


Appendix I

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., Allen Tough's *The Adult's Learning Projects*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, 1979) is that when adults go about learning something naturally (as contrasted with being taught something), 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 than what they learn by being taught.

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

Furthermore, in traditional education the learning activity is structured by the teacher and the institution. The learner is told what objectives he is to work toward, what resources he is to use and how (and when) he is to use them, and how his 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 his helper, mentor, teacher, and often, peers. By participating in the process of diagnosing his needs, formulating his objectives, identifying resources, choosing strategies, and evaluating his accomplishments, the learner develops a sense of ownership of (and commitment to) the plan.

Finally, in field-based learning particularly, there is a strong possibility that what is to be learned from the experience will be less clear to both the learner and the field supervisor than what work is to be done. There is a long tradition of field-experience-learners being exploited for the performance of menial tasks. The learning contract is a means for making the *learning objectives* of the field experience clear and explicit for both the learner and the field supervisor.

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 personnel appraisal process or the long accumulation of evidence for yourself of the 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.) you are concerned about. 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 the store" is a competency that involves some knowledge of how a bicycle operates and the route to the store; an understanding of some of the dangers inherent in riding a bicycle; skill in mounting, pedaling, steering, and stopping a bicycle; an attitude of desire to ride a bicycle; and a valuing of the exercise it will yield. "Ability to ride a bicycle in cross-country race" 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.

Learning Contract for:			
Name _____			
Activity _____			
Learning Objectives	Learning Resources and Strategies	Evidence of Accomplishment of Objectives	Criteria and Means for Validating Evidence

Figure I-1. This is a typical learning contract.

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 that 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. An example of a model of competencies for the role of adult educator is provided in Appendix J.

Step 2—Specify Your Learning Objectives

You are now ready to start filling out the first column of the learning contract shown in Figure I-1, "Learning 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 directions 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 in Figure I-1, "Learning 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 field experience and the strategies (techniques, tools) you will employ in making use of them. For example, if in the "Learning Objectives" column you wrote "Improve my ability to organize my work efficiently so that I can accomplish 20 percent more work in a day," you might list the following in the "Learning Resources and Strategies" column:

1. Find books and articles in library on how to organize your work and manage time and read them.
2. Interview three executives on how they organize their work, then observe them for one day each, noting techniques they use.
3. Select the best techniques from each, plan a day's work, and have a colleague observe me for a day, giving me feedback.

Step 4—Specify Evidence of Accomplishment

After completing the second column, move over to the third column, "Evidence of Accomplishment of Objectives," and describe what evidence you will collect to indicate the degree to which you have achieved each objective. Perhaps the following examples of evidence for different types of objectives will stimulate your thinking about what evidence you might accumulate:

<u>Type of Objective</u>	<u>Examples of Evidence</u>
Knowledge	Reports of knowledge acquired, as in essays, examinations, oral presentations, audio-visual presentations, annotated bibliographies.
Understanding	Examples of utilization of knowledge in solving problems, as in action projects, research projects with conclusions and recommendations, plans for curriculum change, etc.

<u>Type of Objective</u>	<u>Examples of Evidence</u>
Skills	Performance exercises, video-taped performances, etc., with ratings by observers.
Attitudes	Attitudinal rating scales; performance in real situations, role playing, simulation games, critical incident cases, etc., with feedback from participants and/or observers.
Values	Value rating scales; performance in value clarification groups, critical incident cases, simulation exercises, etc., with feedback from participants and/or observers.

Step 5—Specify How the Evidence Will Be Validated

After you have specified what evidence you will gather for each objective in column three, move over to column four, "Criteria and Means for Validating Evidence." For each objective, first specify what criteria you propose the evidence will be judged by. 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 poise, speed, flexibility, gracefulness, precision, imaginativeness, etc. After you have specified the criteria, indicate the means you propose to use to have the evidence judged according to these criteria. For example, if you produce a paper or report, who will you have read it and what are their qualifications? Will they express their judgments by rating scales, descriptive reports, evaluative reports, or how? One of the actions that helps to differentiate "distinguished" from "adequate" performance in self-directed learning is the wisdom with which a learner selects his or her validators.

Step 6—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 get their reactions and suggestions. Here are some questions you might have them ask about the contract to get optimal benefit from their help:

1. Are the learning objectives clear, understandable, and realistic; and do they describe what you propose to learn?
2. Can they think of other objectives you might consider?
3. Do the learning strategies and resources seem reasonable, appropriate, and efficient?
4. Can they think of other resources and strategies you might consider?
5. Does the evidence seem relevant to the various objectives, and would it convince them?
6. Can they suggest other evidence you might consider?
7. Are the criteria and means for validating the evidence clear, relevant, and convincing?
8. Can they think of other ways to validate the evidence that you might consider?

Step 7—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 it may change. So don't hesitate to revise your contract as you go along.

Step 8—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 6 to examine your evidence and validation data and give you their judgment about their adequacy.