

Learning contracts in the classroom: tools for empowerment and accountability

CATHERINE M. LEMIEUX

Abstract *This paper describes the results of a study investigating learning contracts as tools for empowerment and accountability. Students (N=100) enrolled in five, graduate-level courses completed a brief instrument measuring key concepts of empowerment. In each class students' mean, final scores, based on first and final drafts of assignments were compared. Students felt they had decision-making power, and reported a sense of personal responsibility for their learning experience. They also demonstrated significant improvements in performance ($p < 0.0001$) after revising their assignments. The findings suggest that learning contracts are an effective tool for responsibly sharing power and promoting better performance outcomes.*

An ongoing challenge for social work educators is to incorporate teaching strategies that are consonant with professional expectations in social service settings in the field. The use of learning contracts to delineate students and instructors' mutual expectations is a strategy that holds promising implications for student (and instructor) learning in the context of empowerment and accountability.

Contracts make the social work world go 'round. The literature describes theoretical foundations undergirding a contract model of practice (see, e.g. Corden & Preston-Shoot, 1987; Maluccio & Marlow, 1974; Zwick & Attkisson, 1985), as well as provides empirical evidence of the effectiveness of contracting to achieve direct practice goals (see, e.g. Aronson & Overall, 1966; Klier *et al.*, 1984; Rhodes, 1977; Smith & Corden, 1981; Wood, 1978). The contracting concept has also been applied to social work education, most often in relation to practicum learning (Bogo & Vayda, 1986; Hamilton & Else, 1983; Parsons & Durst, 1992). The use of the learning contract in the classroom, however, has received minimal attention (Coulshed, 1993; Knowles, 1986). Huff and Johnson (1998) recently incorporated learning contracts with formative and narrative evaluations to compare students' perceptions of empowerment, and found that students in the experimental class felt significantly more empowered than those in the traditional class. Respect, validation, ownership, and choice were identified as key mechanisms of classroom empowerment. They conclude their paper with methodological and practical suggestions, and underscore the primacy of teaching students the value of empowerment.

Huff and Johnson's (1998) study raises several important issues. Although these authors found 'no prior studies on the effects of using empowerment techniques' (p. 382) with graduate-level students in their review, a literature base (spanning over 25 years) has been

Correspondence to: Dr Catherine M. Lemieux, Louisiana State University, School of Social Work, 311 Huey P. Long Fieldhouse, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA.

available to educators who wish to test innovative teaching strategies. In fact several practical suggestions made by Huff and Johnson had already appeared in a number of earlier articles (viz., Brown *et al.*, 1976; Coulshed, 1989; Kramer & Wrenn, 1994; Swaine & Baird, 1977; Swenson, 1988).

Huff and Johnson (1998) believe that empowerment is the most fundamental skill. I would argue that accountability (i.e. the ability to demonstrate favorable outcomes) is just as important as empowerment: both are critical tools for professional social workers who are being called upon to demonstrate advanced clinical, technical, and administrative competencies upon graduation (Jarman-Rohde *et al.*, 1997; Middleman, 1987). It behooves educators, therefore, to assess how their teaching approaches influence both their students' performance outcomes as well as the quality of their professional encounters.

Finally, Huff and Johnson's (1998) suggestions to randomly assign subjects, isolate and measure the effectiveness of different strategies, and incorporate follow-up data are logical, responsible, and methodologically sound. These recommendations, however, pose practical obstacles for educators who experience relentless (and often competing) mandates for service, productivity, and excellence in teaching within heavily bureaucratized environments. Moreover, the key in assessing the validity of quasi-experiments is demonstrated comparability on important variables, a point that was not made clear by Huff and Johnson (1998). Parsons and Durst (1992) argue that less rigorous studies can provide useful information for educators if concepts are responsibly generalized from relevant literature, and when careful testing of these approaches yields both positive student endorsement and favorable academic outcomes.

In order to address some of these issues, I review the literature describing the use of empowerment techniques in social work education and summarize the principles and concepts underlying the use of learning contracts. I describe an innovative teaching approach that incorporates written learning contracts with student self-evaluation and formative evaluation processes. A more detailed discussion of self-evaluation in the classroom is reported elsewhere (Lemieux, 1997). This study assesses the effectiveness of using learning contracts to facilitate student empowerment and improve performance outcomes.

Empowerment techniques in social work education

The effective use of empowerment strategies in the classroom is contingent upon the instructor's success in reducing the inherent power disparity that exists between professors and students. Huff and Johnson (1998) extended Solomon's (1976) goals for social workers and identified mutual respect and validation, and student ownership and choice as key concepts of classroom empowerment. These themes have consistently emerged among concerned educators who strive to create classroom environments which emulate core social work values and competencies.

