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The learning contract has been renamed the learning covenant to emphasize the spiritual dimension of the contract. The learner develops and enters into a written contractual agreement with a facilitator.

The Learning Covenant

R.E.Y. Wickett

Adult educators who facilitate learning often work in relationships that have the potential to encourage spiritual growth and development. The process of learning and the close working relationships that often develop as a result are good examples of what Vella refers to in Chapter One of this volume as a *spirited epistemology*. An epistemology may be spirited regardless of whether the substantive content of the learning is spiritual. For example, an adult literacy educator who views the learning process as a privileged teaching event may not necessarily view the curriculum as spiritual.

Consequently, it is important for persons who work with adult learners on a regular basis to learn to appreciate the rich variety of experiences that learners bring to the learning situation, and the potential for spiritual growth that might come about as a result of their interactions with the learner. More important, adult educators must consider the nature of the relationships that develop as they interact with learners, and the spiritual dimensions of this interaction. One way that this can be done is through the use of the learning covenant, a model rooted in the ancient concept of covenant that has important implications for the relationship between the learner and the adult educator.

This chapter begins with a general overview of covenants, explains the concept of the learning covenant, elaborates on the conditions for establishing covenants such as relationships and on the spiritual dimensions of both learning and covenants, and presents a learning covenant model that can be used in a variety of adult education settings. The essence of learning presented in this educational model and referred to as the learning covenant is its adherence to the need for a high-quality relationship between the learner and the adult educator. The model also provides a vehicle by which learners can be empowered while at the same time engaging in carefully planned, individualized learning activities.

Historical Evidence of Covenants

The history of covenants and covenant relationships begins in the very early days of civilization. Our concept of covenants has evolved and expanded over time. While the language or term used may change, the basic concept of an agreement, usually formal, between two or more persons to do or not do something remains the same. Modern agreements such as treaties and contracts are derivatives of the earliest forms of covenants. However, a covenant differs from a contract in that it emphasizes the relationship and not the content of the agreement. This focus distinguishes the covenant from a contract, which emphasizes doing or not doing.

Covenants may be traced back to Mesopotamian society (Paul, 1970). The purpose of covenants, as Paul points out, was to provide a framework for human interaction that would help societies and individuals function in appropriate ways. These early covenants were highly important ways of establishing the rights and responsibilities of both parties. Because early societies believed in some form of higher power or God, the spiritual dimension was necessarily present when people formed covenants and in the living out of the covenant.

The origins of covenants as they are currently known are found in societies that have been influenced by a Judeo-Christian ethos. The Mosaic covenant, for instance, can be interpreted as the governing principles of our current law. The Ten Commandments bound the people of Israel to God and set out clearly their mutual commitments to each other. The earliest concepts of the law drawn from these basic principles are recorded in the Bible.

Since the basic element of covenants is relationship, parties to covenants accept their parts willingly as a way to commit to others and to guarantee a certain result. In an adult learning situation, a learning covenant can facilitate learning and increase self-directedness in learners by establishing responsibilities and deciding on outcomes. It is important to remember the spiritual nature of covenants and the contexts in which earlier covenants were used in order to infuse a spiritual dimension in covenants established today. For this reason, adult educators should examine the conditions of historical covenants that are still relevant today and apply these provisions.

Relationships and Context for Learning

The relationship between the adult educator and the learner is central to the process of interactive learning. Malcolm Knowles (in his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, 1980) and many other adult educators have placed the interactive dimension at the heart of the adult learning experience. If the relationship between educator and learner is important in a learning situation that is not regarded as religious or sacred, it has an even deeper meaning in the context of the relationship that this volume describes as spiritual.

Leon MacKenzie (1982) and John Elias (1993), two adult religious educators, stress the importance of a supportive learning climate and a positive relationship between the learner and the adult educator. Bruce Joyce and Marsha Weil (1986) also describe various models for teaching that provide a framework for planning and implementing face-to-face interactions between teachers and learners. These authors stress the importance of good relationships among learners in groups of any size and between the learner and the educator in any learning activity.

Clearly, the time and energy put into building these relationships on the basic principles of safety, respect, and honor are essential for strengthening the relationships. This type of environment is what Elias (1993) refers to as a healthy interpersonal climate. In fact, most models for teaching and learning have an important interpersonal dimension.

