

Learning Contracts

In some courses you will be asked to complete a Learning Contract to help you focus on being an active participant in the online learning experience. For many of you, the responsibility of using learning contracts to design learning experiences is a new thing. The freedom/responsibility of designing your own learning experiences can be at turns exhilarating and scary.

Learning contracts are based on the concepts of self-directed learning. You have all had experience with self-directed learning whether you called it by that name or not. As Roger Hiemstra notes:

"Most adults spend a considerable time acquiring information and learning new skills. The rapidity of change, the continuous creation of new knowledge, and an ever-widening access to information make such acquisitions necessary. Much of this learning takes place at the learner's initiative, even if available through formal settings. A common label given to such activity is self-directed learning. In essence, self-directed learning is seen as any study form in which individuals have primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and even evaluating the effort. Most people, when asked, will proclaim a preference for assuming such responsibility whenever possible."

Hiemstra, R. (1994). Self-directed learning. In T. Husen & T. N. Postlethwaite (Eds.), The International Encyclopedia of Education (second edition), Oxford: Pergamon Press

What do you want to learn today?

The Learning Contract example below (which is written using the Learning Contract form) is designed to stimulate your thinking about how your desired Learning Outcomes fit into the requirements and activities of a given course.

Learning contracts are based on one of the basic concepts of adult learning - only you are responsible for what you learn. I can't make you learn. No instructor can. I can provide opportunities for you to learn. I can give you feedback. I can encourage. But you all have the right to learn or not learn at your choice. Everyone has that right. As you teach what you teach remember that this goes for your students too. It also goes for children and dogs and anyone else who we may be teaching. The earlier we get in the habit of consciously recognizing that responsibility the more active we can be in our own learning and the more we will learn. If you get a sort of "unsettled feeling" about this process that's good if it gets you thinking about what it means to you to be responsible for your own learning.

The Learning Contract is an opportunity for you to individualize the course to your particular needs. Heimstra describes it as "a means for negotiating a reconciliation between these external needs [of the course] ... and the learner's internal need and interests." This is an opportunity to focus on an applied project related to your workplace or a community-based organization or to do further in-depth research on a specific course topic of interest to you. It is also an opportunity to discuss your learning goals with your course instructor to further clarify and focus them.

First and foremost, when a learning contract is used in a course it is part of the course and must reflect the course topic. If you are writing a learning contract for a class on organic gardening your contract would reflect your specific learning goal related to organic gardening. So, for D505, your contract would reflect your learning goal related to adult learning theory. If you are doing an independent study course you would have much more latitude in topic selection.

Second, a learning contract is one unified document. There are two sections but they all refer to the same learning goal and that goal relates to the course content. This is very important because what you are really doing in this contract is defining your final project. This project could be up to 30% of your final grade so it is something you need to think through carefully. That said, a learning contract is also re-

negotiable. If you get into your project and find out something just is not going to work you can go back to your instructor and rework the contract as needed.

Third, as I alluded to in the previous point, a learning contract is a negotiated document. It allows you to personalize a course and incorporate your interests. It allows you to create an application based on course content or explore a certain aspect of the course in more depth or investigate a related author or concept that there is not time to cover in the course. At the end, though, the product you create is graded by the course instructor. That instructor must approve your learning contract to ensure it is within the content area of the course and to help you make sure you are not trying to do too much in the time frame of the semester or too little for the point value of the assignment. If you are doing an independent study or directed readings it would be negotiated with your faculty advisor or other faculty member with whom you are working. Based on the learning contract, the faculty member will tell you how many credit hours you should enroll for.

The due date for the Learning Contract will be posted in the syllabus of the course and is normally about one month into the semester. However, you should begin thinking about it at the beginning of the semester and have several ideas of what you might want to do. Feel free to run two or three by your instructor for feedback and further suggestions. If you want to do a larger project with someone else in the class make sure you talk with your instructor about wording your contracts appropriately for a joint project.

The due date for final projects is also posted in the syllabus. Keep in mind the amount of time you have when designing your project and writing your contract. You may propose various kinds of work products to document your learning, such as research papers, annotated bibliographies, interviews with documentation (may include audio or video tapes or interview transcripts), video, multimedia, web pages, and other kinds of visual or performing arts projects. All projects will include a final reflection paper that describes the work process and reflects on your application of course material and additional learning resources to both process and product.

