

The Ambridge Contract Plan of Instruction  
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### **A Brief History of Its Development**

During the school term of 1923-1924 a number of principals and teachers began experimenting with a unit method of instruction. Assignments covering a unit of work, usually requiring a week, for completion, were carefully planned and written by the teachers. These written assignments were called "contracts" in accord with, the terminology used by Miss Parkhurst in the Dalton laboratory plan.

In developing and writing her contract the teacher kept in close touch with her principal to whom the finished product was handed. The contract was then read by the principal and the superintendent, and any necessary alterations were made. The closest cooperation in the study, checking, and altering of contracts was practiced from the very inception of the plan. After a contract was officially approved, it was mimeographed in the superintendent's office.

By the end of the school year the plan had commended itself so completely to the teachers, principals, and superintendent that the latter recommended it to the board of education for city-wide adoption in all grades above the third, during the year 1924-1925. The board unanimously approved the recommendation and voted to provide the supplies and the extra clerk necessary for mimeographing the contracts.

In accord with the action of the board, certain teachers were appointed to prepare contracts in the various school subjects in various grades, from four to twelve inclusive, for the year 1924-1925. These teachers accepted their appointments and began their work before the close of the 1923-1924 term. This enabled them to turn in two or more contracts to the office of the superintendent to be mimeographed during the summer, to be ready for the opening weeks of the 1924-1925 school year. The teachers who functioned as contract-makers during this first year were filled with the spirit of the pioneer and crusader. As pioneers they were working in a field where there were few guide posts to mark the way. As crusaders they had to overcome the tradition of the mass recitation system so strongly entrenched in their own lives, as well as in the lives of pupils and patrons. A confident hope that city-wide adoption of the new method would prove superior to the old was a constant stimulus to the contract-maker as she struggle toward the master of her specific task and the firm establishment of the new idea in the school and community.

During the present year, 1925-1926, the main objective is the differentiation of the material within the contract t for high, average, and low groups. In order to utilize the benefit of experience and to incorporate differentiation of material, all contracts are being re-written this year.

### **How the Plan Works**

All contracts are mimeographed a week or more before the date of intended use. During the week preceding their use the contracts are delivered to the various buildings. On Monday each pupil is handed a contract in each subject covering a week's work. The contract itself is expected to carry sufficient directions to motivate the work and get it under way. A certain amount of oral direction, however, is necessary at times in introducing a contract. This is especially true in the lower grades. Teachers are cautioned, however, to keep such oral direction, comment, or help, at a minimum.

The pupil is thus introduced to the contract on Monday and begins to study it. He continues to study on Tuesday and Wednesday, recites on Thursday, and is objectively tested on alternate Fridays. The alternate Fridays which are not devoted to testing maybe used for whatever purpose the teacher deems advisable. They are usually used for general conferences.

On regular study days (Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays) general conferences are held, when necessary, to help over common difficulties.

We should possibly emphasize the fact that objective testing is an integral part of this plan. Tests are given bi-weekly and cover two contracts.

In contrast to the Dalton laboratory or the Winnetka plans which provide for the progress of the pupil at his own rate of speed, the Ambridge plan, through the differentiated contract and homogenous grouping, attempts to give each pupil sufficient work to keep him busy on this own level. However, a shift to the individual progress idea would now be easy, if deemed advisable, as the contracts for each subject in each grade are on file ready to hand out.

At the present time however, we are inclined to adhere to our own method of grouping and differentiation material. The maintenance of the group provides for socialization. The differentiated contract aims to give each child just enough work to challenge him and keep him usefully busy.

### **The Job of Contract Writing**

The writing of contracts assures the professional growth of teachers. It provides a definite plan for training in service. Teachers are now analyzing and pondering over teaching material as they never did before. Bacon has well said, "Writing maketh an exact man." It is also commonly observed that to write clearly one must think clearly. The teacher is thus undergoing a constant drill or training in careful, exact thinking, of which the pupil reaps the full benefit.

What to include in the contract and how to present it are two of the big questions for which the contract-writer must find answers. She is thus led to the latest and best studies in curriculum making and method. She knows that she cannot afford to be ignorant of the latest developments in these fields and thus she becomes a student of both.

The teacher's study of the problem of what to put in the contract invariably leads her to a recognition of the great wealth of material outside of the regular text. After all the average teacher has been too often the creature of the textbook. The suggestion of one requirement of the

administrator that each contract should contain liberal references to supplementary material compels a broad survey of the field by the teacher and to that extent broadens her vision and aids the pupil.

That the most important things should be made to stand out in the field of knowledge as hills, Mt.ain ranges, and peaks, is a truism frequently overlooked by the teacher. Too often all things seem to be of equal value and nothing emerges from the common level.

The selection of the objectives in the writing of a contract compels the lifting of the bigger ideas above the common level. These objectives, of which there are usually not less than three nor more than six in a contract, become the Mt.ain ranges or peaks of the unit. About them clusters all the teaching material. Because of these objectives, teachers and pupils are literally compelled to view the assignment in its larger aspects. The setting up of objectives thus leads to orderly thinking which takes the place of senseless memorizing of incoherent facts.

Contracts must not only be logically arranged but they must also be clear and simple. They must be written in the child's language and down to his level. "Talking over the pupil's head," has been commonly practiced by both experienced and inexperienced teachers. The teacher learns by experience with the contract to get down to the pupil's level. The constant individual consultation between teacher and pupil assures this. Such consultations can only be carried on in a language which is understood by both. The teacher thus learns by direct contact to make a contract whith is meant to be – an instrument through which the mind of the teacher and pupil meets.

### **The Improvement of Contracts**

The fact that the contract is a picture, as it were, of the teacher's thinking tends to improve both the quality of her thinking and the general make-up of the contract. The teacher knows that this picture will be viewed by the pupil, the classroom visitor, the supervisor, and frequently by parents. Therefore she quite naturally aims to be a real artist and to paint a real picture. She wants the contract to represent the very best which she has to offer in both content and craftsmanship. Good contracts will assure higher classroom achievement for the pupil and professional recognition for herself.

The teacher knows that the contract brings her and her work definitely before the public eye. Instead of resenting it she accepts this publicity as a challenge to do her best. She is, therefore, alert to make her contracts steadily better.

The fact that the contract is a lesson plan for the pupil as contrasted to the old fashioned plan book which was too often merely a lesson plan for the teacher herself assures a constant tendency for improvement. The contract represents a service for another – a high ethical and business principle of the modern world. The plan book represents something for self and lacks the stimulus of the service idea. Teachers by nature and profession are interested in service. This may explain why they are willing to labor for hours in making contracts, while the plan books are disposed of in as many minutes.

Contract improvement is also assured through the close, constant, and constructive criticism of other members of the profession. The knowledge that other teachers will use the contract is in itself a stimulus to the contract-maker. She thus knows that her work will be subjected to close scrutiny by other professional experts. It must stand the acid test of use by others as well as by herself. That this constant constructive criticism has been useful is indicated by an inspection of contracts for the past two years. Such an inspection indicates a steady improvement in content: differentiation of material for high, low, and average groups; and, in general, craftsmanship.

Professional recognition of her work in contract making is no mean factor in stimulating constant improvement. In the past the good work of many teachers has been unrecognized by professional leadership. The teacher may have prepared her work well, may have met her class, and may have done a good job, but her influence was bounded by the four walls of the classroom. Even the supervisors may not have been aware of her clear thinking, thorough lesson planning and excellent results. Certainly in many cases those in authority were not aware of her excellent ideas and practices. After a while she became discouraged and was content with mediocre results.

Under the present system she realizes that the contract becomes a vehicle of expression for every professional idea. Consequently she is alert to jot down teaching thoughts as they come to her in the administration of the contract. These ideas find expression in later contracts, are recognized by supervisors and used by other teachers. Thus the teacher makes herself felt in the profession. Her ideas are not lost and her personality not submerged. She has been given a chance to pass on a good thing for which she receives credit. She is buoyed up by the experience and the privilege while the whole school system is the beneficiary.

