

Authentic Assessment

Learning Contract



DEFINITION

A learning contract (also known as a negotiated learning agreement) is a formally written agreement between a teacher and a learner. The contract's purpose is to ensure that certain specified learning activities will be undertaken to achieve an identified learning goal, and that specific evidence will be provided by the learner to demonstrate that the learning goal has been reached. In creating a learning contract, students are encouraged to reflect upon their learning objectives. They should discuss and reach a consensus with their teachers regarding the learning activities to be undertaken and how learning outcomes will be evaluated. Usually, a learning contract is evaluated based on specific criteria related to the learning objectives listed.

The structure of a learning contract varies depending on its purpose. In general, it will incorporate the following sections: (1) Learning objectives, (2) Resources and strategies for achieving the learning objectives, (3) Evidence to demonstrate how the learning objectives are achieved, (4) Timeline, and (5) Agreed-upon assessment criteria to be applied for evaluation.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

To design a learning contract assessment, teachers should follow the procedures below:

1. Ask students to identify their learning needs.
2. Assist students in specifying learning objectives in relation to the learning needs identified.
3. Introduce students to learning resources and strategies that can be utilized to achieve the learning objectives.
4. Ask students to propose learning activities that can help them attain their learning objectives, and develop a detailed schedule/plan to do so.
5. Review the learning contract with students.
6. Propose how the learning objectives will be assessed and the corresponding assessment criteria. Allow students to discuss and negotiate these.
7. Obtain feedback from students regarding their expectations for feedback, so that both the frequency and quality of feedback can be adjusted to meet their needs.



BENEFITS & CHALLENGES

Benefits

- Individual difference in learning needs are taken into account. Students can decide upon and tailor-make learning activities that are appropriate for their specific needs, and that align with their interests.
- Students can enjoy more autonomy in their learning.
- The assessment task can promote higher levels of authenticity as it requires the collaboration between teachers and students.
- A more democratic relationship arises between teachers and students as both parties become learning partners.

Challenges

- Students need to be trained in the writing of meaningful learning contracts.
- Students may feel stressed and/or unsure when writing learning contracts if they are unfamiliar with this type of task.

CASE SAMPLE

Learning contract assessment in a new multidisciplinary WIL subject at Monash University

Design of the assessment:

Learning contracts were used as an assessment in a new multidisciplinary work-integrated learning (WIL) subject at Monash University. The subject included a two hour session that addressed, among other WIL topics, expectations of and from students regarding assessment. Students also attended a discipline-specific seminar that reviewed theoretical knowledge to apply in WIL, conventions to follow at workplaces, and so on; a mid-semester seminar allowed students to check in with their supervisors, discuss experiences with classmates, and clarify assessment tasks if needed.

As students engaged in internship activity, they also completed assessment tasks including a portfolio, online discussions, and a learning contract. In the contract (450 words), the nature of the internship, its location, tasks, and achievable objectives needed to be clearly communicated and agreed to by the student, discipline supervisor, and sponsor. In writing the objectives, students needed to identify their own areas of learning and development, and consult and negotiate these with the university and industry.

How are students assessed?

The learning contract accounted for 10% of assessment. It was used to evaluate whether students achieved the following learning objectives: (1) quick adaptation to working in a discipline-specific, professional environment; (2) the student's consolidation of discipline-specific knowledge such as professional standards and applied practices; and (3) network expansion in the industry. In this case study, the portfolio and reflection accounted for 45% each of the remaining assessment. Employer evaluations were also sought in which students were given either a pass or fail.

Reference

Sutherland, K., & Symmons, M. (2013). Issues and challenges identified in the development of a broad multidisciplinary work integrated learning package. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 14*(4), 295-304.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING

- Completing a learning contract involves continuous discussion and negotiation between students and teachers. Teachers should thus build rapport with students, and provide personalized feedback and recommendations for contract's items.
- Students unfamiliar with learning contracts may feel vulnerable during the process, especially when disagreements arise during negotiations. Teachers should be aware of students' feelings and offer appropriate guidance.