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Using Learning Contracts in the Counselor Education Classroom

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Abstract

Adult students in counselor education programs bring diverse experiences to the classroom. In order to attract and retain students, institutions are exploring multiple delivery systems of instruction. The following study provides an overview of learning styles and characteristics of adult graduate students and explores the degree to which learning contracts may be a beneficial tool to positively impact student learning in the counselor education classroom. Surveys were administered pre- and post-participation in a master's level counselor education classroom regarding the use of a learning contract. Results indicated that participants found the learning contract to be useful and allowed the students to be more self-directed and connected with their work.

Keywords

Counselor preparation, graduate students, learning, assessment, adult students, learning contracts, learning styles

Using Learning Contracts in the Counselor Education Classroom

Kim C. O'Halloran & Megan E. Delaney

Adult students in counselor education programs bring diverse experiences to the classroom. In order to attract and retain students, institutions are exploring multiple delivery systems of instruction. The following study provides an overview of learning styles and characteristics of adult graduate students and explores the degree to which learning contracts may be a beneficial tool to positively impact student learning in the counselor education classroom. Surveys were administered pre- and post-participation in a master's level counselor education classroom regarding the use of a learning contract. Results indicated that participants found the learning contract to be useful and allowed the students to be more self-directed and connected with their work.

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Today's master's degree students in counseling programs represent a broad spectrum of individuals with diverse experiences. These students vary in terms of work and life experience, family and cultural differences, socio-economic status as well as time attendance status (e.g. full-time/part-time). In addition, students have a wide range of other commitments besides a graduate program such as career and/or family obligations. The adult students may also differ from younger, traditional students in their motivation, self-direction, intent and opinion of learning (Cranton, 2006). Such students may benefit from diverse forms of classroom instruction, especially techniques that involve more accountability and collaboration (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Hoshmand, 2004). In order to attract and retain graduate students, some universities and instructors are embracing change in the methods of course delivery (Sarasin, 1999). One particular method is use of a learning

contract, which is a written agreement between an instructor and student regarding the learning outcomes and assessment of a course (Boak, 1998). This mixed-method study explores the degree to which learning contracts may be a beneficial tool in the counselor education classroom to address the learning styles and characteristics of adult graduate students.

Adult Learners and Graduate Education

Graduate counselor education programs aim to prepare graduates for state and national certification and state licensure. Programs adhere to standards defined by the profession and often by accreditation organizations. The graduate program curriculum is defined by courses and learning objectives that typically incorporate a variety of skills, activities, and types of learning. Counselor education programs especially incorporate holistic, multicultural

pedagogy that aims to develop empathetic and capable practitioners who are also critical thinkers (Hoshmand, 2004). Students in counseling programs must exhibit the ability to develop their own professional and personal learning goals as well as the ability to assess their own development (Bennett, 2002). They must be prepared for self-directed learning throughout their careers, and be dedicated to ongoing personal growth and development.

Learning Styles

A graduate counselor education classroom is comprised of many different individuals who bring to that classroom and the university their own objectives and goals for learning and their unique learning styles (Renfro-Michel, O'Halloran & Delaney, 2010). In order to effectively instruct adult students, it is important for the instructor to have a general understanding of different learning styles (Stage, Muller, Kinzie & Simmons, 1998). According to Sarasin (1999), learning style is "a certain specified pattern of behavior and/or performance according to which the individual approaches a learning experience, a way in which the individual takes in new information and develops new skills and the process by which the individual retains new information or new skills" (p.1). A student's learning style has a direct effect on their attentiveness and engagement in class as well as their ability to master and retain content (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2006). In order to reach students who may have differences in learning styles, instructors may need to provide a variety of teaching delivery methods.