Self-directed learning

Some of the earliest thoughts about empowerment in social work education can be culled from the work of Somers (1971), who described how instructors can engage learners through a collaborative process whereby 'it becomes possible for the class or unit or unit system to develop shared direction, shared scanning and self-monitoring, and shared steering of its own life and direction' (p. 57). Middleman and Goldberg (1972) used an interactional teaching method based on the assumption that students want to assume personal responsibility for

their learning and growth, and that learning from each other (as well as from the teacher) influences how they help others in the future.

In 1972 Knowles found traditional, pedagogical approaches to education (i.e. the exclusive use of structured lectures and assignments) inappropriate for adult learners in classroom settings. He advocated for the inclusion of andragogical approaches (i.e. those responsive to the needs of adults) based on the following set of assumptions: (a) adult learners are self-directed; (b) life experience is a valuable learning resource; (c) the demands of social roles stimulate an adult's readiness to learn; and (d) mature people come into learning experiences to solve problems. These assumptions challenge social work educators to define their roles and develop activities in a manner that both teaches and models autonomous, professional behavior.

In 1977 Brigham linked the elements undergirding the teaching approaches of Paulo Friere to social work education, and he argued that change agents and autonomous learners 'develop from a liberation rather than an indoctrination' (p. 8). Brigham describes how he implemented the Friere approach through the use of individualized learning contracts, and he concluded that educators must be willing to adopt a posture that is premised on a re-configuration (as opposed to abandonment) of their responsibilities as learning coordinators and facilitators.

Brown *et al.* (1976) and Swaine and Baird (1977) describe student-centered (andragogical) teaching approaches that incorporated mutual goal setting and ongoing evaluation. These authors similarly observed that too much flexibility in decision making produces considerable anxiety for students. Kramer and Wrenn (1994) tested a teaching approach that blended both pedagogical and andragogical methods, and concluded that students appreciate the responsibility of being treated as self-directed learners; however, they also require structure, guidance, and instructor-based knowledge and skill expertise. These authors observed that students get frustrated with unclear guidelines and are more comfortable with instructors' decisions about course content and desired outcomes.

Empowerment and capacity building are concepts germane to feminist pedagogy (Dore, 1994; Lazzari, 1991) and the teaching of feminist practice principles (Davis, 1993; Tice, 1990). Feminist scholars criticize traditional, classroom approaches which groom students to depend on others to meet their learning needs: This behavior is at odds with the critical, evaluative, and reflective behavior that is encouraged and expected in the field (Millstein, 1993). Self-directed learning implies the existence of a 'nonhierarchical, collaborative' encounter with the classroom instructor (Dore, 1994, p. 98), participatory decision making, and personal and collective responsibility for learning.

Learning contracts

Parkhurst (1922) provides one of the earliest references to contracting in education in his discussion about how best to distribute initiative and responsibility among educators and students. The learning contract, in general, has been conceptualized as both a system that organizes an alternative mode of education (see, e.g. Berte, 1975; Duley, 1975; Feeney & Riley, 1975) and as an approach which shapes a particular program of study (see, e.g. Barlow, 1974; Freie, 1972). The learning contract in the classroom is an agreement between the instructor and student that establishes the nature of the relationship, the objectives of the learning experience, the activities to accomplish the learning objectives, and the means by which the educational effort will be evaluated. Contracts are developed via a negotiation process between the instructor and student that invites collaboration, dialogue, and mutual accountability. The instructor ideally adopts the role of facilitator, and students are encour-

aged to assume personal responsibility for their learning experience. Students are granted decision-making power with expectations that they can and will commit to a learning process and demonstrate favorable outcomes. Learning contracts can be used to organize self-directed learning by providing students with opportunities to select activities and assignments and negotiate for certain grades (see, e.g. Knowles, 1986). Students are committing to a process in which they are expected to maximize the educational experience.

The contracting process has been used in relation to students' practicum experiences to foster organization, empowerment, and mutual accountability (Collins & Ottley, 1986; Fox & Zischka, 1989; Wilson, 1981). Parsons and Durst (1992) posit that the learning contract has been underutilized in social work education because it is viewed as a static, preparatory step that is distinct from the actual learning process. The authors argue that an equal focus on both the process and content of contracting can provide students with liberating and empowering educational experiences. Huff and Johnson (1998) used a learning contract as one of three empowerment strategies in the classroom, and found that their approach increased students' perception of empowerment. When learning contracts are responsibly used, they motivate students to achieve certain outcomes and provide structure to the learning experience, while remaining flexible enough to respond to the unique demands of individual learners. Contracting, therefore, is a means by which instructor-facilitators can apply the concept of self-determination (Freedberg, 1989), as they critically and reflectively share their power with student-colleagues.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how learning contracts were used in the context of an overall teaching approach that incorporated instructor- and student-directed features. The work of Knowles (1986) and professional experience shaped the development of the learning contract and its use in each class, whereas Kramer and Wrenn's (1994) findings provided the basis for decisions about balancing instructor- and student-centered activities. Outcome measures used to assess the effectiveness of this approach include formative and summative course evaluation data, and student survey data describing the extent to which learning contracts facilitated their learning and professional development.

