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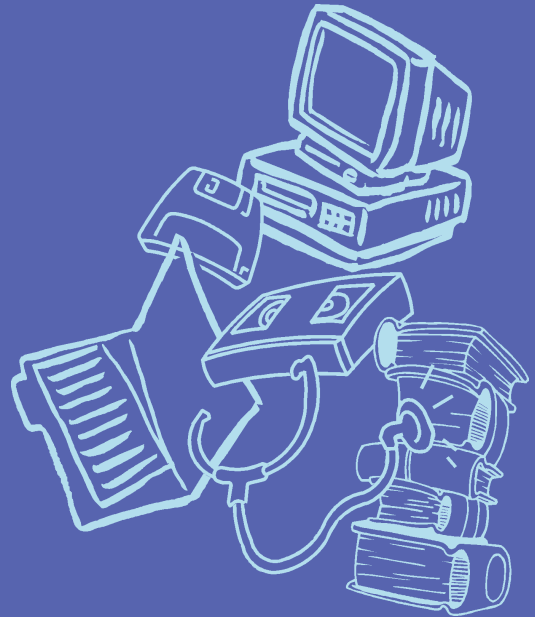
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Learning Contracts



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Snippets on Learning Contracts

A learning contract is basically a short agreement in writing between a trainee and supervisor. It outlines what is expected to be learned in a specific period and the method of assessment of that learning. Although it is a formal written agreement it need not be complex. It should outline:

- what the trainee will learn
- how the learning will be accomplished
- how the learning will be assessed.

Through learning contracts, trainees are encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning. They are encouraged to be involved in creating and implementing this learning and, to a varying degree depending on the type of contract, evaluate their own progress.

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The problem

'Coping with the demands of the ward and the patients always seems to take priority over my training'

'Consultant X only lets me see the routine patients in my case load'

'I still find having to make rapid decisions in an emergency very difficult – it's an area in which I need to improve'

Junior doctors

The solution

Learning contracts provide an educational framework to a trainee's placement. They assist in marrying the individual learning needs of the trainee with the demands of the workplace thus making efficient use of that work experience. They also encourage the trainee to become a more independent learner – an essential feature for personal and professional development.

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Introducing Learning Contracts

A learning contract is a way of structuring a learning experience.

There are various types of learning contracts drawn up for different purposes, eg for courses, placements, distance learning. Whatever the type and format, learning contracts can be described as an agreement between trainee and teacher/supervisor which specifies in detail:

- what the trainee needs to learn/be able to do (learning or placement objectives)
- how they will go about learning i.e. who and what will help (strategies and resources to achieve these objectives)
- what the trainee can produce to show that learning has been successful (evidence to indicate achievement of objectives)
- how and by whom the learning will be assessed (criteria for evaluating the evidence).



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Drawing up a learning contract can be an effective and stimulating activity. It will 'force' you as a teacher or supervisor and the trainee to have a constructive discussion about learning outcomes and how they can be achieved.

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Learning contracts in action

Types of learning contracts

Learning contracts can be seen as lying on a continuum with 'fully self directed' at one end and 'prescribed' at the other. In a fully 'self directed learning contract' the trainee might draft the entire contract and then negotiate and agree the contents with a supervisor. At the other end of the continuum the objectives and the assessment criteria for achieving these objectives will be prespecified.

The trainee and supervisor together will negotiate means of achieving these objectives.



Find out if your organisation uses learning contracts and if so, what type.

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Drawing up the contract

We will now look at the steps involved. Don't be too daunted – the key to it is getting the learner involved and with both of you not feeling too wary if you don't get the contract right. It can always be renegotiated.

What does the trainee need to learn/achieve?

Achieving the objectives

Providing the evidence

Assessing the evidence

For more information click on one of the options



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What does the trainee need to learn/achieve?



Achieving the objectives

Providing the evidence

Assessing the evidence

With a 'prescribed' contract, the learning outcomes or objectives will have been specified. These then become the basis for the learning contract.

With a 'self-directed' contract trainees set their own objectives. It is a negotiated agreement so you may have to strike some balance between what trainees feel they need to do and what the course or placement requires of them.



Note...

It is important that there is agreement between trainer and trainee of the content of the contract before it is signed.



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What does the trainee need to learn/achieve?