Adult students tend to be motivated and have the ability to self-direct their learning (Byer, 2002; Cranton, 2006). For example, adult students are more likely to participate in class, determine their own

goals, and monitor their progress throughout the course. In addition, students who share their knowledge and experience with other students reinforce the subjects discussed in the classroom (Cranton, 2006). Adult students thrive by being actively involved in their curriculum and course design. Consequently, classroom structure is changing to become more collaborative (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Gnuse, 2004).

Pedagogical Approaches

In order to encourage the enrollment of adult students, institutions are examining ways to modify instructional and delivery methods (Mandell & Herman, 2008). The nature of graduate education has become even more competitive, requiring colleges and universities to offer instruction that is perceived as convenient to adult students. Institutions of higher education are modifying programs, diversifying meeting times, providing distance learning, and amending instructional methods to attract and accommodate adult students to their campuses. As a result, institutions that provide more flexibility and non-traditional methods of instruction may gain a competitive edge over those who do not. Furthermore, an instructor who understands adult learners and makes accommodations within his or her lesson plan and/or curriculum or classroom structure can empower and motivate students, as well as have a direct impact on the student's commitment to learning (Gnuse, 2004).

Roles and responsibilities for instructors are also changing. Instructors adapting this form of adult education are identified as a facilitator in the learning process (Stage et al., 1998). Rather than just presenting material, an adult educator and/or facilitator helps develop the classroom process and procedures alongside the students. In addition, this facilitator assists

students in recognizing their learning styles and needs. In this way, students and instructors work collaboratively to achieve mutually established learning goals.

Collaborative teaching assumes that each participant has the ability to make valuable contributions and decisions for their learning needs (Stage et al., 1998). Working with their instructors, students analyze their needs and establish their learning objectives into goals for the course. Instructors then work with students to find the resources they need to achieve their goals, support the student throughout the process, and help develop an evaluation tool to monitor and assess progress and achievement (Knowles, 1986). For an adult learner in counselor education, this may be helping that student identify goals that are applicable for their area of research or appropriate for their current or future occupation. Learning contracts are one example of a tool that facilitates the goals of collaborative teaching.

Learning Contracts

One effective way of organizing the needs, goals, objectives, assignments, and evaluation of a course in a collaborative way is through the development of a learning contract. A learning contract is a written agreement between an instructor and student regarding the learning outcomes and assessment of a course (Boak, 1998). Lemieux (2001) defined a learning contract as “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” (p. 265). The learning contract encourages an open dialogue between instructor and student and shared responsibility in the learning process (Marsden & Luczkowski,

2005). The instructor’s role becomes more facilitative and supportive rather than authoritarian.

Instructors using learning contracts have a great potential for helping students become more self-directed, motivated, and confident (Bearle, 1986; Caffarella & Caffarella, 1986). Learning contracts are used as a strategy to motivate adult students in identifying their needs and desired outcomes for the course. As self-directed learners, students have the opportunity to choose activities, assignments, responsibilities, and resources to support their learning process. They can also use learning contracts to optimize the likelihood of success by choosing assignments that fit their learning style. Learning contracts can look different depending on the instructor and the content of the course. For example, a learning contract may include a choice of assignments. After discussing learning styles with students, an instructor can help students choose assignments based on their strengths and goals for the course. Learning contracts could include an agreement on goals for the course, a commitment for participation, or simply a signed contract (see Appendix for a sample learning contract).

The use of a learning contract allows for greater potential of a positive learning experience as well as the increased probability of retention of the material (Gnuse, 2004). “A humanistically-oriented counseling education program that emphasizes the development of the personhood of the counselor would focus on the student’s self-understanding and the use of self in the process of learning and potentiating positive development in others” (Hoshmand, 2004, p. 83). The use of learning contracts may provide a tangible introduction to counselor education students preparing to take responsibility for lifelong learning and professional development.