Clarifying mutual expectations, identifying relevant tasks, and obtaining a commitment to the process should lead to a more favorable outcome in the classroom, as has been demonstrated in the practice literature. In an educational context, improved performance on assignments and other tasks would be the most valid outcome measure. In this study, students' mean, final scores on first and final drafts of assignments were used to measure improvements in performance outcomes.

Method

Study participants

The study population was comprised of 100 students enrolled in five different classes with the instructor during the spring, summer, and fall semesters in a large, southern state university in America. The spring semester classes included a domestic violence practice elective (Family Violence) that was open to both first- and second-year students ($n = 25$), and a required, foundation-level course on group and community practice (Practice II) ($n = 20$). Eight students participated in the Family Violence class over the summer. Fall semester classes included the foundation research ($n = 29$) (Research I) and practice (Practice I) ($n = 18$) courses. Participating students were, on average 29 years old ($SD = 8.22$). Over three quarters were female ($n = 76$, 76%) and Caucasian ($n = 90$, 90%), with seven (7%) African-American and three (3%) Asian students participating in this study.

TABLE 1. Questionnaire item responses

Item	N	L	S	Q	V
1. I liked having the opportunity to pick my assignments and due dates	0	0	2	8	90
2. I felt bound and obligated by the mutual expectations that were outlined in my contract	1	2	3	26	68
3. I think the learning contract was an important feature of this course	3	0	16	31	50
4. I feel it is helpful to revisit the learning contract during class on a regular basis	1	9	29	32	29
5. I feel like my use of a learning contract is relevant to my work with clients	0	3	15	24	58
6. The learning contract helped me to clarify the nature of my relationship with my instructor	2	2	16	27	53
7. My learning contract motivated me to complete all my course readings on time	5	4	20	36	35
8. I felt like I had some decision-making power in this class because of my learning contract	1	2	9	24	64
9. I frequently reviewed my learning contract on my own throughout the semester	3	14	33	30	20
10. I would probably think about academic integrity and the NASW Code of Ethics without a learning contract	3	10	24	35	28

Note. N = not at all; L = a little; S = somewhat; Q = quite a bit; V = very much.

Instrumentation

Student attitudes toward the use of learning contracts and demographic information were measured with a brief, 17-item instrument developed by the author. Ten items measured the extent to which students felt the learning contracts both empowered them and held them accountable in their respective classes (see Table 1). Four items focused on responsibility for learning (items 2, 7, 9, 10), three items were about the contracting process (items 3, 4, 5), two items focused on ownership and choice (items 1, 8), and the remaining item (item 6) was about the student–instructor relationship. Participants responded to each item using a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from ‘not at all’ (1) to ‘very much’ (5), with total scale scores ranging from 10 to 50 (see Table 1). A reliability analysis of this instrument’s internal consistency yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.80, adequate for the purpose of this study. Demographic data were gathered with the seven remaining items. Students signed informed consent forms and completed this questionnaire during the last class session after final grades were determined. Formative and departmental course evaluation data and students’ final scores (based on first and final drafts of assignments) served as additional outcome measures.

Instructor-directed activities

Students in each class were provided with a detailed course syllabus and class outline that described the course content, the objectives of the course and each class session, the methods

of instruction, and key readings for each session. An attached appendix to the syllabus provided students with a detailed description of assignments and how they were weighted, and criteria for evaluation.

The instructor deemed it necessary to develop specific skills in some classes, and this judgment dictated when students would have the opportunity to choose among assignments. For example all students in the foundation-level research course produced a research proposal and critiqued a journal article, whereas students in the family violence elective, for some assignments, selected among conceptually-related products. Finally, in all classes (when there was no guest speaker scheduled) the beginning of each class session included a didactic element that covered key concepts and provided some structure to the learning experience.

Student-directed activities

Students in all five classes evaluated their own attendance and participation based on specific criteria, and were allowed to choose their assignments (for some classes) and their due dates from a predetermined menu. The instructor developed a Sequential Criterion-Referenced Educational Evaluation (SCREE) instrument specific to each class in order to assess attainment of course objectives [see Hudson (1981) for a complete description]. Students self-administered the SCREE in the first and last classes, and two other times during the semester.

The learning contract was used to commit the instructor and students to a structured evaluation process which encouraged students to revise their work, if necessary and appropriate. Students initially submitted their assignments to the instructor who provided detailed, narrative feedback and a score on a rating sheet that used a Likert-scale format for each established performance criterion. Students were encouraged to revise their work using this feedback, and reevaluate their performance and award themselves final scores using a similar student rating sheet. Students then resubmitted their assignments and rating sheets to the instructor for review. Assignment scores were privately negotiated if the instructor did not agree with the students' ratings.

