

Chapter 6

Learning Contracts as Part of Instructional Design and Evaluation

Mary C. Ware
State University of New York, USA

ABSTRACT

The author, an instructional development specialist and faculty member with 35+ years experience, has been attempting, throughout her career, to encourage students to be more self-directing about their learning and to move away from the phenomenon she calls “whadyaget” in which students are only concerned about the grade they receive on an assignment, rather than the accomplishment the assignment represents. One solution to this problem is the use of contracts, specifically with mature adult learners. In a contract learning setting, students choose a contract which includes the “body of work” for which they will be responsible. Once completed, students will receive the grade for which they contracted. The author will report anecdotal evidence collected from at least ten years of using this method and also will discuss pros and cons of contract learning/grading, suggestions for improved implementation of the contract process and future trends in contract learning as they relate to adult education and, most recently, distance learning.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

For any college professor with an instructional design background, teaching becomes a constant feedback loop. Anything one does can be analyzed and, hopefully, improved upon. For the author, grading, motivating students, and seeking to have them self-regulate and do their best work,

have been life-long goals. In some courses which the author has taught over the past 35 years, the content is controversial, and, as such, students feel they must “agree” with the instructor (i.e., repeat back on tests and papers the position(s) that the professor holds) in order to receive a good grade. It was this observation/instructional design problem which led the author to the use of contracts. After using grading contracts for a number of years with mature adult learners, the

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author feels that contracts can be useful for subject matter of almost any nature, including that of career and technical education.

Contract learning is not a new concept. It has been used in secondary education, in colleges, and in vocational education since the 1970s. Contracts also may take many forms, which will be discussed below. The premise, however, is the provision of choice for students (among options to demonstrate their competency; and, perhaps, in the amount of work they contract to complete). Much research has shown that when students exercise choice they are more satisfied with their education and so satisfaction (as well as competence) becomes an added bonus.

This chapter will outline some literature in relation to the use of contracts, especially in young adult and adult education. It will include samples of types of contracts, including the type which the author regularly uses. Anecdotal evidence of the success of this method will be reported. As with any methodological choice, there are pros and cons, and these will be discussed.

A reader utilizing this chapter will be able to:

- Examine his/her course(s) to see if contracts might be feasible.
- Design a contract or contracts for that course.
- Pilot the use of contracts with his/her students.
- Evaluate the success of this technique as part of his/her course design.
- Use feedback gained from pilot uses of contracts to refine their use.

6.2 BACKGROUND

Individualized instruction (from which learning contracts evolved) became a “hot topic” in the 1970s. It was considered the wave of the future, perhaps one which has not been embraced to the degree predicted during its early years. Several

prolific writer/researchers contributed to the body of knowledge at that time. As early as 1968 William Romey described learning contracts in his book entitled, *Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Science*. Rita and Kenneth Dunn (1972) wrote extensively about designing student learning contracts. Thompson and Poppen (1972) also provided information on learning contracts as a means for developing individual responsibility in students.

These early writings were more focused upon “how to do it” and did not include much theoretical background. In 1983, Carl Rogers explicated the theoretical foundation for contract learning in his oft-quoted work, *Freedom to Learn for the 80's*. Rogers characterized the teacher’s role as that of facilitator and exhorted the instructor to ask:

how can I help him or her find the resources – the people, the experiences, the learning facilities, the books, the knowledge in myself – which will help them in ways that will provide answers to things that concern them (italics mine), the things they are eager to learn? And then, later, how can I help them evaluate their own progress (p. 136).

Malcolm Knowles (1986), one of the most influential writers on contract learning, continued in this theoretical bent by suggesting that faculty must

change their psychic reward system from valuing the extent to which the learners conform to their direction to valuing the extent to which the learners take the initiative in directing their own learning (p. 246).

The promise of learning contracts for this author is shown in some of the potential ways that Thompson and Poppen (1972) suggested that contracts could help make:

students, as individuals, responsible for:

- (a) *making choices about meeting learning objectives;*

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