Professional Development Using Learning Contracts

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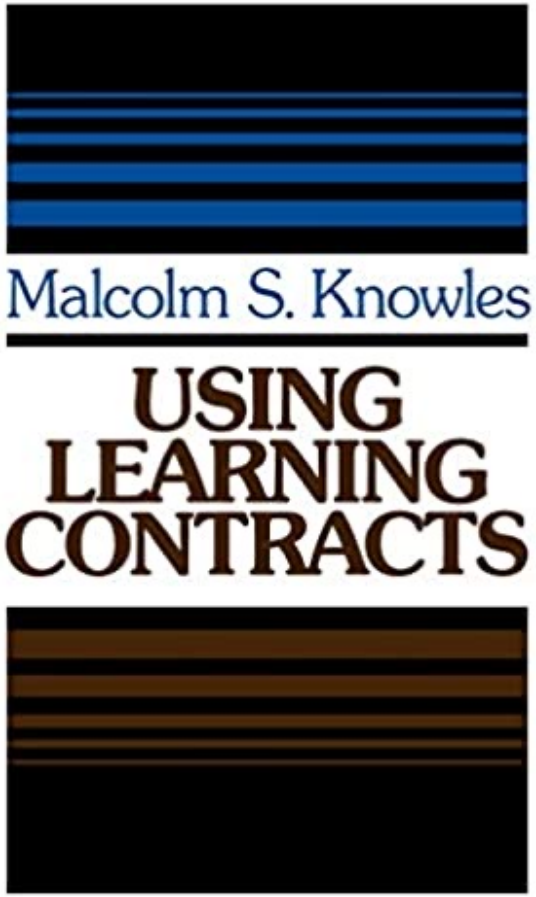
What Are Learning Contracts?

- Learning contacts are self-designed plans for building professional capacity.
- They are based on work by Malcolm Knowles.
- They are learner-centered, learner-defined, and learner-controlled.
- Learning contacts are:
  - Keyed to your personal needs and goals;
  - Focused on what you want to learn and how;
  - And include outcomes and standards for judgment.



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Why Do We Need Learning Contracts?

- A majority of practitioners say that they need to learn new things on the job in order to stay current. (NAPA/UNT Study)
- Students also identify key things that are missing from their academic training programs. (Delphi report)
- Typical American job arcs involve three career changes and over a dozen different jobs.
- Practitioner careers often consist of a series of projects, each different.
- Different projects require new skills and knowledge.
- You don't need to go back to school to learn much of this.

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Some Advantages of Learning Contracts

- They allow you to develop specific areas of professional need or interest in an intentional and timely way.
- They encourage you to approach learning resources in innovative ways.
- They permit flexibility.
- They can be scaled up or down, as needed.
- They locate control, responsibility and timing with you rather than with others.

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Components and Steps in the Process

Objectives

Decide on learning needs and turn these into objectives

Strategies & Resources

Identify learning strategies, resources, and activities

Outputs

Decide what will constitute evidence of your learning

Judgment

Decide on the assessment standards you will use to judge success

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Step One: Defining Learning Goals

- What do you want or need to learn, and why?
- Write each learning need as an objective statement
- Use “to” followed by an action verb
- Objectives are specific, short and focused
- Objectives state what, when, and where, but not why or how.
- Objectives are usually measurable

Tips:

- Break big issues into smaller ones;
- Pick things that are: Easy, fun, short, and insightful.

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Step Two: Identifying Learning Resources

Things you can use:

- People
- Materials
- Courses
- Workshops
- Conferences
- Places
- Situations
- Activities
- Networks

Things to think about:

- What to look for and where
- Who to contact
- How best to proceed
- What your priorities are
- What the sequence and timetable will be
- How you will deal with obstacles
- What your level of effort will be

Tip:

Use your network to find other people who have had this same issue.

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Step Three: Specifying Learning Outcomes

- Learning areas can include knowledge, skills and/or attitudes.
- Take account of formal, outside requirements if necessary.
- Also determine your own personal requirements.
- Combine these in a statement covering:
  - What
  - What format
  - How much
  - How good
  - When

Tip:

Think about what you would present to others, and in what format.

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Step Four: Setting Assessment Standards

- Who decides how good it is
- How do they decide this
- What standards are going to be used
- From outside
- Standards you decide yourself

Tips:

- Make sure you know about any external standards.
- Decides who counts as a ”peer.”
- Decide what performance criteria will apply.

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Exercise One: Learning Goals and Objectives

- Take FIVE minutes
- Write down your learning goal.
- Then, turn this into a learning objective.
- Express this in one sentence which is:
  - Concrete
  - Specific
  - Time-bound
  - Measurable
- Share this with the group

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Exercise Two: Resources and Strategies

- Take FIVE minutes
- Write down all of the ways you can think of to learn what you need.
- Share these with the group.
- In the group, decide which resources are the most suitable ones, and why.

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Exercise Three: Decide Outcomes and Criteria

- In the group, present the outcomes, products or “deliverables” that will indicate that you have accomplished your learning objective.
- When you have done this, discuss the criteria which will be used to judge your work.

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