Formative evaluation data were gathered from students at the end of each class indicating their satisfaction with the content, discussion, and learning environment, plus any comments. These results were summarized and distributed the following class. The instructor, a practitioner with over 17 years of group experience, applied the principles articulated by Shulman (1987) for maximizing 'mutual aid processes' (p. 7), and consistently modeled collegial, respectful, and authentic communication in each class.

Learning contracts

A second appendix to the course syllabus and outline provided students with a learning contract comprised of three subsections. The first section stipulated 13 expectations related to academic integrity, professional behavior in the classroom, performance on assignments, and special circumstances (see Appendix A). The Instructor-Student Agreement comprised the second section of the learning contract, and more fully describes the nature of the professional relationship among students, and between the students and the instructor. This first-person agreement commits students and the instructor to the learning process, embraces key empowerment concepts (i.e. mutual respect, validation, decision-making power, and personal responsibility for learning) and articulates the expectation that students can and will improve their performance with instructor feedback (see Appendix B).

The first two subsections of the learning contract were the same for each of the five classes,

and were reviewed during the first class session. The final section of the learning contract was tailored to each class, and summarized the menu of assignments and due dates (see Appendix C for an example of this section as it was used in the Family Violence class). Students were given 2 weeks to complete and sign this form and submit it to the instructor, who signed, copied, and then returned the form to the student. The content of the learning contracts was discussed in the five classes throughout the semester to assess the extent to which the students and the instructor exercised mutual accountability and adhered to expected behavioral norms.

Findings

Of the 100 students who participated in this study, over three quarters were enrolled full time (77%), and most (91%) had no prior experience with learning contracts. They reported over 3 years of paid practice experience (in months) ($M = 40.07$, $SD = 67.74$). Over 4 years had elapsed (in months) ($M = 54.90$, $SD = 74.30$) since these students obtained their last degree.

Summed learning contract scale scores ranged from a low of 23 to a high of 50 ($M = 41.83$; $SD = 5.53$). The distribution of responses for each item is presented in Table 1. Most students (96%) felt that the learning contract was an important feature of the course and that it helped clarify the instructor–student relationship. They particularly liked having the opportunity to choose their assignments and due dates (98%), and most (94%) felt obligated to meet the expectations set forth in the learning contract. Almost three quarters (71%) reported that the learning contract motivated them to complete their readings on time. Although only half regularly reviewed their contracts on their own, 61% felt that it would be helpful to review the learning contract during class. Over half (63%) reported that they would be concerned about academic integrity and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (1996) *Code of Ethics* without a learning contract. Most (97%) felt, at least somewhat, that the contract provided them with some decision-making power in the class, and was relevant to their work with clients.

Departmental course evaluation data were gathered from four classes ($N = 93$). The response options for this 10-item instrument ranged from ‘1’ (strongly disagree) to ‘6’ (strongly agree). The mean scores (with standard deviations in parentheses) in the Family Violence, Practice II, Research I, and Practice I classes were 5.60 (0.79), 5.26 (1.00), 5.36 (0.76), and 5.87 (0.37), respectively.

In each class students’ final scores, based on both first and final drafts of their assignments, were compared to assess the extent to which their overall performance improved with revisions to their work (see Table 2). The difference in mean scores was 15.10 in the large Family Violence ($n = 25$) class, 6.52 in Practice II, 6.69 in the small Family Violence class, 6.59 in Research I, and 3.45 in Practice I. These improvements in scores were significant (at $p < 0.0001$) in each class (see Table 2).

Discussion

Students felt empowered in these five classes, and reported a sense of ownership, validation, and choice about their learning experience. This is evidenced by the distribution of responses on the survey instrument and positive, summative course evaluation results, and supported by several student comments. One student commented, ‘I felt empowered with the learning contract. Thank you. It was very much in line with self-determination’. Another student wrote, ‘It is nice to be treated as an adult and a professional. The learning contract helps place the responsibility where it should be—on the graduate student’.

TABLE 2. Comparison of final scores based on first and final drafts of assignments

Class	<i>n</i>	First drafts		Final drafts		<i>t</i> -value
		<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	
Family Violence	25	81.90	7.49	97.00	3.38	-10.42****
Practice II	20	85.89	2.63	92.41	2.09	14.91****
Family Violence	8	86.81	4.12	93.50	3.31	8.07****
Research I	29	83.39	4.45	89.98	3.94	11.45****
Practice I	18	84.41	3.41	87.86	3.60	-8.06****

****: $p < 0.0001$, two-tailed test.

Students also felt accountable to the learning experience, and suggested that the learning contract provided clarity about mutual expectations and the nature of the instructor–student relationship. A student commented, ‘I definitely found they challenged me to fulfill the expectations of the professor as well as my own’. Another student commented, ‘The learning contract helped me to keep in mind, throughout the semester, my obligations as well as the teacher’s’. The instructor’s liability for fulfilling expectations was intimated by a student who noted, ‘The learning contract was useful and it meant a lot that you abided by it also’.

