

LEARNING CONTRACTS: AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD FOR DETERMINING COURSE GRADES

William Smith, New Mexico State University, Department of Marketing & General Business, Box 30001, Dept 5280, Las Cruces, NM 88003 (505-646-3341)

Stu Devlin, New Mexico State University, Department of Marketing & General Business, Box 30001, Dept 5280, Las Cruces, NM 88003 (505-646-3341)

Doug Ross, New Mexico State University, Department of Marketing & General Business, Box 30001, Dept 5280, Las Cruces, NM 88003 (505-646-3341)

Lynn J. Loudonback, New Mexico State University, Department of Marketing & General Business, Box 30001, Dept 5280, Las Cruces, NM 88003 (505-646-3341)

ABSTRACT

The use of learning contracts is a classroom activity worthy of educators' consideration. Educators discuss, analyze and assess their roles in the classroom in hopes of providing their students with meaningful educational experiences. Although there are a number of learning activities available for use in the classroom, it seems that students desire activities that involve content and are application oriented (Karns 1993). The purpose of this paper is to discuss how learning contracts tie in nicely with such preferences of students. Additionally, this alternative classroom activity provides for more emphasis on goal-setting. Specific discussion on the use of learning contracts in a Personal Selling course is provided. Also, other courses in which learning contracts may be used are suggested in hopes of stimulating educators' interest in and consideration for this activity.

LEARNING CONTRACTS: SELECTED LITERATURE REVIEW

The learning contract is a mutual undertaking between the instructor and each student whereby the student contracts during the beginning of the term for a specified final grade. Unlike traditional approaches to course requirements, the contract affords options to students regarding the number of requirements individually undertaken during the term. Each student sets a personal goal for a particular grade; essentially, learning contracts provide for formal goal-setting opportunities.

A review of literature supports the importance of goals. In general, a goal may be defined as what a person is trying to accomplish. Additionally, it is recognized that goal commitment is enhanced when individually internalized and accepted.

Goals help clarify expectations and participative goal-setting is preferred over goals that are set in a non-participative manner (Locke and Latham 1984). Also, commitment to the goal is affected by asking an individual to accept a goal and having that person state publicly that the established goal is accepted (Locke and Latham 1985).

Apparently, interpersonal communication is significantly related to goals. With the use of learning contracts, such communication between an instructor and students takes place. Hopefully, a consequence of using learning contracts is enhanced student motivation. Knowles (1986) believes that learning contracts are a means to gaining more commitment from students. Furthermore, his contract learning model is based on six considerations:

- (1) the benefits to each learner and the consequences of not learning;
- (2) the importance of taking personal responsibility for learning;
- (3) the unique experiences of each learner;
- (4) the learner's readiness to learn;
- (5) the organization of learning around life tasks;
- (6) the attempt to tap into intrinsic motivators.

LEARNING CONTRACTS IN THE PERSONAL SELLING COURSE

The Personal Selling course is recognized as a positive undergraduate experience. Students, having taken the course during college, speak highly of the course; they find that it is interesting, practical and useful (Bragg 1988). Additionally, students' work related skills are developed which benefit and meet many of the needs of business (Buchanan 1987). Such classroom learning accomplishments are commendable. However, it may be argued that

the important issue of individual goal-setting is not being emphasized as much as it could, or should, be in a Personal Selling course. In selling, the manager is responsible for helping the seller communicate goals. The sales manager relies on effective communications to help motivate the seller. If effective communication is important between the sales manager and salespeople (Vassalo, Lanasa and Johnson 1989), it does not seem too far removed that similar classroom tactics might be appropriate for the instructor responsible for a Personal Selling course.