Benefits and Limitations

Learning contracts are beneficial for adults since course outcomes are more likely to match the student's learning needs (Boak, 1998; Gnuse, 2004). Students learn self-direction by being accountable for designing the contract and identifying the particular goals they wish to achieve. This allows for students to be more motivated, thereby generating additional enthusiasm for learning. Individual learning styles are supported by generating objectives that match the student's preferred style of learning. Flexibility in assignments offers variation and choice. A student can then focus these choices on specific objectives and outcomes. The formal nature of a written agreement provides structure and guidance as well as clear expectations. Additionally, frequent feedback from the instructor and/or peers helps the student make progress toward their goals. Boak (1998) stated that learning contracts help students develop independent learning skills that will carry on into the students' lives and "enhance their ability to manage changing situations and the needs of the future" (p.5). These actions build autonomy, strengthen the ability to apply theory to practice, and allow students to engage in consultation, all of which are behaviors and skills that are goals of counselor education programs.

Despite the advantages, there are some limitations for using learning contracts with adult students. First, a learning contract is not appropriate for all types of learners, especially for learners who need more direction, who have more dependent personalities, or who thrive in the traditional style of instruction (Gnuse, 2004). Learning contracts may not be appropriate when content is complex and completely unfamiliar to the learners. Introducing a learning contract as a new concept will

require some rethinking of learning in the minds of some students. They may need time to adjust and understand the concept.

Purpose

Due to the changing environment of modern highereducation, adaptability, flexibility, and accommodation in teaching pedagogy are required to attract and retain adult learners. As a proven effective strategy, learning contracts have a future in adult education. That being said, little to no research has been conducted on the effectiveness of using learning contracts in counselor education pedagogy. The purpose of this study was to understand the degree to which learning contracts may be a beneficial tool in the counselor education classroom. Specifically, it sought to gather student perceptions regarding their own learning styles and types of assessments. It also aimed to understand if students perceived a learning contract as having impacted their performance, their learning, and their sense of responsibility for their own learning, growth and development. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways did counselor education master's students describe their learning styles and the methods by which their learning could best be assessed?
2. In what ways did counselor education master's students perceive that the use of a learning contract enhanced their learning in a specific course?

Method

Survey Implementation

The study was conducted using survey methodology, and used a mixed-method of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Approval for the research was granted from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning the study. Pre- and post-course surveys were designed to measure student perception of the use of a learning contract in graduate courses in a master's program in counseling. They further sought to assess the success of a learning contract to meet the differential learning needs of students. They included multiple-choice and open-ended questions regarding student perceptions and preferences regarding their learning styles and the learning contract. Specific questions in the pre-course survey included how the student would best describe his or her learning style, how he or she would prefer to be assessed/graded on his/her learning, whether he or she believed that a method of assessment impacts academic performance, and whether he or she had ever used a learning contract in a course. Post-course survey questions asked students to share their thoughts regarding the freedom to choose the assignments that would contribute to their course grade.

Participants

The survey was pilot tested with a small group of graduate assistants and revised prior to implementation in the courses. The study was conducted at a mid-sized Masters I university in the suburban Northeast, where the average master's student is 33 years old and the graduate population is made up of 70% part-time students. The surveys were administered on

the first and last day of class to a convenience sample of master's degree students in three different counseling master's program courses that incorporated learning contracts, resulting in participation by 57 graduate students.

Procedures

The first survey was distributed to students at the beginning of the first day of class. The purpose of this pre-course survey was to assess student attitudes toward learning styles and their impact on assessment in a course. Following the completion of this survey, students received the course syllabus and learning contract, which allowed them to choose from a variety of assessment types for the course. At this point, the professor led a discussion about learning styles and the options students might consider in using the learning contract in a way that worked best for them, followed by a question and answer period. Students chose from a menu of course assessments, including in-class examination, short papers, individual or group class presentations, and research papers. Students were able to select from this menu so that their choices would add up to 100 points. The goal of utilizing the learning contract was to allow students to choose assessments that would best fit their learning style and to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Students had one week to complete and return the learning contract to the professor and had the opportunity for optional individual meetings with the professor to discuss the choices. Once students made their choices and submitted the learning contract it could not be modified. Students completed the post-course survey at the end of the final class meeting. The purpose of this survey was to assess students' experiences with the learning contract format.

