Learning Contracts and Self-Evaluation

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Abstract

This paper focuses on possible ways of improving student motivation and methods of assessment at tertiary level. It also addresses the need for integration of theory, practice and experience in the teaching/learning process in order to produce change in knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Learning contracts and self-evaluation are explored in the framework of adult learning and guidelines for their effective application are presented.

Introduction

The idea using contracts in the teaching-learning process developed in the sixties in the context of student centred learning, T-groups and the experiential learning movement. The focus of student-centred learning originated by Carl Rogers and his followers was on developing an open and non-threatening atmosphere conducive to learning. The main challenge that student-centred learning faced in tertiary education was the need for development of the new way of assessment, different from traditional tests and assignments. Although having more a role of facilitators than teachers, tutors and lecturers still needed to evaluate student work at the end of the course and mark it. In the context of understanding learning as mutual process where participants learn from one another and where the teacher is more a facilitator than an omniscient transmitter of knowledge, new methods of evaluation needed to be invented.

Malcolm Knowles (1986) started experimenting with learning contracts in his graduate courses and very soon realised that they worked like magic. Students became more motivated, learning became individualised and their achievements were much higher than when traditional methods were used. Being very famous in the field of adult education, for the last thirty years Knowles has been promoting the science of...
andragogy as opposed to pedagogy, strongly believing that different methods should be used when educating adults then when children are concerned.

When I started experimenting with learning contracts in my teaching practice the effect was similar as Knowles observed. The idea of individualised learning, that learning contracts offer, perfectly fitted with my teaching style and with my personal beliefs. My thinking and consequently my work was very much influenced with Dr William Glasser’s teaching. William Glasser (1998) focuses on quality in his teaching and he stated that if we as teachers create warm and trusting relationships, create a warm and trusting environment, eliminate fear and coercion, and if students see purpose in what they are learning and how can they utilise it in practice – it is very likely that they would do quality work. Glasser also stated that self-evaluation leads to improvement of quality and that quality is not a destination, but rather a journey. Being evaluated from somebody else increases defensive behaviour and students produce work just to satisfy the teacher and to get a good mark, instead of learning and improving knowledge in order to became effective practitioners in the future. Combining Glasser’s ideas and Knowles’s practical advice I focused on creating a trusting relationship and atmosphere conducive to learning on my courses but also on creating effective working contracts with students. The purpose and the importance of the material that needed to be covered during the course became transparent and by being able to self-evaluate their achievements students became more motivated to continuously improve their knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Instead of being motivated extrinsically, with rewards and praise, they became motivated intrinsically, feeling satisfaction because they achieved something useful for their professional development.

I have found learning contracts particularly useful for teaching social work and counselling because of the continuous need for integrating theory, practice and personal experience. Students set their learning outcomes, personalising proposed course outcomes, which address what needs to be covered during the course. By doing that each learning outcome is linked with its practical application and students are becoming aware how they can use learned knowledge in their future profession. Self-evaluation is a good tool of evaluating changes that happened during course on the level of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. When students set clear learning outcomes as
well as clear parameters for self-evaluating their work they inevitably become active participants in the teaching-learning process and they undertake responsibility for their learning. Identifying the theoretical, practical and experiential part of the course clarifies the purpose of integrating it all together and students are more likely to perceive it as meaningful and purposeful.

This paper will outline the process of contract learning and self-evaluation through the example of the Professional Practice course taught in the framework of the Bachelor of Social Work programme. Knowles’s (1986) framework for constructing learning contracts has been used to outline this process.

General and Individualised Outcomes

At the beginning of the course students receive Green Cards and the detailed outline for the course incorporated in the Book of Readings. Learning outcomes are clearly stated in the Green Card but they are general. Students are asked to personalise these general outcomes and list them in their learning contract, as well as stating why are these learning outcomes important to them and how will achievement of these help them to become better professionals. They have the chance to explore their learning needs and how do they fit into their career plans. They are also encouraged to explore their learning styles and they are asked to define areas where they would like to improve in terms of modifying their favourite learning styles and developing new abilities. Students have the opportunity to define what would they like to understand better, what skills would they like to improve or develop, what attitudes would they like to change and what values would they like to explore. When they discuss these issues in small groups they are asked to clearly formulate their specific objectives, link them with outcomes in the Greed Card and put them in their learning contract. If they need more time, they can consult the Book of Readings and other recommended literature or consult the lecturer individually before completing their contract. When students submit their learning contracts, the contract is either accepted or it needs to be supplemented in order to fulfil course requirements.
Resources, Strategies and Possible Obstacles

When general outcomes from the Green Card are individualised, students are asked to define learning resources, strategies and possible obstacles. They are encouraged to choose strategies to achieve their learning outcomes, utilising their prior knowledge and resources available. It is entirely up to students if they will use their preferred learning style or try experimenting with new ways of learning. They are encouraged to go beyond their comfort zone in order to be challenged and to feel and know at the end of the course that they accomplished something that they would not accomplish without the group support, available resources and them putting a lot of effort into it.

While talking about resources, students are becoming aware of support systems at campus, library resources, lecturer’s availability, required and recommended literature, available agencies in the social work field which may help them to achieve their learning outcomes as well as resources among themselves. Students are asked to share how they can help one another in achieving learning outcomes. Co-operation is encouraged and students can produce as evidence of their work group projects, as well as individual pieces of work.

Evidence

Students are asked to state what evidence they can collect to demonstrate that they have accomplished their learning outcomes. Some choose to do case-studies, journals, oral presentations, essays, to moderate discussions, conduct projects, submit examples of utilisation of knowledge they gained during the course, reports, book reviews, etc...They also attach weighting to each assignment. They are asked to do a minimum of two and the maximum of four assignments. There is no word limit. They have to demonstrate the knowledge and they have the freedom to choose how will they

\footnote{UNITEC designed material containing basic information about the course.}
do it. Students set dates when they would like to submit their assignments with the
general deadline being the last day of the course. Students are encouraged to learn how
to plan and how to manage their time as well as how to utilise available resources. All these skills are essential for effective social and community work and counselling.

Criteria for Validating Evidence

Students are invited to set standards or criteria for validating their work. They are asked to define how will they know that they have been successful and how will they measure success. The long list of criteria is offered to students so they can choose which of these apply to accomplishment of their outcomes. They can set their own criteria as well. They self-evaluate according to chosen criteria and lecturer's feedback focuses around these with an additional more general feedback.

Students can change their learning contracts, but they need to give proposed changes in a written form to the lecturer. Changes have to be received at least one week before their assignments are due.

Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is understood to be the first step to supervision therefore it is essential to teach students to self-evaluate. If they learn to self-evaluate early in their professional development they will inevitably become more accountable as practitioners when they complete their studies. Students attach self-evaluation to each assignment they submit. They are asked to reflect on their work and to state what have they covered in terms of the learning outcomes listed in the Greed Card and in terms of their personal outcomes. They are asked to reflect on what have they learned and how do they see it relevant for their future practice. In their self-evaluations students write what do they
think they still need to improve, learn or re-learn in order to become effective practitioners and what do they think is missing in their assignment. They may include their colleague’s assessment as well and they grade their assignments on the 11-point scale.

Conclusion

Learning contracts significantly contributed to the quality of the course. Students became more motivated when attaching personal meaning to achievement of the outcomes from the Green Card. The learning process became more co-operative and students became keen to learn more. The integration between theory and practice was enhanced whereas students became very clear about direction they want to take in their further learning. It seems that this way of teaching and learning helped students to become more motivated, to learn more and to see purpose and meaning of the material taught during the course.

References:
