

CHAPTER IV

ORIENTATION OF STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND RESOURCE TEACHERS

The first week of school created a special time for the teacher-researcher to get to know the students and to establish routines and procedures used throughout the school year. It allowed a time for the students and the parents to understand what kinds of learning activities would take place and how the students would be evaluated.

The first two days in the classroom focused on going over the school's policies on various topics and handling the many forms issued at the beginning of a new school year. The school administrator adjusted class times so that some periods lasted longer than other periods. These extra minutes allowed students' time to familiarize themselves with their new lockers and to changing classes after each period of instruction, since the school introduced both activities to the students for the first time in the seventh-grade.

The classroom routines began on day 1 in the classroom with the students being assigned an individual seat alphabetically. Depending on the arrangement of the seats at a table, I assigned the student to either seat A, B, C, or D. Each set of four seats around a large table formed a team. Depending on the class size, most classes had either six or seven teams of students, and some teams had five members. The formation of teams allowed the students to be grouped for learning activities and also allowed the students an opportunity to start to bond with their team members. The formation of teams set up cooperative learning groups.

Day 2 began with the students coming into class and sitting in their assigned seats. By the end of day 2, the teacher and the students had learned more about each other. Together, they had established a comfort zone, a classroom conducive to learning. The students then readied themselves for an orientation on how to use learning contract.

The orientation involved explaining the use of the three components of the learning contract in the classroom. The three components included the letter to students and parents, the Student Progress Sheet, and the life science course objectives with the required and additional activities (see Exhibits B, C, & D). In this chapter, I will discuss how I introduced the students, parents, and resource teachers to the use of a learning contract.

Students' Orientation

The students' orientation to the learning contract began on day three of the new school year, and its presentation lasted through the next three consecutive class sessions. For the orientation to be successful, the seventh-grade, life science students had to demonstrate that they could follow directions.

Session 1: The Letter to Students and Parents

In Session 1, the students received the first component of the learning contract, the letter to students and parents (see Exhibit B). Using the overhead projector with a copy of the letter to students and parents made into a transparency, the students listened while I explained the six points of information. The six points stressed in the letter to students and parents follow: (a) a definition of a learning contract, (b) a summary of how points could be earned, (c) a statement about required and additional activities, (d) a requirement that students keep a science notebook, (e) a message to students about recording points earned on a Student Progress Sheet, and (f) a reminder that students were responsible to make up missed work when absent from class. After reading each point in the letter to students and parents, I would pause, allow the students some time for reflection, and then answer questions from the students.

The suggested grade requirements for a letter grade equaled the total points accumulated over an entire grading period of six-weeks. I introduced this section of the letter to students and parents by talking to the students about academic responsibilities, grades, and the idea of goal setting. The students saw the total points required for each letter grade, and they understood that they needed to make a commitment to try to earn a particular letter grade.

As the students' first homework assignment, they had to take the letter home, discuss it with their parents, sign for a grade, and then both student and parent sign their names on the bottom. I expected the letter returned to me the next school day.

Reflections on Session 1

By the end of Session 1, I had the students involved in academic goal setting and taking responsibility for their learning activities. My role as teacher had switched from someone who gave out information to someone who facilitated learning for the students' journey as life-long learners.

Session 2: The Student Progress Sheet

Session 2 began with the students asking questions about the letter to students and parents and continued with a discussion of how to differentiate between required activities (RA) and additional activities (AA) (see Exhibits E & F). Next, I gave the students a copy of the Student Progress Sheet (see Exhibit C). I demonstrated the method used to record earned points from all graded activities.

Using the overhead projector and a transparency of the Student Progress Sheet as a model, the students circled the number of the additional activity required for the A grade and placed a “+ ” by each additional activity required for the A+ grade. The additional activities’ numbers could be found on the bottom of the letter to students and parents for the A grade and the A+ grade. For example, the additional activities for the first grading period were numbers 7,12, 20, 30, and 35 for the student who contracted for the A grade. I called this procedure of identifying the additional activities with a circle or a “+” for an A or A+ “setting up the Student Progress Sheet.”

Because the additional activities enhanced or expanded the science concepts taught during the grading period, I reminded the students that the additional activities’ numbers changed for each grading period.

Part of Session 2 included information sheets about how to work with the two types of learning activities. I included this information in this chapter because of the necessity of the procedures giving more structure to the orientation process. With each step of the orientation process in Session 2, the students received an information sheet, saw me model common examples, and then participated in guided practice and feedback.

Entitled “Rules for Writing Up Activities,” the first information sheet listed the directions for setting up the students’ papers for the required activities (see Exhibit G). For guided practice, the students set up their loose-leaf paper for required activity RA 1 using the information sheet.

“Additional Activity Information,” the second information sheet, contained directions for checking the additional activities (see Exhibit H). This sheet also highlighted information about the consequences of not correcting wrong answers on their assignments.