I describe the importance of this interpersonal dimension and the interaction that generally results in my 1991 book *Models of Adult Religious Education Practice*, in which I define a model as a framework that will “assist the educator to understand the nature of the learner’s situation and to create a context in which the learner will be enabled to learn and grow through an appropriate process” (p. 3). The focus in my definition is clearly on the learner; the educator is defined in relation to the learner. This definition highlights the educator’s need to be interactive with the learner.

The book describes what I refer to as the *learning covenant*, an alternative learning model rooted in the literature of adult education, particularly in Knowles’s (1986) learning contract model. In the previous chapter, Leona English describes how a learning contract has been employed in a self-directed master of adult education program. Actually, contracts can be established in a variety of learning settings. For example, they can be established between employers and employees in business and used to promote a learning climate in the workplace and to increase employees’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In the true spirit of contract, such agreements must be beneficial to both parties.

Covenants are similar to contracts in many ways, but they differ in that covenants include a strong spiritual dimension, especially the capacity to relate, which is innate to humanity. The learning covenant, like a contract, involves establishing learning objectives, naming the strategies to be used for accomplishing these objectives, setting time lines, identifying resources, and outlining criteria for evaluation.

Spiritual Dimensions of Learning

According to Henri Nouwen (1975), the spiritual can be discovered in the three dimensions of human experience: with ourselves, with others, and beyond the human to the source of all spiritual life. In his book *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Nouwen describes the human ability to grow spiritually through the recognition of the spiritual

dimensions with ourselves, with others, and beyond the human to the source of all spiritual life. In his opinion, it is through the two dimensions of spirituality that exist beyond ourselves that we can truly learn to grow in understanding.

Moving Beyond Ourselves. The ability to move beyond ourselves is key to the success of the covenant relationship and should not be forgotten. It is only within the broader context of these two dimensions—with others and beyond the human—that the relationship with others can make its maximum contribution to our spiritual development.

Growing in Relationship. Nouwen describes the relationship between learner and adult educator as one that involves finding “a hospitable place where life may be lived without fear and where community can be found” (1975, p. 46). This is the space in which relationships can be fully developed and experienced. The term that Nouwen uses to describe the context in which relationships can develop is *hospitality*, which he defines as the creation of “a free and friendly space” in which people can enter to become friends (p. 50). In the second chapter of this volume, Linda Vogel elaborates on the experience of place as helping to ground our spirituality, as a way of connecting the ordinary and the sacred.

Hospitality. The space in which hospitality occurs, to which Nouwen refers, is not a space that requires others to be like us. Rather, it is a space that Nouwen describes as “a friendly emptiness where people can enter and discover themselves as created free.” He says, “Hospitality is not an invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own” (1975, p. 51). This task is not easy, because most adult educators have a tendency to control and direct the learning process. To do otherwise requires what Vella refers to in Chapter One as “slaying the dominating professor in myself.” This change often requires a psychological shift on the part of adult educators as they relinquish control to learners. Adult educators must learn to trust and also believe in learners’ ability and desire to achieve success.

Nouwen stresses the importance of hospitality in relationships between educators and learners and cautions about avoiding the types of relationships in which there is fear because these kinds of relationships are counterproductive to the learning process. Nouwen uses the term *affirming* to describe a positive relationship. He regards affirmation, encouragement, and support as important factors in the learning process. In brief, hospitality is central to an effective covenant, in which learning is involved.

Limitations. Nouwen reminds adult educators that they are not the only ones who have the potential to influence students. Their interactions with each other and with other human resources may be as valuable as or more valuable than their interactions with an educator. In fact, the covenant relationship makes it possible for the adult educator and the learner to engage with each other in a way that is supportive of adult learning. The learning covenant supports the type of relationship that Nouwen believes is

desirable for both the learner and the educator, if the spiritual in the three dimensions of human experience is to be realized.

Spiritual Dimensions of Covenants

Because earlier societies viewed the world as having an important spiritual dimension, the presence of a spiritual dimension in covenants was taken for granted. Oaths were sworn to uphold covenants, thereby evoking the spiritual connection to uphold the covenant and bind both parties. In modern society, people generally no longer think in this way, but there are exceptions. Robert Sevensky (1982) and Dennis Kenny (1980) put forward the claim that a higher spiritual power or God has a relationship with the professional who works with clients. Sevensky refers to this relationship in the medical profession, and Kenny makes reference to this kind of relationship within clinical, pastoral fields. These authors urge professionals to consider ways in which the spiritual dimension can be included in their work. When adult educators use learning covenants with their students, they should understand that the very term implies a spiritual dimension, because the emphasis is on the relationship rather than on the content of the agreement.

