DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 266 JC 950 249

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TITLE The Effectiveness of Student Learning Contracts in a Public Community College History Course.
PUB DATE 11 Nov 94
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Nashville, TN, November 9-11, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; Comparative Analysis; *Grades (Scholastic); *History Instruction; Learning Activities; *Performance Contracts; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of student learning contracts in a Southeastern, open-admissions, public community college history course. The contracts specified final grade goals and point-earning activities (e.g., tests, book reports, term paper). A control group (N=72) using the learning contracts was compared with a demographically similar experimental group (N=51), which did not use learning contracts. Study findings included the following: (1) only 25% of the control group completed their contracts; (2) 72.55% of the experimental group completed at least one book report or term paper, compared to 69.44% of the control group; and (3) the control group achieved a total points earned mean of 86.07, while the experimental group mean was 94.50. As the group without learning contracts completed more learning activities and performed significantly better in terms of overall points earned, it was concluded that the use of learning contracts should be carefully evaluated in terms of its purpose, design, and student willingness and ability to set and achieve goals. (KP)

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association
Nashville, Tennessee
11 November, 1994



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# The Effectiveness of Student Learning Contracts in a Public Community College History Course


## Abstract

A study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of student learning contracts in a Southeastern, open-admissions, public community college history course. The contracts specified final grade goals and point-earning learning activities (tests, book reports, term paper). For this study, a control group (n = 72) was compared to an experimental group (n = 51). There were no significant differences in the groups' demographics. Contracts were employed with the control group. With the experimental group, no contracts were required, but the same point-earning learning activities were permitted.

Only 25% of the control group completed their contracts. 72.55% of the experimental group completed at least one book report or a term paper, while 69.44% of the control group did so. A chi-square procedure comparing book report/term paper completion revealed no significant difference, but it was deemed noteworthy that the experimental group completed more learning activities than did the control group.

The control group achieved a total points earned mean

of 86.07, while the experimental group mean was 94.50. A *t*-test showed the groups' difference of total point means to be significant ($p < .01$). Therefore, the lack of contracts did not appear to cause final grades to suffer.

The researcher concluded that contracting of this sort, when employed with this type of student population, may not result in an increase in learning activity or overall performance or learning. Further study should concentrate on contract purpose and design, and on student willingness and ability to set and achieve goals.

# The Effectiveness of Student Learning Contracts in a Public Community College History Course

Teachers at all levels should be constantly seeking ways in which to cause more and better learning to happen. Often, this search will lead them to the professional literature, where they are likely to encounter a variety of methodologies, each offered as a solution to whatever the problem may be. Teachers can read about, and feel encouraged to try, methods of instruction derived from any number of pedagogical theories.

If the teacher is struggling with the problems of student passivity and procrastination, then a literature search is likely to lead to recommendations for the use of student learning contracts. These plans, or contracts, are usually in the form of an agreement between the student and the teacher. Most contracts contain learning goals and the means of achieving those goals. Ideally, learning contracts will permit students to pursue learning goals relevant to their own interests but within the context of the course; thus, they may become self-directed learners (Clark, 1981; Knowles, 1986).

Burkett and Darst (1979), Berte (1975), Gross and Gross (1980), McKeachie (1986), and Vitucci (1992) are

among those who define the purpose and design of student learning contracts. A profile of such contracts emerges from their work. Contracts should result from a dialogue between student and teacher and include a statement of student learning goals, learning activities that will contribute to attaining those goals, and methods and criteria of evaluation. Typically, these contracts are formalized with dates and signatures. Ideally, they will provide for more student choice, flexibility, and motivation.

However, others (Rose, 1987; Spear, 1991; Vitucci, 1992) raise serious doubts about the use of student learning contracts with some populations. They variously question the maturity, motivation, and skills of many students who may be asked to plan and execute a contract. From their perspective, passivity and procrastination must be dealt with *prior* to any attempts at contracting; the contracts themselves may not be the solutions to these problems.

This paper therefore seeks to address several aspects of the effectiveness of student learning contracts, when used with students in a public, open-admissions community college. Do the students make realistic plans, and do they carry them out? Do students who make a plan perform more

learning activities than students without contracts? And, finally, what might this investigation reveal about the purpose and design of contracts?

## The Study

A study of the use of student learning contracts was conducted in a community college history course. With terms of only 11 weeks, the researcher was concerned that there would be too little time for the students to conceive of, plan, and achieve objectives and goals that were entirely their own. Therefore, the students were limited to setting final grade goals and selecting learning activities (term paper, book reports, tests) from a menu dictated by the instructor. Student choice was allowed in determining term paper subjects, in picking books for reports, and in deciding on how many and which type of evaluated learning activities to participate in.

Students were required to complete and sign their contracts by the third of twenty class meetings. Details of methods and standards of evaluation were included in the course syllabus given to each student at the first class meeting. Specifics of the grading system are contained in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Research Design

With the control group, contracts as described above were utilized. The experimental group treatment differed in that they were allowed to exercise the same learning activity choices as the control group, but were not required to execute a contract.

Data pertaining to control group completion of their contracts and attainment of their final grade goals were tabulated. A chi-square procedure was utilized to analyze the differences between the control and experimental groups' completion of the learning activities (book reports, a term paper, and/or tests). Since the experimental group was not required to express a final grade goal, comparison of the groups' planned goal attainment was not possible. Therefore, in order to provide a look at end results, a *t*-test comparison was made of the two groups' total points earned.