The contracting process was used to motivate students to revise their work and reevaluate their own performance, and students demonstrated significantly improved outcomes when they were given this opportunity. This is consistent with the behavior that is expected of autonomous professionals. We are not preparing students for a world of one-shot performances (i.e. test taking); rather, we are preparing them for interactive, reflexive, and discursive relationships with clients, colleagues, and organizations. By providing students with extensive written feedback in addition to a numerical score, the instructor was able to demonstrate and model a high degree of investment in and commitment to the learning process, behavior that is akin to Miller’s (1990) conceptualization of a covenantal model for professional relationships. This may serve the same function as Huff and Johnson’s (1998) narrative evaluations, but without the accompanying logistical problems.

Many students became aware that their expectations for perfection (i.e. a superior grade) with unfamiliar material were unexamined and unreasonable, a realization that encouraged them to report more empathy for their clients’ struggles and frustrations with change. Moreover, the process of negotiating grades provided an invaluable learning experience that emphasized collaboration and the responsible sharing of power, lessons that students will hopefully generalize to their future practice settings as they assume supervisory roles and tasks.

Huff and Johnson’s (1998) speculation about the instructor’s responsibility for managing the classroom and clarifying standards of performance (see p. 381) is puzzling. It is the instructor’s responsibility (as with any task group leader) to facilitate interactions in a class such that members can achieve their learning goals, and part of this is ensuring that standards for performance are explicated and upheld. The structure imposed on the learning experience in these five classes (i.e. predetermined learning objectives, assignments, and criteria for evaluation) by the instructor seemed to alleviate some of the student anxiety and discomfort reported in Huff and Johnson’s (1998) study. One student stated, for example, ‘I liked the structure the learning contract provided and the sense that things were in control’. Another student noted, ‘Being able to choose my own due dates really helped me to manage my own course work’. These comments echo the observations of Kramer and Wrenn (1994), who

encourage educators to properly balance instructor- and student-directed learning activities. In this sense the strategic imposition of some structure can be a more liberating than confusing experience for students who are accustomed to the behavioral norms of a traditional classroom environment.

The use of contracts in clinical settings is not unquestioningly embraced (see, e.g. Corden, 1980; Miller, 1990; Seabury, 1976), and the use of learning contracts in these classes was not without criticism. As one student noted:

I loved being able to choose assignments and due dates. I wish more instructors would allow this, however, I do not feel the learning contract was a necessary tool for our class. I feel like I already commit to a specific set of standards when I come to class. I also feel like you are to adhere to specific standards when you choose to teach.

Some students either misunderstood the purpose of the contract, or viewed it as a discrete, one-time event. One student commented, 'I did not understand their purpose'. Another student noted, 'I rarely looked at the contract other than for due dates'. This last comment is consistent with the finding that only half of the students regularly looked at their contracts on their own.

Students did not feel, for the most part, that it was particularly helpful to revisit the learning contracts in class. This may be because students are not interested in spending an inordinate amount of class time on process issues if mutual obligations and expectations are articulated in a clear and straightforward manner. Students may also be reluctant to use class time to review contracts when they have the opportunity to provide formative evaluation data after each class session. One student noted on a class feedback form, 'I did not understand at first why we spent so much time discussing our participation, and then realized that this was something we all committed to at the beginning of this class'.

A review of the numerous, insightful, amusing, and at times painfully critical comments on over 50 feedback forms from the students in these classes suggests that responsibly soliciting and managing student feedback on an ongoing basis is an important extension of the learning contract. Not only do students enjoy and consistently use this mechanism, but it provides continuity to the learning experience, clarifies expectations as relationships develop in the class, and creates an environment in which students can ask questions and practice assertiveness.

One change I plan to implement in future classes [also recommended by Huff and Johnson (1998)] is to encourage students to develop and submit proposals for alternative assignments (and evaluation criteria) when options are already made available to them. I also plan to develop and administer tests covering course content in order to provide students with outcome measures that are more objective than self-administered SCREE data. Rather than using tests for course credit, however, students will be asked to link their test results to attendance and participation self-evaluations.

This study also has limitations, the most obvious one being the lack of comparison data. The reliability of the instrument warrants further testing, and the wording of the items reflects a bias toward acquiescent responses. Despite this danger, it should be noted that there was some dissent on items 4, 7, 9, and 10. Although no significant differences emerged across the five groups on mean, scale scores, the classes were dissimilar in terms of their substantive focus and student membership. It has been demonstrated that learning contracts can facilitate both empowerment and accountability in the classroom; however, as Huff and Johnson (1998) aptly note, it is important to examine the extent to which students transfer these competencies to the field.