Part of the difficulty that adult educators encounter today when using learning covenants with their students is misconceptions about the covenant concept and its meaning. Students often confuse the word *covenant* with the word *contract*, which has legal overtones that students often find frightening. In contrast, the covenant approach focuses on the spiritual connection, thereby minimizing the sense of a legal commitment. As we understand them today, covenants have come to our society through a complicated process of change and adaptation.

Conditions of the Covenant

All forms of covenants exist with conditions and within contexts. Each has a reason for existence in the minds of the parties who undertake them. Covenants have been conducted and are conducted currently with certain conditions to ensure effectiveness. The conditions of covenants apply to both parties: a level of commitment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of respect for the other person, benefits, sanctions, connection with other aspects of society and life experience, and an evolving nature (Wickett, 1995, p. 69). Each condition must be considered if maximum benefit is to be derived from the adult learning process. To neglect one condition would put the covenant in jeopardy. Taken together, these conditions provide a recipe for success.

A Level of Commitment. The commitment made to the learning process can not only ensure success in the acquisition of substantive content but it can also reflect the relationship between the parties. For example, an adult literacy educator who in every way possible supports learners who face

multiple financial, emotional, and cognitive difficulties as they work toward fulfilling the conditions of a learning covenant is demonstrating commitment. An adult educator's commitment to individuals' personal development, which includes overcoming the various barriers they face, is as important as the educator's commitment to the learning of substantive content. The adult learner must also have a high level of commitment to the learning covenant and be actively involved in all parts of the learning process. The task of the adult educator is take full advantage of the adult learner's commitment.

A Sense of Responsibility. Adult educators must assume a high degree of responsibility for the learning process. This requires that they have special expertise in the subject matter they are teaching in order to ensure the success of the learning process. For example, community college instructors who teach computer courses not only need to be knowledgeable about computers and understand how to teach computer skills, but they must also encourage their students to be Subjects of their learning by helping them set realistic learning goals and identify indicators of success. Adult educators are also responsible for seeing that computer program graduates are competitive in the workplace. The learner, too, should demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility to participate and maximize learning. This mutual sense of responsibility will inevitably draw both parties into a relationship in which the spiritual dimension is recognized and enhanced because it is based on dialogue, respect, and accountability.

A Sense of Respect for the Other Person. Jeffrey Orr and Linda Vogel point out in Chapters Six and Two, respectively, of this volume that respect is central to a spiritually based relationship. The word *respect* refers to the condition of being esteemed or honored, a sense of the worth or excellence of a person. In a learning covenant, adult educators and learners must respect one another as persons and acknowledge the skills and knowledge that each has to offer. For example, nutrition educators who work with senior citizens and help them from time to time to establish goals for changing lifestyle behaviors need to be respectful of the seniors' lifelong experiences as well as of their rights and freedoms. This kind of personal respect provides a basis for interaction and mutual benefit.

Benefits. Learners who have had a successful learning experience often feel overjoyed and proud of their accomplishments. Their self-esteem improves and their desire to continue learning grows and develops. These are the positive benefits of success. Not surprisingly, adult educators who practice a spirited epistemology experience benefits as well. In Chapter Two, Vogel explains that they recognize that "by entering into a 'spirited epistemology' . . . horizons are expanded and all are invited to share in the benefits of that work." This positive feeling is related in part to the quality of the relationship that the educator has had with the learner. It is here that the spiritual dimension is most likely to be evident.

Sanctions. It is impossible to discuss benefits without referring to the sanctions that are a consequence of an unsuccessful learning experience.

Sanctions can best be described as the lack of success. When the adult learner is unsuccessful in acquiring new knowledge or skills, not only has the learner failed, but the adult educator has failed as well. A good example is well-intentioned parents who sign up for a parenting skills course but in spite of their efforts are unsuccessful in changing their relationships with difficult children. Although it is hard to recognize the spiritual dimension in the context of failure, it may well be there in terms of the support and safety of the learning relationship that is required at the time. In the case of the parents, they might have learned to deal with their problem better than they did before, to practice patience, and to find ways of dialoguing with their children.

