

What is Learning Contract and How to Apply It to A Big English Class in Order to Enhance Individual Learning

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Abstract

Learning contract is a tool that allows students to focus on their strengths and interests and gear their learning to their individual learning styles and needs by setting objectives, establishing time lines and planning for evaluation. This study is to use "learning contract" in order to enhance individual learning in a large English class or traditional class. In this study, how-to strategies are also presented as well.

This paper follows a four-Chapter format. Chapter One is an introduction to the study. It includes background and philosophy of education. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature related learning contract using, in this chapter, the definition of learning contract, how to develop a learning contract, and what are its benefits are also presented. Chapter Three presents the discussion of how the learning contract enhance individual learning in a big English class, and practical models from students who major in Dance in National Taiwan College of Physical Education in 1996. Chapter Four presents the recommendation and conclusions.

Chapter One

Introduction

We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. (Rogers 120).

Many writers and researchers suggest that for students to survive in a changing world, the goal of educators should be not only to impart state of the art knowledge of their fields of study to their students but also to teach their students how to learn and to solve problems relevant to their subject areas.

Knowing how to learn is the most basic of all skills because it is the key that unlocks future success. Individuals who know how to learn can more easily acquire other skills. Without this essential skill, one's learning is not as rapid or as comprehensive and long lasting. (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer 37)

One of most significant findings from research about adult learning is that when adults go about learning something naturally, they are highly self-directing. Evidence is beginning to accumulate, too, that what adults learn on their own initiative they learn more deeply and permanently by being taught.

Furthermore, in traditional education the learning activity is structured by the teacher and the institution. The learners are told what objectives they are to work toward, what resources they are to use and how to use them, and how their accomplishment of the objectives will be evaluated. This imposed structure conflicts with 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 his or her helper, mentor, teacher, and, often, peers. By participating the process of diagnosing needs, formulating objectives, identifying resources, choosing strategies, and evaluating accomplishments, the learner develops a sense of ownership of the plan.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

In this chapter, the definition of learning contract, how to develop a learning contract, and what are its benefits are presented.

Definition of learning contract

Some people prefer to call learning contracts "learning plans" or "learning agreements" or "study plans." Contract learning is an alternative way of structuring a learning experience: It replaces a content plan with a process plan. Instead of specifying how a body of content will be transmitted (content plan), it specifies how a body of content will be acquired by the learning (process plan). Cristiano (1993) expressed that learning contracts are a valuable tool for providing instruction in basic social work values, skills, and knowledge. The profession of social work recognizes the importance of every individual's right to self-determination, respect, dignity, and worth.

According to Knowles's definition of learning contract,

"the learning contracts are a tool that allows students to focus on their strengths and interests and gear their learning to their individual learning styles and needs. The type of instruction encourages self-responsibility and creative problem solving-valuable assets in pursuing their academic and professional careers."(1986)

Why use learning contracts?

As I mentioned earlier, students go about learning something naturally, they are highly self-directing. And what students learn on their own initiative

they learn more deeply and permanently than what they learn by being taught.

Those kinds of learning that are engaged in purely personal development can be planned and carried out completely by an individual on his or her own terms and with only a loose structure. But those kinds of learning that have their purpose improving one's competence to perform in a job or in a profession must take into account the needs and expectation 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 needs and interests.

How to develop a learning contract?

There are specific guidelines which provided by Cristiano, M. (1993) for developing effective learning contract assignments as following:

1. Decide on a starting and ending date for the contract.
2. Decide on types of problems or issues to be addressed by the students.
3. Develop means for helping students to identify their personal learning objectives.
4. Identify and make available to students learning resources.
5. Develop a general format for the learning contract assignment. State the specific criteria for accomplishing each section of the learning contract assignment. There are two examples for further clarification.

Example one--the result is evidence of the achievement of the learning objective such as a paper, presentation, ideotape, transcripts from interviews (Knowles 27-37):

- a. State learning objectives.
 - b. State resources and learning strategies.
 - c. State target date for completion.
 - d. State how the evidence of completion of the learning objective will be presented.
 - e. State how the evidence of completion will be judged or validated by experts other than the instructor.
 - f. State how the results (products) of the learning contract will be
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evaluated by the instructor.

Example two--the result is a report of the completion of each section of the learning contract assignment (Rogers 135-161):

- a. Specify the learning objective.
- b. Specify the need to achieve the objective (statement of the problem or issue).
- c. Specify the learning resources.
- d. Summarize content of learning resources relevant to the learning objective.
- e. Summarize personal insights gleaned as a result of interacting with the learning resources.
- f. Specify the action plan for achieving the learning objective.
- g. Evaluate the results of the each step in the action plan.
- h. Specify the follow-up action plan.
- i. Develop evaluation criteria.
- j. Provide suggestion for learning objectives.
- k. Provide suggestions for learning resources.
- l. Provide examples of effective completed learning contracts.