Conclusion

Learning contracts were used in these five classes to clarify mutual expectations, structure the learning experience, and articulate performance standards. The instructor consciously shared power on some issues, and not on others, in order to ensure that students acquired competencies that would enhance their success as professional social workers in the field. Students not only benefited with improved grades, but they also felt empowered and accountable as they practiced important, transferable skills. The approach used in these five classes minimized the professor–student power imbalance.

The academic setting often precludes random assignment and opportunities to either delay treatment or isolate and test different strategies. This means that instructors must explicate their methods and select valid outcome measures that provide useful information to other educators, especially when the use of a comparison group is neither feasible nor desirable. This study, for example, does not allow us to assess whether we would see significant improvements in students' performance outcomes either without a contract or with a less structured evaluation process. It would be irresponsible, however, to withhold or deny that level of structure from a comparison group of students: In addition to unnecessarily increasing student anxiety, we would also be teaching and modeling questionable practice habits.

Many questions remain unanswered. For example, it is unclear which types of students most benefit from the contracting process. How does practice experience influence the effectiveness of learning contracts? Is the usefulness of contracting affected by students' undergraduate orientations or the length of time they have been out of school? Are learning contracts more effective in required or elective courses? These questions are most appropriately answered with multivariate approaches that can tease out the relative contributions of relevant variables.

From a more practical perspective, what happens if I fail to comply with an established turn-around date? I'm reminded of a student who quipped when submitting his learning contract, 'My attorney reviewed it and he said it looks okay'. Although learning contracts are presumably morally rather than legally binding, it behooves educators to garner the support of their department heads prior to incorporating learning contracts into the classroom setting.

Instructors who choose to selectively share their power in the classroom are encouraged to responsibly test their approaches. They should carefully plan and develop components of the learning experience and link them together in a logical manner. The learning contract is a particularly useful tool for coordinating a holistic learning experience. Continuous feedback is essential to the process, and instructors should be willing to modify their approaches according to the expressed needs of their student-colleagues whenever this is appropriate.

Learning contracts can provide instructors with an opportunity to co-create learning environments that are conducive to the expression of critical interpersonal skills and values. The process of empowerment in practice settings, however, is nested within expectations for improved outcomes, to which both practitioner and client are held accountable. In an educational context, learning contracts can be used to ensure that student-colleagues acquire the competencies they need to meet the demands of modern service environments, while allowing us to celebrate the 'beliefs and values we espouse as instructors' (Kottler, 1992, p. 475). It is in this manner that we can simultaneously model professional integrity and promote the integrity of the profession.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Robert Leighninger, Jr. for his careful review of this manuscript and helpful comments.

References

- ARONSON, H. & OVERALL, B. (1966) Treatment expectations of patients in two social classes, *Social Work*, 11, pp. 34–41.
- BARLOW, R. M. (1974) An experiment with learning contracts, *Journal of Higher Education*, 45(6), pp. 441–449.
- BERTE, N. R. (1975) The future for learning contracts, *New Directions for Higher Education*, 10, pp. 93–100.
- BOGO, M. & VAYDA, E. (1986) *The Practice of Field Instruction in Social Work: Theory and Process* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press).
- BRIGHAM, T. M. (1977) Liberation in social work education: applications from Paulo Freire, *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 13(3), pp. 5–11.
- BROWN, L. N., KATZ, D. & WALDEN, T. (1976) Student-centered teaching: the analog to client-centered practice, *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 12(3), pp. 11–17.
- COLLINS, S. & OTTLEY, G. (1986) Practice teaching: reflections, steps before reflection, and some steps for the future, *Social Work Education*, 6(1), pp. 11–15.
- CORDEN, J. (1980) Contracts in social work practice, *British Journal of Social Work*, 10, pp. 143–161.
- CORDEN, J. & PRESTON-SHOOT, M. (1987) *Contracts in Social Work* (Aldershot, England, Gower).
- COULSHED, V. (1989) Developing the process curriculum, *Issues in Social Work Education*, 9, pp. 21–30.
- COULSHED, V. (1993) Adult learning: implications for teaching social work education, *British Journal of Social Work*, 23, pp. 1–13.
- DAVIS, L. (1993) Feminism and constructivism: teaching social work practice with women, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 8(1/2), pp. 147–163.
- DORE, M. M. (1994) Feminist pedagogy and the teaching of social work practice, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 30(1), pp. 97–106.
- DULEY, J. (1975) Out of class contract learning at Justin Morrill, *New Directions for Higher Education*, 10, pp. 53–63.
- FEENEY, J. & RILEY, G. (1975) Learning contracts at New College, Sarasota, *New Directions for Higher Education*, 10, pp. 9–30.
- FOX, R. & ZISCHKA, P. (1989) The field instruction contract: a paradigm for effective learning, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 3(1), pp. 103–116.
- FREEDBERG, S. (1989) Self determination: historical perspectives and effects on current practice, *Social Work*, 34(1), pp. 33–38.
- FREIE, J. F. (1972) The individual learning contract, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 25, pp. 230–234.
- HAMILTON, N. & ELSE, J. F. (1983) *Designing Field Education: Philosophy, Structure, and Process* (Springfield, IL, Charles C. Thomas).
- HUDSON, W. W. (1981) Sequential Criterion-Referenced Educational Evaluation: a student/teacher assessment system, *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 17, pp. 53–58.
- HUFF, M. T. & JOHNSON, M. M. (1998) Empowering students in a graduate level social work course, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 34(3), pp. 375–385.
- JARMAN-ROHDE, L., MCFALL, J., KOLAR, P. & STROM, G. (1997) The changing context of social work practice: implications and recommendations for educators, *Journal of Social Work Education*, 33(1), pp. 29–46.
- KLIER, J., FEIN, E. & GENERO, C. (1984) Are written or verbal contracts more effective in family therapy? *Social Work*, 29, pp. 298–299.
- KNOWLES, M. S. (1972) Innovations in teaching styles based upon adult learning, *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 8(2), pp. 32–39.
- KNOWLES, M. S. (1986) *Using Learning Contracts* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey Bass).
- KOTTLER, J. A. (1992) Confronting our own hypocrisy: being a model for our students and clients, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 70, pp. 475–476.
- KRAMER, B. J. & WRENN, R. (1994) The blending of andragogical and pedagogical teaching methods in advanced social work practice courses, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 10(1/2), pp. 43–64.
- LAZZARRI, M. M. (1991) Feminism, empowerment, and field education, *Affilia*, 6(4), pp. 71–87.
- LEMIEUX, C. M. (1997) *Peer Review and Self-Evaluation Processes: Preparing Students for Professional Learning Experiences*. Paper presented at the 43rd Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education, Chicago, IL.
- MALUCCIO, A. N. & MARLOW, W. D. (1974) The case for the contract, *Social Work*, 19(1), pp. 28–36.
- MIDDLEMAN, R. R. (1987) Stress in social work education: responding to a changing environment, *Arête*, 12(1), pp. 67–72.
- MIDDLEMAN, R. R. & GOLDBERG, G. (1972) The interactional way of presenting generic social work concepts, *Journal for Education for Social Work*, 8(2), pp. 48–57.

