Engaging Online Students Through Learning Contracts

Lynn McNamara
EdD, JD, MPH
Lynn.McNamara.EdD@gmail.com
Lynn McNamara: Presenter Introduction

- Over 10 years of experience teaching and developing online and hybrid courses
- Learning designer (online higher education)
- JD, EdD, MPH
Topics for Discussion

◦ Background and Context: Doctoral Research Study
◦ Findings and implications for practice
◦ Hands-on practice developing a learning contract

Session Outcomes

By the end of this session, you should be able to:
◦ Describe what a learning contract is
◦ Explain the rationale for using learning contracts
◦ Create a learning contract
Poll Question

Have you ever heard of learning contracts?
Yes or No
Background and context: 
Doctoral research study
The Context: Online Higher Education

- By the Fall of 2016, just over 30% of students took at least one course online
- In 2020, nearly all students participated in online education
Online Higher Education: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

- **Good**: addresses distance and temporal challenges
- **Bad**: low student motivation, self-direction, and engagement
- **Ugly**: ineffective teaching methods
Definitions

- **Students’ internal motivation**: an intrinsic source of desire to learn, including but not limited to “increases in self-esteem, responsibility, creativity, and self-fulfillment” (Knowles, 1986, p. 42)

- **Students’ self-direction**: the self-perception that the individual is capable of making choices about planning and executing his or her learning experiences, with the assistance of an instructor (Knowles, 1986).
Current State of Affairs

- Many online higher education settings advocate student-centered learning practices
- Still, low levels of student motivation and self-direction persist
  - Noted in the literature
  - Observed in practice
  - How can we improve our student-centered teaching?
Let’s Share Ideas (Padlet)

◦ What are some things that you do to increase internal motivation and self-direction among your students?
  ◦ Applicable at any level of education
  ◦ Applicable to online or in-person settings

◦ Go to the Padlet and share your ideas!
  ◦ https://padlet.com/lmcnamara20/yx96tz7ogcua2dr0
Problem of Practice

Low motivation, self-direction, and metacognitive behaviors among students in online higher education courses

Doctoral thesis

A Study of Adult Learners’ Self-Reported Levels of Motivation, Self-Direction, and Metacognitive Learning Behaviors in Online Graduate Courses
Possible Solution: Andragogy

- As articulated by Knowles (1986)
- Form of student-centered learning
- Many recommended teaching practices are consistent with andragogy
- Provided the theoretical framework for the doctoral study
Andragogy (Knowles, 1986)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption or Principle</th>
<th>Andragogical Approach to Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concept of the learner, level</td>
<td>Increasingly self-directed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of self-directedness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness to learn</td>
<td>Develops from life tasks and problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>A rich resource for learning by self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Task or problem-centered</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Internal incentives, curiosity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need to know</td>
<td>Learner’s perception of what and why of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>important to overall learning experience</td>
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(Holton, Wilson, & Bates, 2009, p. 178)
Learning Contracts

- Preferred method of teaching adults following the tenets of andragogy (Knowles, 1986)
- Provide students with choice about how to complete class assignments, within the framework of the course learning objectives (Knowles, 1986)
- 5 key elements of a learning contract (Knowles, 1987):
  1. Identified learning goals
  2. Methods and resources the student will use to achieve the learning goals
  3. Data the student will use as evidence of having achieved the goals
  4. Standards for assessing and grading the work product
  5. Deadlines for completing each part of the learning plan
Learning Contracts in Online Higher Education: Examples

- Students chose between pre-determined assignments, leading to an increase in motivation and self-efficacy (Chyung, 2007)
- Students provided with the opportunity to propose their own deadlines and deliverables, leading to positive student feedback (Boyer, 2003)
Sample Learning Contract (Partial)
Learner: Maria Doah
Learning Experience: Th. & Prac. Of Adult Ed.
Methodology

<table>
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<tr>
<th>What are you going to learn? (Objectives)</th>
<th>How are you going to learn it? (Resources and strategies)</th>
<th>Target date for completion</th>
<th>How are you going to know that you learned it? (Evidence)</th>
<th>How are you going to prove that you learned it? (Verification)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To develop the ability to describe the differences between youth and adults as learners and the implications for learning and teaching.</td>
<td>Read references cited in Inquiry Unit 1.2. Interview 3 persons from each age group: 6-10, 15-18, 19-22, 23-25, 45-50, 65-70.</td>
<td>Feb. 28</td>
<td>Make a videotape presentation of the differences and their implications.</td>
<td>Have videotape rated on a scale of 0-10 by 3 educational psychologists and 3 experienced teachers. A mean rating of 8.5 will be verification.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Skill in designing learning experiences that will accomplish a variety of purposes for several different kinds of learners.</td>
<td>Read references cited in Units 1.2 and 1.3.</td>
<td>March 16</td>
<td>Design (1) a one-day workshop for supervisors on delegating authority; (2) a 10-week course for school dropouts on job hunting; (3) a 20-week course on Understanding the Bible.</td>
<td>Have the designs rated by a supervisory trainer, a vocational educator, and a religious educator in terms of their feasibility, excellence of content, and involvement of learners.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excerpt from doctoral study learning contract #1