By placing more emphasis on the importance of goal-setting in the classroom, perhaps greater learning experiences would occur. How may this be accomplished? As mentioned previously, through the use of learning contracts. Currently, there are twelve commonly used learning activities for college courses: lecture, class discussion, text/readings, guest speaker, film/video, multiple choice test, essay test, term paper, case analysis, role-playing, simulation game and client project (Karns 1993). For a practical course like Personal Selling (Good 1991, Swenson and Donoho 1992), certain activities seem more appropriate than others. The difficult task for instructors is in selecting which activities to include during the term that will accomplish the overall learning objectives for the course and simultaneously appeal to the majority of students so that their individual efforts will be maximized. Are some activities preferred over others by students? If preferences for activities are an individual issue, varying from student to student, then the instructor is faced with the issue of making arbitrary decisions and hoping for the best. The inclusion of the learning contract as an additional activity may help with this dilemma.

Traditionally, instructors of Personal Selling (just as in most courses) distribute syllabi to the students at the beginning of the term (see Appendix A - provided for illustrative purposes). Each syllabus includes general objectives of the course, specific objectives and the course requirements. As Kelley, Conant and Smart (1991) point out, it is important that there be a mixture of activities in the course. The learning contract, when included as part of the syllabus, provides a creative approach to the mixture of activities (see Appendix B). For the Personal

Selling course, these requirements are chosen based on the beliefs and preferences of the instructor and may consist of a specified number of tests, in-class assignments (lecture, case discussion and guest speakers - for example) and role-playing exercises. However, these activities are the minimum expected of each student and for the students who contract for only these activities, only a final grade of B or below is possible. As indicated in Appendix B, these course requirements (with associated weights reflected) only total to 850 points. If no additional activities or assignments are chosen, then the maximum final grade possible is a B. (For example, a student must make 90% or better on every mandatory requirement to end up with a cumulative total of 800 or more points, but less than 900). Obviously, this option should appeal to those students seeking to satisfy minimum course requirements.

However, for those students who desire to contract for an A, additional activities are required. The options include additional readings, or a term paper, or a client project. These options (again - as indicated in Appendix B) then total 1000 points; students that perform all of the activities at a level of 90% or better have a chance to make a final grade of A for the course. Again, it is up to each student to explicitly make this choice.

It is important to note that the grade contracted for does not guarantee the student that grade. The contract merely reflects a student's goal for the course. All final grades are based on the total of points obtained at the end of the term. The contract serves two purposes: (1) if a student is only interested in performing a minimum number of activities, then he/she has that option; (2) if a student prefers one type of activity more than another, then he/she has that option.

A LITERATURE REVIEW OF ALTERNATIVE CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

It is true that learning contracts are a change from traditional grading. Yet, examples of changes in courses, although unrelated to learning contracts, have been cited elsewhere. Wotruba (1992) uses a change from traditional grading in a Sales Management course; a compensation analogy for grading students was

used and there seemed to be more involvement, interest and effort by students. Interestingly, the first step in a four step process reported by Wotruba (1992) was "setting objectives"; also, the study was discussed as an applied operational setting whereby the students recognized and appreciated the approach.

Another study that ties in nicely with this paper is one by McCorkle et al (1992); a "self-marketing plan" involved students establishing both long and short term objectives toward careers. According to this study, one result from the classroom experience was a greater focus on self-improvement by the students. Kimball (1990), in yet another study, expressed concern that traditional approaches in the classroom inadequately prepare students for the real world. He argues for the inclusion of assigned contemporary business books as opposed to a text book enhancing realism of the subject. Finally, Haynes and Helms (1991) addressed the issue that limited opportunities exist through traditional classroom approaches for conveying immediate relevance of the subject material to students. Such studies, representing non-traditional techniques in courses, encourage the argument for the introduction of learning contracts as yet another way of adding relevance to the subject.

CONCLUSION

The learning contract is a viable alternative activity worthy of educators' consideration. The learning contract provides the means for students to explicitly communicate goals. It is important to state that the argument for the use of learning contracts does not eliminate further motivational efforts on the part of the instructor during the term. Without question, on-going classroom methods and techniques used to accomplish the learning experience by the instructor impact students' motivation throughout the term. However, the learning contract enhances effective communication between the instructor and the students regarding personal goals. Knowles (1986) believes that the choice to use learning contracts is a way to potentially separate professionals from amateurs. Additionally, he warns educators to avoid becoming enamored with one teaching-learning technique.