- MILLER, P. (1990) Covenantal model for professional relationships: an alternative to the contract model, *Social Work*, 35(2), pp. 121–125.
- MILLSTEIN, K. H. (1993) Building knowledge from the study of cases: a reflective model for practitioner self-evaluation, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 8(1/2), pp. 255–279.
- NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS (1996) *Code of Ethics* (Washington, DC, National Association of Social Workers).
- PARKHURST, H. (1922) *Education on the Dalton Plan* (London, Bell).
- PARSONS, J. E. & DURST, D. (1992) Learning contracts: misunderstood and underutilized, *The Clinical Supervisor*, 10(1), pp. 145–156.
- RHODES, S. L. (1977) Contract negotiation in the initial stage of casework service, *Social Service Review*, 51, pp. 125–140.
- SEABURY, B. A. (1976) The contract: uses, abuses, and limitations, *Social Work*, 21(1), pp. 16–21.
- SHULMAN, L. (1987) The hidden group in the classroom: the use of the group process in teaching group practice, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 1(2), pp. 3–31.
- SMITH, G. & CORDEN, J. (1981) The introduction of contracts in a family service unit, *British Journal of Social Work*, 11, pp. 289–313.
- SOLOMON, B. (1976) *Black Empowerment* (New York, Columbia University Press).
- SOMERS, M. L. (1971) Dimensions and dynamics of engaging the learner, *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 7(3), pp. 49–57.
- SWAINE, R. L. & BAIRD, V. (1977) An existentially based approach to teaching social work practice, *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 13(3), pp. 99–106.
- SWENSON, C. R. (1988) The professional log: techniques for self-directed learning, *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, 69(5), pp. 307–311.
- TICE, K. (1990) Gender and social work education: directions for the 1990s, *Journal for Social Work Education*, 26(3), pp. 134–144.
- WILSON, S. J. (1981) *Field Instruction: Techniques for Supervisors* (New York, The Free Press).
- WOOD, K. M. (1978) Casework effectiveness: a new look at the research evidence, *Social Work*, 23, pp. 437–458.
- ZWICK, R. & ATTKISSON, C.C. (1985) Effectiveness of a client pretherapy orientation videotape, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 32(4), pp. 514–524.

