



What is the value and use of the learning contract in practice education from students and practice educator's perspectives?

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What is a learning contract?

- A learning contract is a negotiated agreement between the student and their educators that aims give the student greater responsibility for their own learning (Whitcombe, 2001).
- This approach promotes self-directed learning as the student can individualise their learning with cognisance of previous experience and their strength and weaknesses. The learning contract is based on Malcolm Knowles (1980, 2005) adult learning theory as the contract serves to focus on the learners needs, and encourages autonomy.



Why learning contract?

- ✓ Personalises the learning for the student
- ✓ Promotes ownership of learning as objectives motivate self directed learning activities
- ✓ Personalises the approach to learning as the outcome is more important than the process
- ✓ Provides a visible structure of what is to be learnt, how it will be learnt within a designated timeframe.
- ✓ The learner has responsibility in evaluating the outcomes (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005, p.135)



Steps in a learning contract

1. Diagnose learning needs
2. Specify learning objectives
3. Specify learning resources and strategies
4. Specify evidence of accomplishment
5. Specify how the evidence will be validated
6. Review contract with supervisor
7. Carry out the contract
8. Evaluate learning

(Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2005, p 267-271)



Learning contract

- Learning contracts are applied to all practice placements in the NUI Galway occupational therapy program. This is a requirement of CORU
- Practice educators are therefore expected to agree and negotiate the contract for relevance to the setting and re-orientate or personalise the placement to meet the students identified learning outcomes.



Research into learning contract

Matheson (2003) in the UK completed focus groups to investigate student views of learning contracts in a problem based learning course and reported that

- a) greater guidance was needed from practice educators for students who were new to creating learning contracts
- b) but this guidance reduced as students became more confident in the process as they progressed in the program.



Research continued

Whitcombe (2001) also in the UK investigated learning contracts via a survey and reported that

- both occupational therapy students and educators considered that learning contracts were time consuming, confusing to use and dependant on the attitude of the practice educator.

Conclusion

- Little is known about learning contracts in occupational therapy



Research question

- What is the value and use of the learning contract in practice education from students and practice educator's perspectives?
- Ethics approval



Method

- 3 Focus Groups of Practice Educators (n. 22)
- 2 Focus Groups with students (2nd year n.9 and 4th year n.11)



Theme One: It provides a framework for students to take ownership of their learning but its hard to complete

I think they are a valuable document for the student to help them keep on track with their goals for placement but I think the addition of the supervision record each week where objectives are set can cause some blurring
(PEFG2)



Theme One: It provides a framework for students to take ownership of their learning but its hard to complete

Because students seem to find it a little bit intimidating sometimes as in they are panicked because they know what they have to get to pass the placement but they don't know what they are meant to say or do and they're just a little bit worried and anxious about what they are meant to put on it (PEFG1)



Theme One: It provides a framework for students to take ownership of their learning but its hard to complete

It's good like when you're preparing for placement to set out what you want to achieve but doing the timeline and what you want to achieve will change as placement goes along (2ndyrFG).



Theme One: It provides a framework for students to take ownership of their learning but its hard to complete

I think it is more useful after you start placement as well because a lot of the goals you make before placement are not likely to be there, actual practice v what you think. It is very hard to make a non-generic one before you start
(4thyrFG)



Theme One: It provides a framework for students to take ownership of their learning but its hard to complete

I thought it was hard as well before you were going in like obviously you want to push yourself but you don't want to push yourself too hard and I thought oh I don't want to tie myself down to be able to an initial interview by week two and then for her to be disappointed in me or that kind of thing thing(4thyrFG)

I was really worried that I was, you know? I didn't want to kind of screw it up on the first day going in saying oh well this is what I think (4thyrFG)



Theme Two: It's not a contract, it's a negotiated learning plan for placement

- *Yes. By their very nature contracts, they are joint you know? It's not just an individual; it has to be with somebody (PEFG1)*
- *Some students will set really really high level goals for themselves and others will kind of pull themselves back as well, so I think as educators we need to be able to support students in guiding them towards the different levels of their goals as well (PEFG2)*



Theme Two: It's not a contract, it's a negotiated learning plan for placement

I think the term contract maybe isn't great, like it sounds very formal and reminds me of work contracts and it's in your contract or it's not in your contract so Learning proposal or learning objectives or learning guide or learning agreement (PEFG2)



Theme Two: It's not a contract, it's a negotiated learning plan for placement

*I think coming back to the learning contract I think the name, the name probably needs to be professional development contract or something like that, start introducing the idea of CPD because the learning contract if you think of what is behind the learning contract, it's what all of us have to do for the rest of our lives, every year to keep our registration is CPD
(PEFG1)*