Quantitative analysis was performed on fixed response portions of the surveys, using SPSS to run frequencies for all questions. Qualitative analysis was performed on open-ended portions of the surveys. Open-ended responses were coded and reviewed for prevailing themes across individuals and courses. This process was completed separately by the researcher and a graduate assistant and compared for consistency. The researchers used an inductive method of coding, manually reviewing each question across all respondents to ascertain the main themes, and then repeated the process to determine if the themes captured all responses.

Results

Completed pre- and post-course surveys were received from 57 students in three different courses. In the pre-course survey, 61% of the students surveyed described themselves as having a preference for a visual learning style, as opposed to auditory or kinesthetic learning styles. 72% of students indicated that their first choice for assessing their learning in a course would be a series of short, written papers and 43% indicated that their second choice for assessment would be an oral presentation. Other choices, including a written in-class exam, one or two research papers or a written group project were chosen as the least favorite forms of assessment. Students felt strongly about the degree to which assessment impacts their academic performance in a course, with 87% responding that the type of assessment has a direct impact on how successful they are in a course. In the post-course survey, 89% of the students preferred or strongly preferred the learning contract as opposed to being assigned a specific set of assessments for a course. In both surveys, there were no significant differences in results across

course sections or based on students' academic concentration, number of credits taken in the program at the point of the survey, or demographic variables.

Coding of the responses to the open-ended survey questions revealed four primary themes from participants. These themes revealed their positive perceptions of learning contracts that center around the role of student choice and responsibility; the themes were: (a) the opportunity to choose assessments that reflect their learning style (b) the ability to choose assessments that help them to balance their work and life schedules (c) the chance to take responsibility for their own learning, and (d) the ability to customize assignments for their own learning goals and interests.

Choosing assessment that reflect learning style

First, participants reported that the use of learning contracts allowed them to choose assessments and assignments that best reflected the way that they learned and processed new information. In their open-ended responses, participants commented on the importance of choosing assignments.

"I am the person who knows my learning style best and I think that I would be better able to demonstrate what I have learned if I am given a choice."

They also recognized that everyone learns differently and excels at some forms of assessment more than others. Learning contracts take this differentiation into account.

"Everyone has a different talent. I feel I do best when given time to write a paper or produce an oral presentation. Exams are timed and it is hard to answer essay questions the way you would like in a certain time limit."

Participants also commented that the learning contract pushed them to reflect on

their own learning styles and how those styles could positively affect their learning experience in the classroom.

“It was enlightening to me because it was the first time I actually thought about my style and was able to see how being able to use my style positively affected my experience.”

Choosing assessments that allow students to balance work and life schedules

Second, students reported that the learning contracts allowed them to make choices that fit with their professional and personal responsibilities and schedules. Participants often commented about the importance of flexibility in their schedules, and that the choice embedded in the learning contracts gave them the ability to better manage their schedules.

“It allowed me flexibility in my schedule, as having the choice helped me manage my schedule”

They would further comment that they would not only choose assignments that would reflect their learning style, but also could choose the assignments that fit best with their schedules.

“I was able to choose the assessments that worked best with the time and resources that I had available this semester.”

Taking responsibility for their own learning

Third, participants stated that the learning contract compelled them to take responsibility for their own learning. Participants reported that the learning contracts provided them with opportunities for self-directed learning.

“I feel I have control and more responsibility for the outcome of my grade.”

They also reported that the learning contract fostered greater accountability and responsibility due to having to make their own choices, and that such freedom also led to greater commitment.”

“It was the first time for me to have a choice. I appreciate such freedom. I noticed that I gained a sense of responsibility and commitment as soon as I signed the learning contract.”