Site, Subjects, and Materials

The study was conducted in a History of Western Civilization course taught at a public, open-admissions community college located in a Southeastern state.

Only those students who completed the course were included in the study; on this basis, the control group totalled 72, the experimental group totalled 51. To determine the degree of demographic similarity between the two groups, *t*-tests and chi-square procedures were used to compare the groups on the basis of grade point average, quarter hours completed, age, gender, ethnicity, and scores on placement tests. At the .05 level, no significant demographic differences were found.

The control group was enrolled during the Fall Quarter. The experimental group was enrolled during the Winter Quarter of the same school year. The same instructor/researcher conducted all of the classes, using the same classroom, textbook, and lecture notes. The course iterations differed only in the use of contracts. Data concerning learning activity and goal completion were readily available from the instructor/researcher's records.

## Results

Only 25% of the control group students achieved or exceeded their final grade goal. It was also observed that, of the 40 control group students who expressed a final grade goal of "A", just 10 (25%) actually earned an "A". These results are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

All students in both groups took all of the tests. 72.55% of the experimental group completed at least one other evaluated learning activity (a book report or a term paper), while 69.44% of the control group did so. A chi-square procedure indicated that, at the .05 level, these differences were not statistically significant (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

The difference between the experimental group total point mean of 94.51 and the control group mean of 86.07 was analyzed with a *t*-test. As Table 4 illustrates, this difference was significant at the .01 level.

Insert Table 4 about here

## Conclusions

The data in Table 2 seem to indicate that goal setting, in terms of focusing on a final grade, was not very effective with these students. Fully 75% failed to

attain their goal which, for the majority of them, was a grade of "A". And this was not a case of "tried but failed"; although all of the control group students indicated on their contracts an intention of completing one or two book reports and/or a term paper, 30.56% of them failed to complete even one of those learning activities. In other words, they failed to do the work that they had perceived as necessary for the achievement of their final grade goal. As Tables 3 and 4 reveal, the experimental group, without contracts, actually completed more learning activities and performed significantly better in terms of overall points earned.

## Implications for Practice

These results are not offered as a universal indictment of the use of student learning contracts. However, they do provide some implications in two areas: the purpose and design of contracts and the use of contracts with a population such as the one studied herein. These contracts did seem to meet all of the criteria specified by Berte (1975) and Gross and Gross (1980). They included goals, learning activities, and the methods and criteria for evaluation. However, limiting the students to choosing from an instructor-prepared list of learning activities may also serve to limit the students' sense of

ownership of the plan. Perhaps greater flexibility in terms of goals, activities, and methods of evaluation would heighten the level of student involvement and improve student performance.

Another important consideration is that of student willingness and ability to set and achieve their own goals and objectives. These concerns were raised by Burkett and Darst (1979), Vitucci (1992), Spear (1991), and Rose (1987) and they seem to have been amplified by this study. Perhaps the control group's failure to complete their contracts could be attributed to some aspects of these particular students' motivation and ability to set their own course. Had there been more planning dialogue between the instructor and the students, as recommended by Vitucci (1992), the students may have been better prepared to carry out their contracts.

In conclusion, it should be restated that student involvement in and ownership of course activities and goals remain worthwhile ambitions for the instructor. However, the methodology used toward those ends must be carefully evaluated in terms of its purpose, its design, and the nature of the population with which it will be employed.

Table 1

Grading System

| Activity | Number Allowed | Maximum Points per Activity |
|---|---|---|
| Tests | 5 | 20 |
| Book Reports | 2 | 5 |
| Term Paper | 1 | 10 |
| Group Grade | 1 | 5 |
| Total Possible Points | | 125 |

| Final Grades | Points Required |
|---|---|
| A | 100 |
| B | 90 |
| C | 75 |
| D | 60 |
| F | Below 60 |

Note. Group grades resulted from mandatory participation in cooperative learning sessions conducted as a means of test preparation. These were individual scores, computed as 5% of each study group's total average test scores.

Table 2

Control Group Completion of Final Grade Goals

| Number of Students who Indicated a Final Grade Goal | Number of Students Who Achieved That Goal |
|---|---|
| 56 | 14 (25%) |

| Number of Students Who Planned To Earn an "A" | Number of Students Who Received an "A" |
|---|---|
| 40 | 10 (25%) |

Table 3

Chi-Square Comparison of Completion of a Book Report or a Term Paper by Control (C) and Experimental (E) Groups, .05 Level of Significance

| Group | | Completed None | Completed One or More | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| C | Frequency | 22 | 50 | 72 |
| | Row | 30.56% | 69.44% | 58.54% |
| | Column | 61.11% | 57.47% | |
| E | Frequency | 14 | 37 | 51 |
| | Row | 27.45% | 72.55% | 41.46% |
| | Column | 38.89% | 42.53% | |
| Total | | 36 | 87 | 123 |
| | | 29.27% | 70.73% | 100.00% |

$X^2$ (1, $N$ = 123) = 0.139, $p > 0.709$

Table 4

t-Test Comparison of Total Points Means Between Control (C) and Experimental (E) Groups, Two-Tailed, .01 Level of Significance

| Group | N | Mean | SD | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C | 72 | 86.0694 | 14.4137 | 47.0000 | 111.0000 |
| E | 51 | 94.5098 | 11.8547 | 70.0000 | 122.0000 |

$t$ (121) = -3.4376, $p < .0008$

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