The following chart is an example of learning contract format:

Learning Contract

Learner:

Learning experience:

Learning objectives	Resources & learning strategies	Target date	Evidence of completion	Verification or evaluation by instructor
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Advantages of using learning contracts

The empowerment of persons, the encouragement of self-direction, and the enhancement of learning by the whole person--with feelings as well as thoughts--constitute a profoundly revolutionary approach to education in this society...The individual who sees himself and his situation clearly and individual, who sees himself and that self and for that situation is a very different person from the one who is simply in the grip of outside circumstances. This differ-

ence shows up clearly in important aspects of his behavior. (Rogers 250-278)

In Cristiano's study (1993), had listed thirteen advantages of learning contract:

1. Students achieve personal learning objectives more effectively than learning objectives that are imposed on them.
2. Students remember the learning experiences that they themselves initiate.
3. Student more effectively integrate theory and practice.
4. Students learn to identify and evaluate a variety of learning resources.
5. Students learn to identify their learning strengths and weaknesses.
6. Students learn how to learn. They learn to identify learning objectives and to develop creative and effective action plans for achieving learning objectives.
7. Students learn to evaluate the accomplishment of their own learning objectives.
8. Students are free to use their preferred learning styles.
9. Students are motivated to learn and change behavior because they have identified problems and issues relevant to their lives and have identified their own means for solving relevant problems and for evaluating the results.
10. When students fail, they are motivated to try again.
11. Students accept responsibility for their own learning and gain confidence in their abilities to be self-directed learners.
12. Instructors learn along with their students and as a result of their interactions with their students. Instructors and the students perceive themselves as lifelong learner, diagnosing individual learning needs and pursuing learning outcomes in an atmosphere of mutual respect.
13. Instructors model for students the advantages of being a lifelong learning. (Cristiano, 1993)

We have learned that it is possible...for students to become reliable self-directing; to choose, and bear the responsibility of the consequences of their

choice; to learn more than in the traditional classroom; and to do so with enthusiasm. (Rogers 303).

Chapter Three

In this Chapter, the discussion of how can the learning contract enhance individual learning in a large English class and practical models from students who major in Dance in National Taiwan College of Physical Education in 1996.

Learning contracts enhance individual learning

In a traditional English class, the students are usually more than thirty. According to various studies, the smaller class, the better students' learning. But, under such a educational system right now, it is impossible to decrease the number of the students. Therefore, how to enhance students' learning under such limitations is a big challenge to teachers. Especially, Chinese students are more like passive learners than active learners. It makes teaching more difficult if teacher highly expected the result of students' learning.

According to related literature review of learning contracts, the problems or difficulties which mentioned above can be solved by using learning contracts in a big English class. There are some reasons to explain how learning contracts enhance individual learning as following:

1. Students set their own English learning objectives according to their needs and interests. When learning becomes interesting, the individual learning will also be enhanced.
2. Students can be divided to several groups and each group shares same English learning experience together, through experiencing peer corporation and learning how to solve problems together. Therefore, the competency of individual student's learning can be increased.
3. Learning contracts can make up the defect of a big English class.
Students can feel free to achieve personal English learning experience through learning contracts.

Practical models of learning contract

There are two models of learning contract which designed by the students who major in Dance at National Taiwan College of Physical Education in 1996 as following:

a. Learning Contract

Learners: 48503037, 48503034, 48503013, 48503012, 48503028 Learning experience: English Play: Cinderella

Learning objectives	Resources & learning strategies	Target date	Evidence of completion	Verification or evaluation by instructor
1. To gain Content of play	Library book, bookstore	Oct. 22	by self-assessment	by evaluation of instructor
2. To prepare Stage properties	self-making	Nov. 19	by self-evaluation of skirt, hat, shoes, fruit, etc.	by assessment of instructor
3. To choose music	Waltz--music store	Nov. 25	by self-evaluation	by evaluation of supervisor
4. To practice	Twice a week	Dec. 1- Dec. 31	8-10 minute presentation of stage play	by assessment of instructor

b. Learning Contract

Learners: 58403035, 58403030, 58403008, 58403037 Learning experience: Modern English play: Mountain climbing

Learning objectives	Resources & strategies	Target date	Evidence of completion	Verification or evaluation
1. To gain content of play	Library books, magazines	Nov. 5	by self-assessment	by evaluation of instructor
2. To prepare stage properties	Self-making	Nov. 12	by self-assessment	by assessment of instructor
3. To rehearse	Once a week	Nov. 19- Dec. 31	6-8 minute stage presentation	by evaluation of instructor

Chapter Four

Conclusion

In this study, the definition of learning contract, developing the learning contract, the advantages of learning contract, enhancing individual learning through learning contract and practical models from students in National Taiwan College of Physical Education are presented.

It is not only individual learning can be enhanced by using learning contract in a big traditional English class, but also in other subject areas, such as academic classrooms (Math, Chinese, English, History), projects, independent study, internships, professional training, etc..

For teachers, learning contract is one of good teaching strategies, too. Through learning contract, it helps to increase the mutual interaction between students and teachers. According to Knowles (1986), teachers can improve their teaching quality by using learning contract in the classroom.

Even, the learning contract can be personal future life plan, setting the goals and put it through the actions, finally, carrying out the life plan. Therefore, learning contract is very practical and useful tool for everybody. Students should know how to use it and apply it to different setting.

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