Customizing assignments to meet their own learning goals and interests

Finally, students appreciated the way that the learning contract allowed them to customize assignments for their own learning goals and interests.

“I learned so much in class and was fortunate enough through the learning contract to further explore the areas of greatest interest to me.”

Participants also commented that the ability to use the learning contract to explore their own goals and interests had a positive impact on their learning experience.

“It had a positive impact on my learning experience because it allowed me the chance to do additional research and work on topics in which I was interested.”

The survey responses and categories derived from the study are consistent with the literature on adult learning and learning contracts. Through the use of a learning contract, participants reported that having different options regarding assignments and assessments allowed them to make choices that best matched their individual learning styles and their personal and professional schedules and responsibilities. They also reported experiencing greater levels of responsibility for and engagement in their learning. By choosing their assignments and means of assessment, students felt that they could concentrate more on the actual learning and less on the exercise and

logistics of the learning and felt that they learned more as a result. They also commented that the learning contract allowed them to further explore areas of their specific interest and tailor their learning to meet their professional goals.

Discussion

The first research question the study aimed to answer was:

1. In what ways did counselor education master's students describe their learning styles and the methods by which their learning could best be assessed?

In the pre-course survey, the majority of the students characterized themselves as visual learners, and implied that they would prefer learning through activities that allow them to see charts and diagrams, and prefer assessments that allow them quiet time to reflect on their learning. This is consistent with the adult learners' preference for self-direction and reflection cited in the literature (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Gnuse, 2004). Each of the preferred choices provided quiet time for students to reflect on their learning as individuals, which is another preference of adult learners. Participants also indicated that they believed the manner in which they were assessed would impact their academic success in a course, which is consistent with the literature that a student's learning style directly impacts his or her engagement and learning (Boak, 1998; Gnuse, 2004; Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2006).

The second research question was:

2. In what ways did counselor education master's students perceive that the use of a learning contract enhanced their learning in a specific course?

Analysis of the open-ended responses in the post-course survey resulted in four primary themes, three of which are consistent with the literature on adult learning styles and learning contracts. Participants appreciated the opportunity to choose assessments that reflected their learning style, which the literature indicates will directly impact their academic success (Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2006). They also appreciated being able to take responsibility for their own learning, which the literature states is especially important for adult learners who thrive when they are involved in their curriculum and course design (Bearle, 1986; Caffarella & Caffarella, 1986; D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Gnuse, 2004). Finally, they liked being able to customize assignments for their own learning goals and interests. This is consistent with the literature that emphasizes the importance of counselor education students to develop their own professional and personal learning goals and to assess their own development (Bennett, 2002; Gnuse, 2004; Hoshmand, 2004).

The one resulting theme that was not directly addressed in the literature was the participants' preference for choosing assessments that helped them to balance their work and life schedules. However, this preference appears to be consistent with the increasingly competitive nature of graduate education that emphasizes convenient forms of delivery to meet the scheduling needs of adult students (Mandell & Herman, 2008).

Limitations

While the results of the surveys were consistent across three different courses, it is important to recognize a limitation of this study. It was conducted using a convenience sample of students at a single university in the Northeast. As a result, the results may not be generalizable to a larger

population; therefore further research of this type at additional institutions would be advantageous to further understand the impact of learning contracts in the counselor education classroom.

Implications for Pedagogical Practice

While learning contracts may have clear benefits to students, the researchers discovered that use of learning contracts is not without challenge for the professor who uses them in a course. A faculty member who uses the learning contract methodology needs to invest in a good deal of planning prior to the start of the course and in the development of organizational tools to use throughout the course. Instead of developing one set of assignments for all students, the professor needs to take the time to develop multiple assignments from which students can choose, and that reflect different learning styles and preferences. For each of the assignments, the faculty member will also need to develop different grading rubrics.