A Connection with Other Aspects of Society and Life Experience. Learning is connected with a person's everyday life and the community in which the person lives. Unionized workers who are sent on training programs of short duration are in particular need of learning objectives and content that are applicable to their work situations. To view the learning experience in isolation from everyday experience is to miss some valuable aspects of the learning process. The spiritual dimension is best seen through an understanding of the whole person in a social context.

Evolving Nature. As conditions change and as the learner proceeds through the learning process, covenants are bound to change. It is important that the learner and the covenant not be seen as static. For instance, as the adult educator sees the learner develop during the learning process, adaptations can and should be made in order to continue creating space for the learner to grow. A challenge that adult educators often face in this regard is convincing adult learners to be more flexible.

The Learning Covenant Model

The learning process is clearly dynamic, with both parties sharing in the changes that occur. The learning covenant model (Wickett, 1991, 1993, 1999) provides the best illustration of the kind of relationship that can exist between the adult learner and the educator—a relationship that has a spiritual dimension. This model has clear role definitions for both parties. The strength of the learning covenant model is in part found in the fact that it has been used extensively under the guise of a learning contract by various groups, including such professions as nurses and medical doctors, and the business community.

The learning covenant model regards adults as responsible people. In other words, adults who engage in a learning covenant have direct responsibility for many decisions that must be made. They are Subjects of their own learning. Their responsibilities include the planning, conduct, and evaluation of the learning.

The task of adult educators who participate in learning covenants is to facilitate the learner's growth and change by providing a central source

of support for the learning process similar to Nouwen's (1975) hospitality. To be successful in carrying out this task, the adult educator must develop an understanding of the learner and of the growth that is occurring.

Relationship. An important dimension of the learning covenant model is the building of a relationship between the educator and the learner. Knowles (1975, 1986), O'Donnell and Caffarella (1990), and Wickett (1991, 1999) all agree on this point. A review of the methodology of learning covenants is particularly valuable when the learner is new to the model. This can be done during an orientation period, during which the tasks involved in the learning covenant are outlined and explained in detail, readings about the covenant process are suggested, examples of covenants are shared with the learners, and opportunities to work on a covenant draft, including feedback on the proposal, are provided. One key feature at the drafting stage of the learning covenant is the identification of the resources that will be required. The finalization of the covenant should occur only after an appropriate process of refinement has been completed. It is at this stage that I stress with my students the importance of clarity, appropriateness, and workability. Dates for meetings and final feedback should be determined at this point.

This period of working together helps the learner to gain confidence in the model. It also provides the adult educator and learner with an opportunity to develop a closer working relationship. One way that these relationships can be developed is through the process of mentoring. An extensive discussion of mentoring as a form of informal learning can be found in Chapter Three, by Leona English.

Content of the Learning. One important step in putting together a learning contract is exploration of the substantive content to be learned. Content is the subjects, or topics, of a book or course. Very often the content is determined by learners' felt need to learn in order to function better in everyday life. Very often this need is determined by where people find themselves in the life cycle. Even in the same program, the reasons that adult learners participate can be very different. An older adult learner might take a course for purely social reasons or out of a desire to learn something new, while a younger person may take the course to advance at work. This variation in reasons for learning often involves complex negotiations between the educator and the learners, so that in the end everyone is reasonably satisfied. The process brings the parties into a close working relationship.

Forming the Covenant. It is during the process of negotiating and conducting the covenant that the adult educator is able to create space for the learner. The learner assumes responsibility for the activities, and the educator, sometimes referred to as the facilitator, guides and supports the learning.

Concluding Thoughts

Covenants have a strong connection with the spiritual dimension, both historically and at the present time. In fact, covenants by their very nature embody a spiritual connection. They incorporate the spiritual dimension of both parties and the spiritual dimension that goes beyond the parties involved in the learning.

Relationships are central to adult learning. Adult educators need to create space for the learner that fosters learning and spiritual growth. Adults who enter learning convents may decide that they need several days to mull over their learning intents, in light of their own spiritual journey. The concept of a hospitable space in which this growth can occur is a challenge that adult educators must face as they respect the learner's ability to grow and change in a manner that is most appropriate for the learner.

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