**Choice Assignments**

1. When will you submit your draft of Assignment #2 for Instructor review?
   Wednesday of Week 4 ____  Wednesday of Week 5 ____  Wednesday of Week 6 ____ (choose one)
2. When will you submit your draft of Assignment #3 for Instructor review?
   Wednesday of Week 7 ____  Wednesday of Week 8 ____  Wednesday of Week 9 ____ (choose one)
3. Which topic will you be covering in your Oral Presentation? (See the Week 2 folder for details. Each student must choose a unique topic. Group presentations are allowed with prior Instructor permission.) ______________________
4. When will you submit your Preview of your Oral Presentation? (No later than the end of Week 10) __________________
5. When will you submit your Final Oral Presentation and associated discussion board post?
   (No later than the end of Week 11) __________________
Analysis #1 (due by the end of Week 2)

- Discuss the effects of technology on the ethics of organizational communications
- Paper (3-4 pages of text, double-spaced)
- Audiovisual presentation (6-8 minutes in length)
- Prepare a lesson on a topic covered in Week 1 or Week 2; must incorporate real-world examples (audiovisual presentation of 6-8 minutes in length)
- Other (describe your proposed assignment; must address a topic covered in Week 1 and/or Week 2 and meet the length requirements noted above)
Purpose of the study

To examine and expand the existing knowledge base about how students interpret and respond to their experience of studying under learning contracts and, specifically, how learning in this way affects students’ perceptions of their internal motivation and self-direction.
Research Design

- Qualitative approach
  - Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)
- Participants
  - Eight students from two courses in a Master of Science in Corporate and Organizational Communication program
- Data Collection Methods
  - In-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between August and October 2018
Doctoral research study: Findings and Implications for Practice
Theme from findings: Empowering through choice

- Taking Control
  - Consistent with andragogy and prior findings (Hassanpour et al., 2015; Lemieux, 2001; O’Halloran & Delaney, 2011)
  - Extended to online-only setting
- Implication for practice: To increase interest and internal motivation, allow some student flexibility
  - Examples: choice of deadline or topic; choice of method of presentation
Theme from findings: Committing to the learning plan

◦ Reconciling Freedom and Commitment
  ◦ Freedom to choose versus commitment to choices
  ◦ Role “tension” in student-centered learning (Tzuo, 2007)

◦ Implication for practice: To engage and increase both internal motivation and self-direction, require students to take ownership of their learning experience
  ◦ Examples: learning contract; developing and committing to a learning plan
Any Questions?

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Hands-On Practice
Developing a Learning Contract
Developing a Learning Contract

Step 1: Identify an appropriate course
Step 2: Identify opportunities for choice
Step 3: Set up the learning contract template and create a timeline for implementation
Step 4: Develop or associate instructions and grading rubric
Step 5: Prepare student communication and follow-up plan
Learning Contract Development Document

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wTrz_uhy03-9tsxGZWwFmnOMiltr58RrTg-rfL3oOXc/edit
Step One: Identify an appropriate course

- Students have enough background knowledge to make informed choices
- Students can access resources they need to make choices
Step Two: Identify opportunities for choice

**Start small:** For example, choice of deadline, topic, or method of completion (e.g., paper or presentation)

**Be explicit about the scope of student choice:** “I didn’t actually see it as a choice, I guess. That’s interesting. And maybe that’s because it was not a contract.”
Step Three: Set up the learning contract template and create a timeline for implementation

- Articulate the student choice(s)
- Establish parameters for deadline(s) flexibility
- Set a deadline for submitting learning contract proposal (e.g., end of Week 1)
Step Four: Develop or associate instructions and grading rubric

• May use the same grading rubric for written papers and oral presentations
  • 250 words, on average, per double-spaced page of text
  • Approximately 130 spoken words per minute
• Share grading criteria with students
Step Five: Prepare student communication and follow-up plan

- Finalize learning contract document and associated instructions
- Finalize timeline for implementation
- Plan for follow-up with students who don’t submit a learning contract or submit an inadequate one
Implementation challenges

- I don’t want to choose. Just tell me what to do.
  - “I’m going to do them [the assignments] probably as well [without the learning contract]. But I may not like it as much!”

- What if I change my mind?
  - Allowed but not encouraged

- A “contract” sounds scary.
  - Outside scope of study, but may try “learning plan” or other terminology; possible effects on how students treat the undertaking
Let’s Discuss!

Meet your breakout group members

Share your learning contract ideas

Identify one area you feel is strongest in your learning contract plan

Identify one question or challenge regarding your learning contract

Be prepared to share key takeaways with the larger group
Any Questions?

I would be happy to answer any questions.

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References


References


Evaluate Sessions and Win!

- Navigate to specific session to evaluate
- Select “Evaluate Session” on session details screen
- Complete session evaluation*

*Each session evaluation completed (limited to one per session) = one contest entry

Five (5) $25 gift cards will be awarded

Must submit evals using the OLC conference website, beta platform mobile app