This amount of planning and ongoing record keeping can be time consuming. Grading responsibilities become much less predictable. In a traditional course, the professor knows up front how many assignments will need to be graded following specific due dates. With the learning contract methodology, it is impossible to predict how many students will choose each assignment type, which may result in unpredictable amounts of grading over the course of the semester. On the other hand, if students choose different assignments during the semester, this may in effect spread the grading out, making the professor's workload more even. One way to alleviate this issue is to predetermine due-dates for different assignments.

Learning contracts may increase the amount of ongoing discussion and feedback

between professor and student during the course, for a variety of reasons. Students may have fewer peers engaging in the assignment(s) they have chosen, reducing their peer group resources. Students who are less sure of their learning style may need to spend more time with the professor early in the semester to make good choices prior to committing to their learning contract choices. As there will be students who need more direction in this area, it is important for the professor to spend some time discussing learning styles early in the semester, prior to students committing to specific assignments in the learning contract.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that learning contracts appear to particularly meet the needs of adult learners in the counselor education classroom. Adult learners benefit from being self-directed, from work that reflects their unique experiences, and from learning that addresses their intrinsic motivation and is organized around their goals and interests (Byer, 2002; Cranton, 2006; Knowles, 1986). They also benefit from diverse approaches to instruction, increased accountability for learning, and collaboration around learning goals (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005).

Having students be actively engaged in and take responsibility for their own learning draws on the intrinsic motivation of adult students, which often leads to greater retention of information learned (Knowles, 1986). This retention of knowledge and the ability to foster ongoing motivation for learning is especially important in the counselor education classroom, as students must prepare to be lifelong learners in the counseling profession. Learning contracts allow professors and students to collaborate to accomplish classroom goals because they

foster student reflection and responsibility for their own learning and needs. They also allow students to enhance their learning through this responsibility and through exploration of specific interests. In addition, contracts allow students to concentrate on the learning itself, rather than worrying

about the mechanisms for learning and assessment. Furthermore, learning contracts afford students more flexibility and provide options that can assist students in balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities.

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Appendix

Sample Learning Contract

Student Name (please print): _____

Please place a check mark in the “Selection” box next to each of the choices you will be using to make up your grade in this class. The total must add up to 90%, as class participation is a mandatory selection at 10%. Please sign your contract upon completion and date it. Learning Contracts are due in class on January 29, and may **not** be changed after that date. I encourage you to contact me prior to the due date with any questions you may have.

Major Requirements (choose two to add up to 70%)

Choice	Description	Due Date	Worth	Selection
Midterm Examination	Covers Chapters 1 through 6, multiple choice and short answer	In class on 2/26	30%	
Final Examination	Covers Chapters 7 through 13, multiple choice and short answer	In class on 4/23	40%	
Group Presentation	Choose a counseling issue and, using the literature, discuss the ethical and legal issues pertaining to that issue (15-minute presentation plus handouts). Groups must consist of two to three individuals. Students electing this option should provide a one-page topic proposal, authored by the group, by 2/12 for feedback/approval.	Presentations in class on 4/16.	30%	
Research Paper	Choose a counseling issue and, using the literature, discuss the ethical and legal issues pertaining to that issue (minimum 10 pages). Students electing this option should provide a one-page topic proposal by 2/19 for feedback/approval.	Due in class on 4/23	40%	

Minor Requirements (choose one for 20%)

Choice	Description	Due Date	Worth	Selection
Journal Article Critique	Choose an article from a professional journal dealing with an ethical or legal issue in your field, and conduct a critical analysis of the article, using what you’ve learned in class and in the text (5 pages). Students should include copy of article critiqued.	Due in class on 3/19	20%	
Position Paper	Choose an ethical issue, take a stand on that issue, and support your position using research and what you’ve learned in class (8-step process) and in the text (minimum 5 pages).	Due in class on 3/19	20%	

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

Faculty Signature: _____ Date: _____

Author Note

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