In conclusion, it is important to note that Personal Selling is but one course that lends itself to the use of learning contracts as an alternative activity. Certainly, some of the Small Business courses often found in the Marketing departments could be considered. The use of learning contracts is based on the premise that learning styles, backgrounds, and paces of learning are different. Small Business courses are prime examples of courses where students enrolled have such diverse characteristics. Overall, the important aspects of learning contracts as an alternative activity relate to the concentrated efforts of mutual goal-setting (recognized as important to the selling field); the integration of real world practices for classroom learning enhancement (recognized as a positive contributor by both educators and students); and improved instructor and student communication (recognized as important in recent educational reform for changes in higher education). There seems to be compelling support for this alternative activity. Plans include introducing learning contracts into courses in the near future; then, empirical evidence will be available.

APPENDIX A

An excerpt from a Personal Selling SYLLABUS (provided for illustrative purposes only).

The following are MANDATORY Course Requirements/Activities:

- In class assignments
- Test #1
- Test # 2
- Role-Playing

Please note that by satisfying only these "requirements/activities", a final grade of B is the maximum grade possibility.

In order for you to set a goal for a final grade of an A, you must choose one of the following options:

- _____ Additional Readings
- _____ Term Paper
- _____ Client Project

(These options will be discussed at length when the syllabi are distributed.)

APPENDIX B

Learning Contract

Personal Selling Class

Term: _____

Name: _____

As previously noted in the syllabus, the final grade will be based on the following:

MANDATORY Course Requirements/Activities: (Provides for ONLY 850 points)

In class assignments	150 points
Test #1	200 points
Test # 2	200 points
Role-Playing	<u>300 points</u>
	850 points

OPTIONS: (Please indicate which option you choose - only ONE, please)

- _____ No additional activities
- _____ Additional Readings 150 points
- _____ Term Paper 150 points
- _____ Client Project 150 points

TOTAL POINTS TARGETED _____
GRADE CONTRACTED FOR _____

THE FINAL GRADE IS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING:

- 900 points and above = A
- 800 points to 899 points = B
- 700 points to 799 points = C
- 600 points to 699 points = D
- below 600 points = F

Student Signature _____

Instructor Approval: _____

REFERENCES

Bragg, Arthur (1988), Personal Selling Goes To College, Sales & Marketing Management:35-37.

Buchanan, Wray (1987), Personal Selling: A Marketing Curriculum Opportunity, National Conference in Sales Management Proceedings:15-18.

Good, Roberta J (1991), Keeping Sales Skills Current Its More Than Read My Lips, National Conference in Sales Management Proceedings:49-52.

Haynes, Paula J. and Marilyn M. Helms (1991), Strengthening the Relevance of the marketing Strategy Course by using a Career Planning Exercise, Journal of Marketing Education, 13,3:66-75.

Karns, Gary L. (1993), Marketing Student Perceptions of Learning Activities: Structure, Preferences and Effectiveness, Journal of Marketing Education, 15,1:3-10.

Kelley, Craig A., Jeffrey S. Conant, and Denise T. Smart (1991), Master Teaching Revisited: Pursuing Excellence from the Students' Perspective, Journal of Marketing Education, 13,2:1-10.

Kimball, Bob (1990), A Real-World Approach to course work in Sales Management, Journal of Marketing Education, 12,1:59-63.

Knowles, Malcolm S. (1986), Using Learning Contracts, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Locke, E. and Gary P. Latham (1984), Goal Setting, A Motivational Technique that Works!, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

_____ and _____ (1985), Goal Setting to Sports, Journal of Sport Psychology, 7:205-222.

McCorkle, Denny E., Joe F. Alexander and Memo F. Diriken (1992), Developing Self-Marketing Skills for Student Career Success, Journal of Marketing Education, 14,1:57-67.