

Guidelines for devising a Learning Contract/ Personal Development Plan



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

A learning contract/ Personal Development Plan is a tool which can facilitate the practical application of self-directed learning, and as such, it has particular relevance within the practice education placement setting. To be effective, it must be a continuously negotiable working document between the practice educator and the student. Using a learning contract/ Personal Development Plan 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/ Personal Development Plan 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/competencies/standards of proficiency on which the student will be assessed. The identified goals must also be consistent with the student's current level of practice education placement and 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/Personal Development Plan. 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 the practice education placement. The student should bring a draft learning contract/ Personal Development Plan to the placement. During the first week of placement the student should be exposed to potentially different learning opportunities and on completion of same, the contents should be negotiated and agreed

in the first week of placement and reviewed in supervision. The learning contract focuses the learner on their goals for the placement.

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/ Personal Development Plan is a vehicle which facilitates the development of intrinsic professional values for the student occupational therapist.

Learning Contracts should specify the following:

1. Link to the Competency Area and Competency number
2. The learning objectives or goals to be achieved
3. The support/strategies required and resources available
4. Details of how learning goals or objectives will be addressed
5. The timeframe within which goals or objectives should be achieved
6. The nature of the evidence that will indicate when goals or objectives have been met
7. The criteria to be used to assess the evidence
8. The signatures of the parties involved in the contract.

Twelve steps to working through a learning contract:

Step 1: The learner's needs or gaps in knowledge or skills are clarified: student identifies strengths, knowledge and skills and identifies weaknesses in relation to current placement. Practice Educator can provide guidance.

Step 2: Learning outcomes are defined: Agreeing on what will be achieved in a defined timescale.

Step 3: Learning opportunities and resources needed to attain outcomes are identified e.g. literature, technology, members of the multi-disciplinary team etc.

Step 4: The process by which learning is to occur is specified in a plan. Plan reflects learning strategies to be used.

Step 5: Responsibilities of the people involved are detailed.

Step 6: Timeframe for completion is determined: Practice Educator facilitates the student to set a realistic timeframe.

Step 7: The criteria against which the achievement of goals is to be assessed are recorded: A checklist for the evidence required to ensure that the terms of the learning contract are fulfilled.

Step 8: The learning contract is signed by both or all parties: shows commitment to a contractual activity.

Step 9: The learning activities are undertaken: New themes or interests may emerge through original outcomes should not be discarded.

Step 10: The contract is revisited and revised as necessary as the plans progress.

Step 11: Outcomes are evaluated against the recorded criteria: Good to consider what helped or hindered learning process.

Step 12: Future needs may indicate a renegotiation of the contract.

Please see Appendix 13 for learning contract/Personal Development Plan. Below is a table providing examples of items for use in the learning contract/personal development plan.

Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
Performance Skills	Be able to complete simple and straightforward skills e.g. assessment/s under supervision	Be able to complete tasks with guided participation e.g. do assessment/s with some complexity with guided participation.	Complete autonomously e.g. do assessment/s with some complexity but able to report back to educator identifying work completed.
Theory	Describe or explain theory relevant to the setting	Select an appropriate model of practice/theory and apply their choice to clients in the setting.	To be able to integrate theory into everyday practice
Evidence based practice	Be able to identify one/two key research used in this setting	Be able to apply evidence-based practice in discussion with practice educator in supervision	Be able to analyse, critique, select and apply evidence in practice by leading discussions in supervision
Thinking Skills	Is able to demonstrate an understanding of clinical decision making through explanation in supervision	Be able to provide other options when discussing clinical decision making and give sound thinking on why other options may be relevant	Will be able to initiate and lead on one innovative or new decision making based on evidence- based practice that will benefit the service or the service users
Learning Behaviour	Identifies relevant questions and uses reflection with educator to develop plans of development	Seeks confirmation of tasks to be completed. Active reflector with educator with detailed and relevant onward planning to develop	Seeks guidance and supervision as needed with insight into abilities, strengths, needs and weaknesses. Evidences reflection in supervision with relevant planning
Attitude to work based learning skills	Is able to use initiative in mundane and routine tasks e.g. setting up a room, organising clinics	Is able to use initiative on basic work tasks, e.g. liaising with nurse night staff on patients, doing a chart review, completing screening etc	Is able to complete work tasks independently and without prompting e.g. organising clinics
Communication skills	Is able to complete communication tasks with other staff informally	Is able to communicate formally with other staff, patients, carers, families and services on routine matters	Is able to communicate informally and formally with other staff, patients, carers, families and services on matters relating to their client caseload
Time management skills	Is able to prioritise tasks with assistance and	Is able to manage small caseload for setting. Is able to prioritise work tasks appropriately and	Is able to manage part of a clinician's caseload and work tasks to practice pace. Is able to prioritise

	complete work tasks in the time frame given	complete essential tasks in a timely fashion	and complete work tasks in required timeframe
Attitude to feedback	Is able to listen to feedback from educator and voice a plan of changes to be made	Is able to listen to feedback from educator and others. Is able to voice a plan, and implement that plan of changes to be made to practice	Is able to self-evaluate performance and seek clarification or elaboration from educator and others. Is able to voice a plan, and implement that plan of changes to be made to practice