Exhibit G

Rules for Writing Up Activities

RA# _____ Name _____
Chapter # _____ Date _____
Total Pts. _____ Class _____

RULES FOR WRITING UP ACTIVITIES:

1. Always include activity number, chapter number, name, date, and title of the activity on paper as shown above.
2. Use a #2 pencil or blue or black eraser pen.
3. Use a ruler when making charts and/or graphs or underlining.
4. Be sure all words are spelled correctly.
5. Skip a line between each item in an activity.
6. Underline the word when writing its definition.
7. Copy questions or answers in a complete sentence.
8. Activities should be complete, neat, checked, and corrected before they are given to teacher for grading.

Exhibit H
Additional Activity Information

NAME _____

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY INFORMATION

Additional activities [AA's] are an important part of the learning contract. Each student must complete some of these additional activities. The total points earned on the additional activities together with the required activities determine the letter grade for a grading period.

When a student completes an additional activity, he/she has the teacher place a green check on the additional activity. This is to verify that the additional activity is complete. If there is an answer key for the additional activity, the student checks his or her work.

Use a red pen to make corrections and/or additions. If all answers are correct, put a red check at the top of the additional activity. Return the answer key, and place the completed and checked additional activity in the class folder for the teacher to verify the score. The number of correct answers, the number of corrections made, and neatness determines the points earned on the additional activity. If answers are wrong and corrections are not made the student will not earn as many points on the additional activity.

Additional activities are due on a specific date and should be ready to check. No late work will be accepted. No AA's will be accepted after class on the due date.

When the teacher returns the AA's to you, record the points earned on the Student Progress Sheet.

Keep on track with your learning contract!

For guided practice, the students selected those additional activities from a designated area in the back of the science classroom, and then they recorded the total possible points on each worksheet using the Student Progress Sheet.

All of the information sheets distributed to the students I reproduced on different shades of colored paper for easy access and fast retrieval from their science notebooks. The students stored these sheets together with the learning contract in their science notebooks in section one (see Exhibit I).

Reflections on Session Two

The orientation process at this point allowed for a shift in responsibility from me, as the gatekeeper for grades, to the students, who became the scorekeepers for total points earned. This process helped to focus the students on their learning activities and helped them to plan for their learning activities.

Session 3: The Life Science Course Objectives with the Required and Additional Activities

Session 3 of the student orientation began with a brief summary of the first two sessions and a question and answer opportunity. Most students felt all of the paperwork overwhelmed them a little. One student remarked, "Why doesn't the teacher just keep up with the points for each assignment?" and "Why do I have to do a learning contract?" After they posed these questions, I stressed the idea of knowing where each student stood with respect to the life science grade. I reminded the students this entire process would take getting used to and that together we could go slowly until they grew accustomed to the procedures and routines.

During this session, I showed the students how to identify the two types of learning activities for a grading period by looking at the third component of the learning contract, the list of the life science course objectives with the required and additional activities (see Exhibit D). They also learned how to identify the reference textbooks to use with the additional activities.

The additional activity worksheets cited the reference textbooks. The students checked out the reference textbooks after school, and the books would be returned before homeroom the next school day. Additional activities, which had page numbers in the description, were located in the students' textbook.

The classroom held five different reference textbooks. As reference textbooks, I used life science books from different publishing companies, either current or past publications, that

Exhibit I

Science Notebook Organization

Science 7

Mrs. Harmon

Science Notebook Organization

Science 7 students need to develop strong organizational skills so that they can locate their assignments, completed RA's and AA's, and keep up with the information on handouts. In an effort to help you become a better student these are the sections for your Science Notebook:

SECTION 1: STUDENT PROGRESS SHEET
 CONTRACT LETTER WITH CONTRACTED GRADE
 LEARNING CONTRACT
 INFORMATION HANDOUTS [on COLORED PAPER]

SECTION 2: RA's [Required Activities] [DO NOT THROW AWAY UNTIL MRS.
 HARMON TELLS YOU.]

SECTION 3: AA's [Additional Activities] [DO NOT THROW AWAY UNTIL MRS.
 HARMON TELLS YOU.]

Students may use dividers, colored construction paper, or index tabs to divide notebook into these three sections. This Science Notebook is a part of the student's daily, required supplies.

Science Notebook organization with sections due: _____

contained support materials for the life science curriculum. In the list of additional activities, the reference books had the name of the publisher in brackets beside the name of the additional activity. A library card was located in the back of the reference books for the students to sign them out overnight.

Later in Session, the students checked their first homework assignment, required activity RA 1, made corrections as needed, and recorded the number of corrections at the top of their papers. I then collected the papers and placed them in a special class folder for the teacher to verify their total points earned on the assignment. Later, the teacher recorded their earned points in her grade book.