For more on Self-Directed Learning please see [The International Society for Self-Directed Learning](#).

Now let's take a look at the Learning Contract Form.

Please download the [Learning Contract Form](#), fill it in, and submit it to your instructor by the due date.

LEARNING CONTRACT

Complete this Contract and submit it by the date specified by the Course Facilitator.

Name of Learner:

Name of Course Facilitator:

Course Number & Name:

Semester and Year:

Learning Contract Due Date*:

Date Submitted:

Final Project Due*:

*see the syllabus for your course for this information

PART ONE

Write a short answer to the question: What are the understandings and competencies you need or want to develop during this course to become more knowledgeable about these course topics within the

professional practice of adult education?

This is where you write your main learning goal. What do you want to learn about or learn how to do or figure out how to apply in your work setting or understand the relationship between, etc. If the thought of writing this gives you writer's block scroll down to the end of the page and start from the bottom and work your way back up. This, as all sections of the Learning Contract, should be written in complete sentences with correct grammar.

This should be a "big picture" statement like: "I want to understand why some people are more self-directed learners than others and whether or not it has anything to do with personality type." (which is the example that will be continued here)

Now break your goal down into smaller Learning Outcomes. Define as many as you need to make this an effective, valuable and successful learning experience. Learning Outcomes may include the broad domains of Knowledge & Understanding, Skills, Attitudes, and Values. In a course this may be only 2 or 3. In an independent study it may be more.

Description of Learning Outcome # 1 - One thing I plan to learn (or increase competency in) is:

This is where you write your first objective which is related to your overall learning goal. Please write these in complete sentences. For example, based on the above goal one objective could be: "I plan to learn more about self-directed learning in general."

a) Learning Strategies & Resources - This is how I will go about achieving this objective (Activities):

This is where you write what you will actually DO to meet the objective. For example: "I will read at least 6 articles on self-directed learning and the book "Self-Directed Learning" by Knowles.

b) Evidence of Accomplishment - This is how I will know the objective has been achieved:

This is where you write about how you will prove to yourself that you met your objective. For example: "I will be able to describe self-directed learning in detail and the characteristics of a self-directed learner."

c) Criteria and Means of Validating or Assessing Evidence of Accomplishment - This is how I will demonstrate or prove that I have achieved it:

This is where you write about how you will prove to someone else (like your course instructor) that you met your objective. For example: "I will write a 2-4 page paper on self-directed learning that will become part of my final project paper." There is a fine line between how you know for yourself and how you can demonstrate learning - this is often confusing for those writing learning contracts for the first time but you will get better with practice.

Repeat the steps above for the remaining outcomes

PART TWO:

A brief description of my Final Project and how it supports my Learning Outcomes:

This is where you write about your project. If you skipped down to here from the goal statement, start by writing about what you want to do. It can be a paper but it can also be a class you teach, a tutorial you

create, a handbook, a website, a workshop, a grant proposal, etc. Continuing the self-directed learning example I've been using, I might say: "My final project will be a workshop that I will conduct for the sales staff in my company on effectively using the learning opportunities provided by a third-party sales training vendor with which we contract. The sales staff doesn't use these services and we end up paying for them anyway. I want to create a workshop that encourages the sales staff to be more self-directed in choosing and following through with their professional development activities. I would like to incorporate different suggestions for different personality types since we used Keirsey's Temperaments Model in other team-building workshops last year. I will turn in the materials used in the workshop, a description of the workshop, staff feedback on the workshop, and my reflection on the workshop as well as a 6-8 page paper on self-directed learning and how I incorporated the reading I did into the workshop materials and presentation."

It could just have easily been "My final project will be a 10-15 page paper on self-directed learning and how it interacts with personality theory such as Temperament/Myers-Briggs, and how it can be applied in a training setting."

For D505 and D506 where there is a Book Critique assignment, in this example the book I would read for that assignment would be "*Self-Directed Learning*" by Knowles. It supports a learning objective and actively relates to the final project.