Achieving the objectives

Providing the evidence

Assessing the evidence



This might involve directing the trainee to specific books, journal articles, case notes, videos as well as to specific people, eg fellow trainees at the same or higher level, other consultants, other professionals, for the purposes of either talking to them or arranging to watch or perform a certain procedure.



Note...

Trainees should also work out ways to achieve the objectives. It is a partnership.

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What does the trainee need to learn/achieve?

Achieving the objectives

Providing the evidence

Assessing the evidence



Personal reflection and analysis by the trainee on events relevant to the objectives is a useful way of identifying learning. Such reflection should not just be a descriptive account of what has taken place, but show lessons learned, weaknesses identified or improved etc. In other instances successful demonstration of an activity to an appropriate person may be required.

A short report, a discussion with the trainer, completion of a self assessment exercise, a presentation at an in-house training session are also means that can be used to provide evidence of increased knowledge.

The formal requirements of your training programme may determine to some extent what evidence should be produced. Trainer and trainee should be in agreement on the evidence to be produced.

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What does the trainee need to learn/achieve?

Achieving the objectives

Providing the evidence

Assessing the evidence



The learning evidence needs to be assessed either informally or, if certification is required, formally. Well defined objectives will help in this stage. You should read the unit on that topic so that you can write measurable objectives.



Note...

For evidence to be formally assessed it is usually necessary to set some assessment or performance criteria.

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Checklists too can be used to assess performance. Assessment for a learning contract, therefore, can range from simple informal peer assessment to formal assessment according to standards set by your organisation or unit.



Note...

The learning contracts should not only specify how the evidence will be assessed, but also mention who should be doing the assessing.

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Examples in practice

Learning contracts need not be complex documents. One side of A4 will often suffice with space for the objectives, the proposed activities and resources, the evidence to be produced, the means of assessing it and, finally, the target date. Here is an example based on a contract design from Challis M (2000).

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Note...

Make sure you are familiar with learning contracts held in your own situation.

Personal Learning Plan Proposal Form

Learner name:

Adviser/mentor:

Date agreed:

Date for review:

What incident or event made you think about what you need to learn?	Learning objectives (what you intend to learn)	Strategies and resources (what you intend to do and what facilities you need to achieve objectives)	What is to be reviewed/ assessed (the evidence you will produce to show that you have met your objectives)	Criteria for review/ assessment (what will demonstrate that you have been successful)	Timescale (when you intend to have completed this piece of learning)
Seeing and appreciating the sensitivity with which a Sp. Reg broke bad news to a patient.	To be competent in breaking bad news.	Discuss with Sp. Reg strategies adopted.	My competence in breaking bad news in both the simulated and real situation.	Comments from peers. Patient reaction. My own increase in self-confidence.	9 months initially although hope to continue to improve.

Signature of learner:

Signature of adviser:

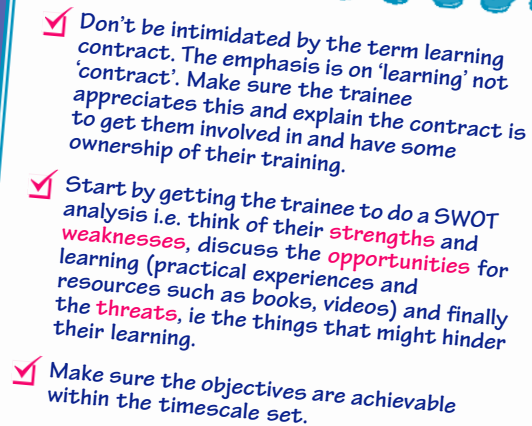
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- ✓ Don't be intimidated by the term learning contract. The emphasis is on 'learning' not 'contract'. Make sure the trainee appreciates this and explain the contract is to get them involved in and have some ownership of their training.
 - ✓ Start by getting the trainee to do a SWOT analysis i.e. think of their **strengths** and **weaknesses**, discuss the **opportunities** for learning (practical experiences and resources such as books, videos) and finally the **threats**, ie the things that might hinder their learning.
 - ✓ Make sure the objectives are achievable within the timescale set.

