USING LEARNING CONTRACTS FOR IMPROVED TEACHING AND
STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The typical students at the Purdue University - Anderson site are primarily what is classified as ‘non-traditional’ as evidenced by their average age of thirty-one and almost ninety-five percent are employed. These individuals could also be called ‘adult learners’ and, as such, they have special needs which must be recognized and addressed if their learning and retention is to be maximized. To accomplish this and satisfy the students' needs, the andragogy educational adult learner method originated with Dr. Malcolm Knowles was followed. Dr. Knowles is considered by many as the 'Father' of andragogy; the study and application methods of adult learning using the primary premise that virtually all learning is self-directed through one’s life-based experiences and interactions.

The andragogy method is infinitely superior when a more modern definition of college or adult education is used especially in this electronic age. The learner must be the focus of the definition which is 'the preparation for and acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding to become an adaptable human being'. During the first weeks of any course the instructor and students must develop a positive relationship: one that is conductive to improved learning. This is more possible having the smaller class sizes at a site location. During these initial weeks the instructor lays the necessary foundation of knowledge and general course expectations from which all else evolves. This phase is followed by either one-on-one instructor-student or instructor-team dialogues to reach a mutual and satisfactory knowledge of specific course expectations from which all else evolves. The students, individually or in teams, must be actively involved in defining their interim and ultimate learning objectives, and in establishing their responsibilities and accountabilities. These specifics are detailed in a learning contract which is submitted and ultimately agreed-to by the instructor. The role of the instructor becomes primarily that of a facilitator, consultant and resource helping each student and/or team successfully accomplish their defined objectives.

In the Spring semester, 1998, three courses at Purdue University - Anderson will be using the learning contract methodology:

OLS 485 - Leadership for Team Development
CPT 230 - Data Communication Development
EET 296 - Electronic System Fabrication

The results attained in each course using this method will be presented while this paper will present the methodology and expected results.

INTRODUCTION

Andragogy, according to Malcolm Knowles, is “a continuum of assumptions” about how adults learn. Five main foundational premises of andragogy are

(1) virtually all learning is self-directed. Allen Tough has measured the means primarily used by adults while learning and has found that only seven percent (7%) is through an instructor.

(2) students’ experiences and interactions should be maximized as a prime learning source.

(3) readiness to learn increases and is dependent upon each individual’s life, work and/or social roles.

(4) material and information should be relevant and task or problem centered.

(5) adults primarily use a near-term time perspective and want an immediacy of application. Patricia Cross adds to this list identifying intrinsic motivation as being pivotal in the adult’s learning. The learner must also perceive the material as being well organized, meaningful and relevant coupled with a facilitative environment providing positive reinforcement. These proponents of andragogy all encourage the use of learning contracts with adult learners through which they can identify:

What they want to learn and Why?
How they plan to learn the identified knowledge and/or skill?
Where and How they will apply the knowledge/skill attained in their work/life/social roles?
How they will measure their interim progress and ultimate achievement?

Since the majority of the Purdue University - Anderson classes consist of approximately eight to fifteen students with ninety-five percent (95%) classified as ‘non-traditional’ adult students, the andragogy, learning contract methodology was used in three courses during Spring, 1998 semester. The courses were Leadership for Team Development in the Organizational Leadership Department, Data Communications Development in the Computer
Technology Department, and Electronic System Fabrication in the Electrical Engineering Technology Department. These courses were selected since they all included laboratory sessions. The Organizational Leadership course included what was termed ‘experiential laboratory of team development’.

During the first four weeks of each course the students were thoroughly introduced to the course expectations and overall objectives. A foundational course content also was established during this period. The students were introduced to learning contracts and how they directly related to the accomplishment of the course objectives. But, more importantly, each student could identify his/her own learning plan so the ultimate outcome of the course would be their meaningful attainment and understanding of the material. They understood that they must learn both the theory and application aspects of each course’s material.

The learning contracts were submitted to the instructor, who, subsequently, conducted one-on-one discussions with each student. Once mutual understanding of the What, When, Where, Why and How? was reached, a final contract was written. The instructor’s role changed from being a content provider, laboratory guide to a facilitator of the students’ learning process. Yes, each lecture session included a content portion but the mode of presentation became more of a discussion, question-answer session on relevant applications of the information. The laboratory sessions were more directly related to the attainment of their learning contracts but sufficient benchmark measures were included to assure that the students were learning to apply the course content.

THE LEARNING CONTRACTS

In the Electronic System Fabrication course and the Leadership for Team Development course the same basic learning contract form was used. Figure 1 is the specific form used by the team development students while the electrical engineering technology students used a slightly modified version.

In the Data Communications Development course the instructor provided more detailed guidelines for the more narrative learning contracts. Figure 2 is a sample of one student’s finalized contract.

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I, ______________, specifically
want to learn and become skilled in the following team development areas:

Because:

I plan to maximize my learning in these areas by:

I, and you, will be able to measure my competence (knowledge and skill) using these

Interim measures:

Final measures:

In the following ways your help will be needed to accomplish this learning contract:

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**Figure 1. Learning Contract for Team Development**
CONCLUSION

At the time of this writing, the semester is only half over but the learning contracts are being fulfilled. All three instructors have had many more than normal individual and team conferences to assist them with their research and laboratory work. The enthusiasm (intrinsic motivation) was extremely high especially since the content was highly relevant to each student’s identified learning objectives. It was also observed that many more ‘extra’ hours were used in the laboratories by these students. An additional advantage using the andragogy method of learning contracts was the role change for the instructors. Each one indicated a more involved learning relationship with the students and teams even though more time was required than simply offering a lecture or monitoring a laboratory. Not only were the students learning more on a self-directed basis but the instructors were better able to specifically help each student to accomplish the course and contract objectives. At the end of the semester the students will be graded in each course approximately one-third on the accomplishment of the learning contract objectives and two-thirds on tests and/or laboratory assignments.

REFERENCES

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3. Pratt, D. R. Andragogy as a Relational Construct; Adult Education Quarterly; Vol. 38, Number 3, Spring, 1988, pps. 160 - 181.