Theme Two: It's not a contract, it's a negotiated learning plan for placement

- *Yes the one I had like, that I brought to my practice educator was changed completely after I spoke to her (2ndyrFG)*
- *Different supervisors are different as well, some would expect maybe an awful lot and other would not expect that much. So if you are going into someone who doesn't expect a lot and you have a load of things down you might seem overconfident or you know, so it is very hard to judge it (4thyrFG)*



Theme Two: It's not a contract, it's a negotiated learning plan for placement

- I don't know if it is a disadvantage but in my placements I probably did not use mine much at all , after all these advantages like, I think it is really student led. I think you need to bring it to supervision but none of my educators never really mentioned it. So, I just kind of forgot about it, honestly (4th yrFG)



Theme Three: Its challenging to get it right so it has to be flexible but competency driven

So I think if they break it down by the competency areas it gives a really nice structure (PEFG2).



Theme Three: Its challenging to get it right so it has to be flexible but competency driven

And it allows them to be more individualised so the assessment competencies are general and not specific to the opportunities they're going to have on placement so it allows them to have a sense of what that looks like for them, even if there was someone on a similar placement that the, how they achieve the competency might be different (PEFG2)



Theme Three: Its challenging to get it right so it has to be flexible but competency driven

but I think it's fundamental for that it's the fluidity because it's a learning contract and any CPD contract cannot be rigid. On week one and two you might agree something and you might decide something but then on week three before I said oh wait a minute I need to re-evaluate this (PEFG1



Theme Three: Its challenging to get it right so it has to be flexible but competency driven

- *Provided a frame and a goal that we wanted to achieve, and we focussed on it, I suppose with the supervisor as well, what they thought that goal meant versus what we thought it was, so we had that learning as well, as to what was expected on practice. But not just as a student (4thyrFG)*



Theme Four: It needs more structure to guide students and educators at different levels

- suppose there's different levels of performance as you said (name) for say year one versus year four in that. So that's maybe where college could come in and help, guide us in the expectations for each of those areas, yes" (PEFG1)
- More than the initial interview, there's more things around, it's like being prepared for initial interview. I don't know, there's like noticing things on initial interview. Being able to observe and report back you know? Those are the sort of things that aren't, they are the practice things, not the initial interview" (PEFG1).



Theme Four: It needs more structure to guide students and educators at different levels

- No. Mm. like my two placements done it really differently like. My first one he wanted one big goal and kind of meet that one but then like she wanted like everything broken down. So like when I went in to her she was like that goal is like huge do you know what I mean? So they all do it really differently (2ndyrFG).
- Which is kind of difficult then for a new therapist who is only taking students for the first time. (PEFG3).



Theme Four: It needs more structure to guide students and educators at different levels

- I've had a few experiences where say with fourth years that their learning objectives have been at way too basic a level you know? And you're trying to, say if it's their last placement ok? This is your last clinical placement after this you are going to be pretty much qualified. You need to be functioning at that entry-level therapist and if they're still saying you know? I want to be able to do an initial interview and write soap notes you're like, no you need to be able to write reports like you know? You need to be able to do a full stroke assessment. You need to be functioning at that entry-level therapist (PEFG3)



Theme Four: It needs more structure to guide students and educators at different levels

- I think a goal bank would make it less site specific and then I think the site-specific goals could be negotiated once the student comes on placement but you know? So I think if they had a rough idea, if they had something to look at because I think students do often kind of want to see an example, maybe it's that fear of being wrong. So if that could be taken out and then if it could help the student in what are realistic goals and then what are site specific goals (PEFG2).



Theme Four: It needs more structure to guide students and educators at different levels

Just to have it ticked off, yes, and you nearly had one chance at it (2ndyrFG).

And if you do something once are you really competent in it like? It's your first time doing it. It's like you're not practicing it, you're just doing it once and that's it, just to tick something off. But I suppose like you are only there for a certain amount of time as well.



Discussion

- In comparison to previous research the contract is challenging to complete for both students and educators but needs to be a negotiated plan
- The term contract needs to be changed and more specifics on what are relevant learning goal for levels of students and placement specialities are required
- Combining of expectations of placement and learning goals needs to be explored.
- More guidance for students and educators including a goal bank needs to be developed



Other issues

- Does learning contract fit competency based education (tick box education)?
- How to focus students on component skills if student lead they focus on competency performance identified in competency assessment forms i.e. clinical reasoning, noticing, observations, planning, evaluating, problem solving?
- Should learning contracts be sequenced (Educators see previous learning contracts)?
- Should they be graded rather than achieved or not achieved?
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Cart before the horse?

- Can a student identify their weaknesses or issues that they need to work on before experiencing it?
- Is a learning contract an outcome of a placement?