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- ✓ Encourage trainees to work out their own way to achieve the objectives but assist by pointing out people, experiences and resources that might help.
- ✓ Resources that can be used for learning might include: books/journals/newsletters/conference proceedings; official publications; case notes; audio/video/CD-ROM's; lecture /workshop; work colleagues from a range of professions; fellow trainees; community visits/clinics.
- ✓ Encourage trainees to be reflective on their progress by asking themselves 'What did I learn from that experience? What went wrong and why? What was the difficult and why? What am I worried about? What did I waste time on? What and how could I do something better?'

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✓ Evidence of learning that might be produced could be: a solution to a problem; a presentation, clinical notes, personal reflections, a demonstration (real/simulated), a case study, comments from an observer, records of work undertaken, a report, a self or external assessment.

✓ When negotiating the contract don't make the trainee feel they are being criticised for inadequacies – lay emphasis on building on existing experience.

Other learning opportunities

There are many books and other resources on Learning Contracts. Here is a short resumé of our suggestions.



Click the appropriate button if you wish to find out more

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Anderson G, Boud D, Sampson J (1996). *Learning contracts: a practical guide*. London, Kogan Page

A very practical book that introduces you to the basic concepts of the learning contract approach. It takes you through the process of introducing contracts for the first time and addresses the kind of problems that may be encountered. It also explores, with examples, how contracts can be adapted for different purposes.

Brown S, Baume D (1992) *Learning contracts Volume 1: a theoretical perspective; Volume 2: some practical examples*. Birmingham, Standing Conference on Educational Development (SCED)

A useful easy to read series of papers which give both insight into and examples of learning contracts.

Sephenson J, Laycock M (1993) *Using Learning contracts in Higher Education*. London, Kogan Page

A more detailed book on learning contracts. For those who wish to find out whether learning contracts might be worth exploring and developing further.

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Parsell G, Bligh J (1996) Contract learning, clinical learning and clinicians. *Postgraduate Medical Journal*72: 284-289

A concise, useful paper that explores the relevance of contract learning to postgraduate training. Worth reading.

Challis M (2000) AMEE Medical Education Guide No.19: Personal learning plans. *Medical Teacher* 22: 225-236

An excellent paper that provides a stage by stage strategy for developing learning contracts.

Brambleby, P, Coates R (1997) Learning contracts in higher professional training: a user's guide. *Postgraduate Medical Journal*73: 279-282

This paper looks at experiences of learning contracts from both the trainee and trainer perspective – looking at the process, advantages and pitfalls. An example of a learning contract (one slightly different from that on Page 3) is given.

Mc Allister M (1996) Learning contracts an Australian experience. *Nurse Education Today* 16 199-205

Written in the context of nursing this paper gives a good account of the author's experiences of using learning contracts – ones where the learner sets his or her own objectives. The author's reflections are worth reading and highlight many benefits of using such contracts as well as some concerns. Useful recommendations for future use of learning contracts are made.

Lowry M (1997). Using learning contracts in clinical practice. *Professional Nurse*12: 280-283

Although written in the context of nurse education, this straightforward description of learning contracts is equally applicable to medical education. It is a useful summary from another author.

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The international database TimeLIT (Topics in Medical Education Literature) www.timelit.org gives free access to articles relating to education in medicine, dentistry, nursing, patient health and the professions allied to medicine.

Other useful websites for those interested in Medical Education are that of the Association for the Study of Medical Education www.asme.org.uk and that of the Association for Medical Education in Europe www.amee.org

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The following units cover topics that are important in the writing of learning contracts. You may wish to look at them as well.

**Aims &
Objectives**

**Needs
Assessment**



Click the appropriate button to take you to a summary of the unit

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If you have never been involved in drawing up contracts before, get together with your colleagues. Agree and set some learning objectives for PRHOs or SHO's in your unit.



Note...

This will be the first stage of drawing up a pre-specified contract for them.



Then discuss and negotiate the objectives with a group of trainees. Get them to come up with additional objectives and refine them as necessary to ensure they are achievable and at an appropriate level of ability for the stage of training.



Note...

Brain storm and discuss ways to achieve these objectives and assess the learning.

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Learning contracts may seem a lot of work but once you and the trainees get used to the process there will be many benefits. The trainees will become less dependent on you and others to identify their needs and organise their learning; the existence of a contract makes it easier for other people to adopt a supervisory or tutor role – you are not seen as the provider of all knowledge; the contract can respond to individual needs.

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