Appendix A

Appendix II. Student learning contract

The following class policies comprise a set of expectations to which the instructor and students agree to adhere:

- Students will act in accordance with the *University Code of Student Conduct*. The instructor will report any acts of suspected or actual academic dishonesty to the Office of the Dean of Students for resolution according to University policy.
- Students and instructor are expected to punctually attend entire class sessions. If some event prevents class attendance, please leave a message with the instructor.
- All written assignments are due at the *beginning* of the class period of the specified date. Assignments submitted *any time* after the beginning of the class will be marked down 5 points *each* late class if prior arrangements have not been made with the instructor.
- Short-answer, in-class quizzes (when applicable) cannot be made up.
- Students are expected to write at a graduate level with respect to spelling, grammar, organization, and conciseness. Students demonstrating considerable deficiencies in their writing skills will be referred to the University Writing Lab for instruction and direction in completing assigned papers.
- Students anticipating or experiencing special circumstances which may impact their successful completion of course expectations or assignments as stipulated in this contract are encouraged to apprise the instructor as soon as possible.
- An Incomplete (I) will not be awarded in lieu of an earned grade.
- Requests for supplemental reading lists must be made in writing to the instructor.
- Public speaking is a professional skill: thus, all students are expected to contribute to class and small group discussions in a consistent, substantive, and courteous manner. Students are expected to bring at least two questions/observations pertaining to assigned reading to each class.

- As part of ongoing professional growth and development, the instructor and students will strive to conduct themselves in accordance with the *National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics*, with special attention given to *Ethical Standards*, subsections 2 (*Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Colleagues*) and 5 (*Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession*).
- Students who are differently-abled and those with special needs must contact the instructor as soon as possible to discuss necessary accommodations appropriate to successful completion of course expectations and assignments.
- All drafts of papers are considered scholarly endeavors (unless otherwise noted) and must be developed in accordance with the style and format stipulated in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Fourth Edition*.
- Beepers and phones must be turned off during class. Please excuse yourself, if necessary, to obtain your messages.

Appendix B

Instructor agreement

As the instructor of _____:

- I agree to abide by the class policies stipulated in this contract.
- I will provide a challenging, stimulating, and nurturing classroom environment appropriate to adult learners.
- I will demonstrate thorough knowledge of the course material as a social work educator, researcher, and practitioner.
- I will adhere to the course outline while simultaneously responding to the expressed learning needs of students.
- I will be available to individually meet with you to discuss any aspect of this course during my office hours or at a mutually convenient time.
- I can be reached at the two numbers on the first page of the syllabus. I agree to return your phone call as soon as possible after receiving a message from you.
- I will provide detailed instructions and specific criteria for evaluation for all course assignments.
- I will provide timely, detailed feedback to assist your learning and attainment of course objectives.
- I will challenge your self-evaluation ratings if necessary and appropriate, and give you the opportunity to reevaluate your ratings via negotiations.
- I will clearly discuss any changes made or not made in this class resulting from student feedback.

Student agreement

As a student of _____:

- I have read and agree to abide by the class policies stipulated in this contract.
- I have read and understand the course syllabus and outline and all of my questions have been satisfactorily answered.
- I have read and understand the evaluation process.
- I have read and agree to abide by the *University Code of Student Conduct* and the *NASW Code of Ethics*. Moreover, I will not collude with fellow students in violation of any of the principles outlined in these Codes.
- I agree to maintain confidentiality with regard to discussion of students' practicum or work experiences and the disclosure of sensitive information.
- I agree to provide ongoing, anonymous feedback to the instructor with respect to my learning needs.
- I agree to perform my own work on class assignments subject to evaluation.
- I have read and understand the instructions and criteria for evaluation for the course assignments I elect to complete.
- I understand that the quality of my work also reflects my professional development, therefore, *any* assignment submitted for feedback (i.e. first and subsequent drafts) will be completed to the best of my ability.
- I will use instructor feedback to improve my performance on assignments, when feasible and appropriate.
- I agree to fairly and accurately assess my own or other colleagues' performance and work when required.

Appendix C

SW 7801—Family Violence. Instructor–student learning contract

I, _____, agree to abide by the expectations set forth in the syllabus and course outline, and Appendixes I and II for this class. I agree to complete the following assignments to the best of my ability, and submit them on the dates stipulated below. If an emergency situation prevents completion of my work, I will notify the instructor as soon as possible to negotiate alternative arrangements. If I am unable to produce quality work and submit it on time (i.e. the beginning of that particular class), I agree to levy a five-point deduction as a consequence.

**ASSIGNMENT #1
VALUES CLARIFICATION EXERCISE**

____APRIL 12, 1999

ASSIGNMENT #2

Please check *one* assignment and *one* due date

____IMAGES OF MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN IN ADVERTISING

____IMAGES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN POPULAR MUSIC

____FEBRUARY 22, 1999

____MARCH 1, 1999

**ASSIGNMENT #3
FAMILY VIOLENCE SCRAPBOOK**

____APRIL 5, 1999

ASSIGNMENT #4

Please check *one* assignment and *one* due date

____PROVIDER REPORT

____POLICY IMPACT REPORT

____MARCH 15, 1999

____MARCH 22, 1999

_____ STUDENT SIGNATURE

DATE

_____ INSTRUCTOR SIGNATURE

DATE

Copyright of Social Work Education is the property of Carfax Publishing Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.