a mutual undertaking between a learner and any helper, mentor, or teacher. By participating in the process of diagnosing personal needs, deriving objectives, identifying resources, choosing strategies, and evaluating accomplishments the learner develops a sense of ownership of (and commitment to) the plan. Learning contracts also are a means for making the learning objectives of any field or practical experience clear and explicit for both learners and facilitators.

How do you develop a learning contract?

Step 1: Diagnose your learning needs.

A learning need is the gap between where you are now and where you want to be in regard to a particular set of competencies. You may already be aware of certain learning needs as a result of a personal appraisal or the long accumulation of evidence for yourself regarding any gaps between where you are now and where you would like to be.

If not (or even so), it might be worth your while to go through this process: First, construct a model of the competencies required to perform excellently the role (e.g., parent, teacher, civic leader, manager, consumer, professional worker, etc.) about which you are concerned. There may be a competency model already in existence that you can use as a thought-starter and check-list; many professions are developing such models. If not, you can build your own, with help from friends, colleagues, supervisors, and expert resource people. A competency can be thought of as the ability to do something at some level of proficiency, and is usually composed of some combination of knowledge, understanding, skill, attitude, and values. For example, "ability to ride a bicycle from my home to work to get in better physical shape" is a competency that involves some knowledge of how a bicycle operates, and the route to work; an understanding of some of the dangers inherent in riding a bicycle; skill in mounting, pedaling, steering, and stopping a bicycle; an attitude or desire to ride a bicycle; and a valuing of the exercise it will yield. Ability to ride a bicycle in cross-country racing would be a higher-level competency that would require greater knowledge, understanding, skill, etc. It is useful to produce a competency model even if it is crude and subjective because of the clearer sense of direction it will give you.

Having constructed a competency model, your next task is to assess the gap between where you are now and where the model says you should be in regard to each competency. You can do this alone or with the help of people who have been observing your performance. The chances are you will find that you have already developed some competencies to a level of excellence, so that you can concentrate on those you haven't mastered. An example of a competency model is contained in Appendix A.

Step 2: Specify your learning objectives.

You are now ready to start filling out the first column of the learning contract (objectives). Each of the learning needs diagnosed in Step 1 should be translated into a learning objective. Be sure that your objectives describe what you will learn, not what you will do. State them in terms that are most meaningful to you--Content acquisition, terminal behaviors, or direction of growth.

Step 3: Specify learning resources and strategies.

When you have finished listing your objectives, move over to the second column of the contract (resources and strategies) and describe how you propose to go about accomplishing each objective. Identify the resources (material and human) you plan to use in your various learning experiences and the strategies (techniques, tools) you will employ in making use of them. Here is an example:

Step 4: Specify target dates for completion.
After completing the second column, move over to the third column (target completion date). Put realistic dates, unless there are institutionally or other required deadlines.

Step 5: Specify evidence of accomplishment.

Move to the fourth column (evidence) and describe what evidence you will collect to indicate the degree to which you have achieved each objective.

Step 6: Specify how the evidence will be validated.

After you have specified what evidence you will gather for each objective in column four, move to column five (verification). For each objective, first specify the criteria by which you propose the evidence will be judged. The criteria will vary according to the type of objective. For example, appropriate criteria for knowledge objectives might include comprehensiveness, depth, precision, clarity, authentication, usefulness, scholarliness, etc. For skill objectives more appropriate criteria may be flexibility, precision, poise, speed, gracefulness, imaginativeness, etc. After you have specified the criteria, indicate the means you propose for verifying the evidence according to these criteria. For example, if you produce a paper, who will you have read it and what are their qualifications? Will they express their judgements by rating scales, descriptive reports, or evaluative memos? How will they communicate those judgements to you and to me? Perhaps they can use a memo or some other written statement. If you attempt to improve a professional skill, is there someone at your place of employment who can judge your accomplishments? An action helping to differentiate "distinguished" from "adequate" performance in self-directed learning is the wisdom with which personal validators operate.

Step 7: Review your contract with consultants.

After you have completed the first draft of your contract, you will find it useful to review it with two or three friends, supervisors, or other expert resource people to obtain their reaction and suggestions. Here are some questions you might have them ask about the contract to receive optimal benefit from their help:

- Are the learning objectives clear, understandable, and realistic? Do they describe what you propose to learn?
- Can they think of other objectives you might consider?
- Do the learning strategies and resources seem reasonable, appropriate, and efficient?
- Can they think of other resources and strategies you might consider?
- Does the evidence seem relevant to the various objectives, and would it convince them?
- Can they suggest other evidence you might consider?
- Are the criteria and means for validating the evidence clear, relevant, and convincing?
- Can they think of other ways to validate the evidence that you might consider?

Step 8: Carry out the contract.

You now simply do what the contract calls for. But keep in mind that as you work on it you may find that your notions about what you want to learn and how you want to learn changing. So don't hesitate to revise or renegotiate your contract as you go along.

Step 9: Evaluation of your learning.

When you have completed your contract you will want to get some assurance that you have in fact learned what you set out to learn. Perhaps the simplest way to do this is to ask the consultants you used in Step 7 to examine your
evidence and validation data and provide you their judgment about adequacy.

[Adapted by permission of Malcolm Knowles from materials he distributed in his classes.]

APPENDIX A

DEVELOPING COMPETENCY MODELS

One of the most valuable techniques for discovering (and constantly rediscovering) learning needs is the competency model. To build a competency model, it is necessary to decide first of all what the competency components are for successful or outstanding performance in a particular field or activity. When this is done, the next step is to determine your own present level of competence with regard to each of the competency components. Once this has been accomplished, the gaps between your present level of attainment and the required level become apparent. While this seems to be simple--and it is--there can be quite an impact when we clearly identify our own learning needs for the first time. The awareness of the gap between "what I can do" and "what I want to be able to do" produces a strong motivational pull to close the gap with all deliberate speed.

An example of this process can be demonstrated in looking at potential competency requirements for a position such as that of a purchasing manager in an industrial corporation. The required competencies might be the following:

**Competence Factors**

1. A knowledge of source of products, materials, or services required for successful corporate operation.
2. Knowledge of purchasing techniques and methods.
3. Familiarity with pricing structures, discounts, allowances, and quantity price breaks.
4. Awareness of delivery schedules, alternate shipping techniques, and transportation routes and methods.

**Supervisory and Managerial Skills**

Utilizing competency models in organizations can produce the following effects:

1. Self-diagnosis of training and development need.
2. Self-directed planning of personal growth progress leading to greater internal commitment.
4. Clarification of supervisor and subordinate perceptions of attainment and competence.
5. Improved bonus and compensation planning.
6. An orientation toward a continuing cycle of growth and development with a focus on forward progress rather than judgement.

**References**


To see an example of a learning contract template click here.

To see an example of a simulated learning contract click here.

To see an example of an actual learning contract submitted in a different format click here.

To see an example of a learning contract that could be submitted electronically click here.

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