

USING LEARNING CONTRACTS IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by:

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Higher education has been transformed over the centuries from a system of classical education aimed at preparing gentlemen, to an institution that helps prepare men and women for careers, self-fulfillment, and productive citizenship. As the purpose of college has changed, so has pedagogy. Among the list of advances in teaching and curriculum has been the development of learning contracts.

George Boak (1998) defined the learning contract as “a formal, written agreement between a learner and a tutor about what the learner will learn and how that learning will be measured.” Learning contracts are negotiated agreements between students and facilitators as to what the educational goals are for a particular course of study. Learning contracts can be used to plan entire degrees, training programs for specific skills, or for individual college classes.

New College of the University of South Florida uses learning contracts to design degree programs (New College, n.d.). At New College, first-year students negotiate a contract with their faculty sponsors, outlining courses to be taken and any special projects that will be performed (New College, 2002). The learning contract at New College has replaced the traditional major program used by most universities. Instead of having specific, prefabricated majors, New College students are able to design their own programs. Rather than being forced into established programs, such as environmental studies or philosophy, a student could combine courses from each and create an environmental ethics program.

Learning contracts have also been used by many community colleges. Whatcom Community College, in Bellingham, WA, allows students to create their own independent study courses using learning contracts (Whatcom, n.d.). Maricopa Community College has even used

learning contracts for staff development with new faculty (Maricopa, n.d.).

In developing a contract, the learner and a facilitator negotiate a plan for what will be learned. The learner discusses what he or she wishes to gain from the education. The facilitator discusses what he or she believes is essential to the education and what the learner may consider in reaching the learning goals. In the process, the first step is to develop learning objectives. Once objectives are established, a plan is formulated for reaching those objectives. The team of learner and facilitator decide the process and means needed to accomplish the objectives. Third, decisions are made as to what work or projects will be completed to demonstrate the learning has occurred. Finally, the method for evaluating the work must be established. The team must agree on what measures will be used to assess and grade the learning (Anderson, 1998).

The facilitator and learner both have significant roles in the process. A good facilitator will help the learner determine what should be gained from the program. Second, the facilitator helps the student through self-assessment to determine what knowledge the student already possesses (deLeon, n.d.). Because students who are new to a subject area often do not know what knowledge they are lacking, the facilitator also must act as a guide in determining what learning is needed. The facilitator must also ensure the contract is challenging enough to warrant academic credit (Anderson, 1998). Students must determine their own goals, and how to best meet those goals. Students are required to take an active part in the development of their curriculum.

Learning contracts offer numerous advantages to the learner. Contracts help to develop skills, such as negotiation, personal responsibility, and life-long learning. The skills developed by using contracts are increasingly necessary in our society.

Because each contract must be negotiated with a facilitator, students using contracts develop valuable negotiating skills (Anderson, 1994). Businesses are in demand of employees who are able to work with others and negotiate. The ability to negotiate is vital to people in a wide range of fields. Customer service requires the ability to negotiate with dissatisfied customers. Salespeople must often negotiate prices. Managers must negotiate salaries. Negotiation is also an important life-skill. People negotiate in everyday relationships, such as when husbands and wives negotiate household responsibilities.

Contracts help foster personal responsibility in learners. Inasmuch as contracts are negotiated by the learner, the learner develops a sense of personal ownership of his or her education (Anderson, 1994). Having a sense of ownership may lead to students putting forth the extra energy and resources which lead to extraordinary learning and development. Because learners have negotiated their own goals into the curriculum, the course becomes highly relevant to each individual student. Additionally, because students have negotiated what work will be done, and how learning will be assessed, students are likely to believe that grades more accurately represent their learning. When graduates begin looking for their first jobs, a common question asked by prospective employers is whether graduates believe their GPAs adequately reflect their knowledge. All too often, the answer is no. Students who were able to negotiate and agree upon how they were assessed may feel more connected to their grades.

Learning contracts also offer an excellent path toward fostering life-long learning. Just a couple generations ago, it was common for people to remain in one career field, even with a single employer, throughout their working lives. Today, the average person will not only change their employers several times, but will even change their career fields. Even those who do

remain in one field will need the ability to update their skills, because of changing technology, throughout their careers. The *new economy* has created a need for life-long learners. Very few people will be able to leave school with all the technical knowledge their careers will ever require. Because learning contracts involve learners in self-assessment, curriculum planning, and learning, students will acquire the abilities needed to continue self-development throughout their lives. Students who have used learning contracts develop intellectual independence and the ability to direct their own learning (Boak, 1998). In essence, students “learn how to learn” (Anderson, 1998).

There are a variety of ways learning contracts can be used in community colleges. As mentioned earlier, contracts can be used in faculty and staff development. However, community college students can also benefit tremendously from the use of contracts. Students can most easily use contracts in individual courses.

Suppose a student is enrolled in the hypothetical course REL 101: World Religions. At the beginning of the semester, the instructor and student would meet to discuss the course, the student’s goals, and devise a contract. The instructor would outline any specific requirements for the course, such as those requirements set forth by the college, and those of the instructor.

Perhaps all students are required to learn about religions from various major regions (i.e. Native American, East Asian, African, and the Near East). Even though the goal is to negotiate a curriculum, it would be quite common for certain requirements to be non-negotiable (Anderson, 1998). However, within those nonnegotiable requirements, there will be significant room for negotiation.

A student who enjoys public speaking, or wishes to develop public speaking skills, may

negotiate to make a class presentation on a specific topic. If the course is in a Florida community college, and is a Gordon Rule course, the student may negotiate how the rule will be met. The student could write three 4-page papers, each concerning the development of a specific religion. If a specific student plans to major in Public Affairs, that student could negotiate to meet the Gordon Rule by writing a weekly response to news articles that concern religion and public policy.

The learning contract seems especially appropriate for adult learners. As a group, adult learners are often more focused on specific learning, demand a more personal role in their education, and are more concerned with expanding their knowledge. Learning contracts allow each of the characteristics of adult learners to be addressed. Adult learners are prepared to accept the personal role and responsibility for education that contracts demand. As adults, they appreciate the value in learning and are willing to put forth the effort to complete independent projects and research.

Learning contracts help schools accomplish their goals of leading to successful careers, and the productive citizenship and self-actualization of students. Contracts help develop work-skills, such as negotiation, responsibility, and life-long learning. Students' careers will gain from the improvement of those skills. Students who use contracts to develop work skills and responsibility are also likely to be prepared for productive citizenship. It follows that students with successful careers, who are productive members of society, and have developed the skills for personal growth are more likely to achieve satisfaction in their lives.

Learning contracts offer a unique way to think about higher education. Students are integrated into their curriculum in ways not available through traditional program development.

The learner is likely to be motivated by the relevance and self-direction intrinsic in learning contracts. Educators become the facilitators to students' own self-discovery, and will find reward in seeing students become more independent as learners. As community colleges seek new ways to attract, retain, and teach adult students, learning contracts should be especially appealing.

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