The next day, after the return of the students' papers, they recorded their earned points for RA 1 (required activity) on their Student Progress Sheets, and then they filed the assignment in their science notebooks.

The last item discussed during Session 3 was the science notebook organization (see Exhibit I). Each student kept a science notebook. They were to organize the science notebook into three sections: Section 1 contained their learning contract and all of the colored information sheets; Section 2 housed the required activities; and Section 3 contained the additional activities. Students kept all papers for an entire grading period and were not to clear their science notebooks until I told them.

Reflections on the Session 3

The orientation process with the students worked if you set up: a consistent pattern for assignments, checking, correcting, and recording points; a routine to check for understanding; a format for evaluating progress. Exhibiting a lot of patience, taking time to answer questions, and developing a sense of security among the students helped in the orientation. The majority of the first grading period was spent reinforcing these routines. By the second and third grading periods, the students automatically responded to the learning contract routines.

Parents' Orientation

The parents first learned about the learning contract through a letter to parents sent home with the students during the first week of the school year (see Exhibit J). The second encounter with the learning contract occurred when the parents and the students read the learning contract

Exhibit J
Sample Letter to Parents
_____ Intermediate School
Science Department
September 2, 1997

Dear Parents:

The seventh-grade science course at _____ Intermediate School is an exciting exploration of the world of life around us. Students will experience broad exposure to the basic aspects of biology. Emphasis is placed on learning through inquiry.

Since this is a lab course, much emphasis is placed on learning to work with scientific equipment, being careful, accurate and neat. Students are expected to be considerate of others, use sensible procedures, follow safety rules, and take responsibility for cleaning equipment and work areas after labs.

Some equipment will be broken in this course, and we believe the fairest way to replace broken equipment is for the student to pay for the equipment he/she breaks.

A textbook will be issued to each student. We ask that these books be covered. A damage fee will be assessed at the end of the year, thus it is important to keep books covered and to take proper care of them throughout the year.

At the beginning of the six weeks, each student will be given a learning contract. This contract includes: all the learning activities and objectives for the six weeks, grade requirements, and a student progress sheet. Parents are asked to read the contract and discuss it with their child. We would like for the parent to sign the contract after his/her child has signed for a particular grade. The contract will give the parent a way to check the progress of his/her child. In addition, a Pupil Progress Report will be sent home at mid-term each six weeks.

In an effort to better serve your student, I would like your permission to administer the Learning Style Profile to your child. This instrument helps to understand how your student learns best.

(exhibit continues)

Exhibit J (continues)

Students and parents will be given a copy of the results. It will be administered during class later in the six-weeks. The results will be used in educational research, but no student names will be used.

Parents, please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions concerning this course or your child's progress. We are looking forward to a pleasant and successful school year for our students, their parents, and ourselves.

Sincerely,

Sally B. Harmon (Teacher)

_____ (Principal)

PARENTS,

Please sign and have your child return to the teacher, thus indicating that you have read this letter. Thank you.

Permission to administer the Learning Style Profile: _____YES _____NO

Parent's Signature

Name of your student: _____ Period: _____

letter (see Exhibit B) and talked about the contracted grade for the first grading period.

The students acted as ambassadors, bringing home comments from the classroom about their learning contract experiences. At Open House Night held at the end of September, I gave an oral presentation about the learning contract to the parents that repeated what I explained to the students during their three orientation sessions. Consequently, when the school held Parent-Teacher Conferences on November 3, my students' parents took a survey (see Appendix F). They demonstrated their familiarity with the learning contract. Some of the parents' comments included, "I used the learning contract when I was a student here, and I liked it." "I have enjoyed working with my daughter on the AAs, and I have learned new information about science." and "My child seemed more organized this year."

Resource Teachers' Orientation

Resource teachers held the responsibility for teaching students with identified learning differences, other health-impaired conditions, and emotionally disturbed or physically challenged students. These students, mainstreamed into the science classroom, had resource periods with the resource teacher assigned to them according to their needs. The resource teacher worked with these students in a one-on-one or small-group situation during the resource periods.

The resource teacher supported the learning activities in the regular science classroom and worked with the special students to help them complete assignments. During the year, two resource teachers worked with the seventh-grade life science students. When there were a total of eight special education students present, the school assigned one of the resource teachers to the science classroom daily during their class time. The other resource teacher had experience with the learning contract from previous years when she worked with the teacher who first introduced me to the learning contract. This resource teacher worked with my students only during her resource periods.

The orientation for the new resource teacher occurred at the same time as the students because she was in the classroom with the students; however, both resource teachers received the same handouts as the students. The resource teachers reinforced the information with their students, and they supported the learning contract activities. Both communicated with me daily.

Reflections on the Orientation Processes

Each group-- students, parents, resource teachers-- worked collectively, consistently, and cooperatively as a team with me to support the learning activities for the students using the learning contract. The orientation for each group helped to establish routines for the implementation process.