Learning Contract Guidelines

Philosophy:

Self directed learning is the educational ideal which guides and informs the Discipline of Occupational Therapy at the University Of Dublin, Trinity College. Endorsing this educational ideal reflects the humanistic values of the profession where the client is viewed as a self directed, autonomous learner who is capable of learning how to direct their own health needs.

Promoting a model of self directed learning within the practice education setting necessitates the establishment of a climate that is conducive to learning. The characteristics which promote an optimal learning climate are:

- Collaboration
- Mutual respect
- Openness
- Trust
- Flexibility
- Supportiveness (Anthony & Gaiptman).

A learning contract is a tool which can facilitate the practical application of self directed learning, and as such, it has particular relevance within the practice education setting. To be effective, it must be a continuously negotiable working document between the practice educator and the student.

Using a learning contract while on practice education placements encourages the student to take an active role in all stages of their learning. It provides the student with the flexibility of individualising their learning by establishing meaningful goals which reflect their own strengths and weaknesses.

Within the context of the practice education experience, the learning contract allows the student to blend the necessary objectives for practice education with their own personal learning goals. When the student is initially identifying their learning goals he/she needs to give careful consideration as to whether or not the desired outcomes are achievable objectives given the available resources and the need to meet the required practice education objectives on which the student will be assessed. The identified goals must also be consistent with the student’s current level of professional development and not be unrealistically high or low.

A collaborative working relationship between the practice educator and the student is essential when using learning contracts. The process of negotiation and the formulation of a written agreement aim to make the responsibility of both parties explicit. It also clarifies and makes explicit the expectations that the practice educator has of the student and the expectations that the student has of themselves and of the practice educator, in relation to meeting learning needs, (Alsop & Ryan, 1996). The skills of giving and receiving feedback enhance the working relationship and need to be nurtured during practice education experience.
Learning contracts need to be regularly reviewed to allow for changes as objectives are met and new learning objectives are developed. This is to acknowledge that learning is a dynamic process and that the learning environment can be both volatile and changeable. Regular professional and documented supervision with the practice educator provides a forum for the two-way negotiation that is needed to make changes and to acknowledge learning developments. It also provides a forum for feedback.

The focus in self directed learning is on the facilitation of learning. It is intrinsic rewards such as a sense of achievement and increased self esteem that are valued by the adult learner. To this end, the learning contract is a vehicle which facilitates the development of intrinsic professional values for the student occupational therapist.

Please note that a template for the Learning Contract is available to download from the Discipline’s website at http://www.medicine.tcd.ie/occupational-therapy/practice-education

**What is a Learning Contract?**

- It is a formalised written agreement between the student and their practice educator.
- It includes input from all parties (student, practice educator, practice tutor/regional placement facilitator where applicable).
- It gives responsibility to the student to be involved in their own learning.
- It focuses on learning opportunities.
- It is written from the students assessment form.
- It is a way of making the student’s own learning objectives (from their own assessment form) explicit.
- It states what the student’s learning objectives are.
- It considers whether the student’s learning objectives are achievable.
- It specifies what strategies and resources the student and practice educator will use to achieve the student’s learning objectives.
- It states the evidence the student will produce to show that they have achieved their learning objectives.
- It defines the timescale for the student’s achievement of their learning objectives.
- It aids the student’s assessment and achievement in the practice education experience.

**The learning contract has four sections:**

- Learning Objectives (what the student intends to learn).
- Strategies and Resources (what the student intends to do and what facilities the student to achieve their learning objectives).
- Evidence and Validation (the evidence the student will produce to show that they have achieved their learning objectives and how their evidence will be validated).
• Timescale (when the student intends to have completed this piece of their learning).

The learning outcomes in the learning contract must use SMART goal setting:

• **S** = Specific
• **M** = Measurable
• **A** = Achievable
• **R** = Realistic
• **T** = Time Frame

The process for negotiating a learning contract while on placement:

• **Before the placement:**

  The student sends his/her CV detailing his/her college studies, and asks for relevant preparation to do prior to their placement. The student should read all the information sent by, and do all the recommended preparation recommended by the placement site (including phoning and/or emailing, and visiting the practice educator or practice tutor where applicable).

• **1st week of placement:**

  The student should take the week to see what opportunities are available and to participate in as many activities as possible. The student should make a list of the identified opportunities in the placement and of all the items they want/need to learn. The practice educator should make a list of all the available opportunities and their expectations of the students. The student and the practice educator should discuss the student’s practice education portfolio (i.e. the student’s curriculum vitae, learning style, professional development form, assessment forms from previous placements, learning contracts from previous placements).

• **End of 1st Week/beginning of 2nd week:**

  The student and the practice educator should have their first supervision session. Both the student and the practice educator should bring their lists to this negotiation meeting.

  Together, the student and the practice educator identify all the items, which are on all the lists and:

  • Negotiate what the student’s learning needs are from these items (i.e. what do I need to learn?)
  • Identify the resources to help the student learn this (i.e. how can I best learn this in this placement?)
  • Identify the criteria by which the student will be able to show they have learnt this (i.e. what will I be able to do when I have learnt it?)
• Prioritise items into essential and desirable if the student and practice educator find themselves compiling a very long list.

• Check that all the essential learning outcomes have been included. If not, do any of these link with anything identified by either the student or the practice educator? Negotiate these in exactly the same way as before.

• Go through all the items left on your list and decide which can/should be achieved and which may need to be held for a more appropriate time (e.g. either later in the placement, or a future placement, or back in college).

The student takes responsibility for writing up the results of this meeting on the learning contract form during the meeting. It is very beneficial to include a practice tutor in this meeting also.

• Each subsequent week:

During each weekly supervision meeting the student and the practice educator reflect on the week’s activities and then mark off items which have been achieved on the contract. The student will find that using a reflective diary throughout the week helps this process immensely.

Note that it is perfectly acceptable to write in learning that happened without planning. So, if something unexpectedly happened and you learnt from the situation – write it in.

Some prompting questions to help when trying to negotiate a learning contract (ask these about each item on the learning contract):

• What do you mean by this?
• Why do you want to learn this?
• Is this learning need essential/ achievable?
• How might you learn this?
• What resources are available to help you do this?
• How are you going to evaluate this?

Why use a learning contract?

1. At the end of the placement, the student’s learning contract provides evidence that the student has:

• Achieved their essential learning outcomes.
• May also have achieved some desirable learning outcomes.
• Passed their placement.

The learning contract should be therefore be used to provide the evidence to write up the student’s final summative report.
2. The student should keep a copy of all their learning contracts in their practice education portfolio. The student should review their learning contracts from previous placements prior to beginning their next placement, as a way to:

- Identify what strengths they will bring to their next placement
- Identify their personal learning needs for their next placement (the things that the student is weaker on and that they need to work on.)