### **Classrooms as Laboratories**

The school of yesterday was mainly a reciting place. Mr. John Citizen who attended the school and knows no other is somewhat confused with the laboratory idea. He went to the school of yesterday to recite what he learned at home or was expected to have picked up in some miraculous undirected fashion. The school of today is not mainly a reciting place but rather a working place where pupils may learn to do by directed doing, learn to study by directed study, etc. Following the laboratory periods, periods of study and activity, the pupil is ready to recite. He has acquired something to give. Even slow pupils are responding now. They have been led by the expert individual assistance of the teacher out of confusion into a clearer understanding of what is wanted and how to get it. It should be kept in mind that the teacher is released from mass instruction during the first three days of the week and can spend the time consulting with the pupil. While the other 39 pupils are working as directed by the contract, the teacher sits down at the pupil's side to observe him, to question him, and to be questioned in turn. The Great Teacher used this method. Recall the case of the interview between Him and Nicodemus, or between Him and the woman of Samaria. This opportunity which he method affords for individual contact assures a real meeting of minds. The teacher as well as the pupil profits by it. The individual work is done quietly at the pupil's desk. The teacher is not conspicuously up front but quietly moves from pupil to pupil. "Real art conceals itself." The teacher is no longer primarily a lecturer or hearer of recitations. She is primarily a directory of study and as such observes the pupil at work, detects his wrong methods, inhibits such methods, and suggests proper ones.

Because of the definite study plan and the careful individual direction of the teacher, the element of bluff is fairly well eliminated from the teaching process. The whole school situation is so set up that the pupil must go to work and be a producer. In the high school in particular the bright pupil has too often done very little real work. He has been bright enough to pick up some things in class and in student parlance to "get by." The old saying, "When in Rome do as the Romans do," applies here. The other pupils are studying. There is nothing else to do. Therefore Johnny goes to work. Visitors frequently comment on this work-attitude of the pupils.

The very work, "laboratory," suggests a place of work. Use of contracts, use of supplementary material, and individual consultations, are all signs of the laboratory idea. "Every classroom, a laboratory," becomes a reality through the use of the contract plan.

### **The Pupil's Reaction to the Method**

How do pupils like it? How is their behavior affected by it? How are they assimilating material through it? Are they developing power? Are they becoming real students? These are some of the questions frequently asked.

The pupil considers the contract a fair, just instrument. It sets forth clearly and exactly what is to be done and how to do it. The pupil knows that he will be tested only on what it contains. For these reasons he does not react against it, though he may flounder for a while in a sea of uncertainty. He has not been accustomed to doing things for himself and for a short time is at a loss as to a method of procedure. This is particularly true in the high school where pupils have grown up under the old method. Usually about two months suffices for a fair assimilation of the new idea. In the lower grades where the pupils are not so established in mass recitation habits the contract plan is accepted more readily, though due to shorter school experience more detailed general and individual help is needed.

The contract as a clear, complete, lesson assignment is in itself an inducement to go to work. The consensus of opinion of principals and teachers indicates that pupils are assimilating more material and doing it much better and more readily than before. In the development of power to go ahead there is a vivid contrast between the contract plan and the old method, the contract plan being much superior.

Discipline has ceased to be a serious problem. Because of the individual contracts teachers and pupils get acquainted with and understand each other better. The fact that busy pupils are seldom troublesome pupils also aids in eliminating opportunities for mischief. The pupil always has something to do under the contract plan, as the contracts are so made as to challenge even the brightest. Each contract includes problems especially meant for the brighter pupils. Pupils of average or low mentality may work on these problems if time permits.

High school pupils in particular appreciate the opportunity afforded by the contract of budgeting their time. They can see on Monday what is to be done of the week in each subject. A pupil who practices home study but desires one evening or more a week off can provide for it by doing more work on preceding evenings.

Review work is made easy for the pupil by use of the contract. All pupils are asked to keep all contracts for the current quarter on file. By referring to the objectives in the contracts for the quarter each pupil can test himself as a preliminary to the regular bi-weekly or quarterly tests.

The teacher also can be guided by the objectives in reviewing with the pupils and in the construction of the tests.

The pupil who has really reflected on the matter and is capable of forming a judgement is quick to state that in his opinion the contract is a real asset to the learner.

### **Teacher Reaction to the Plan**

Weak and lazy teachers are pitilessly exposed by the plan. They do not like it. All other teachers, almost without exception, do like it. The latter group have a feeling that by the use of the contract they can indicate to the pupil where he should go and how he should go to arrive.

Teachers and administrators both appreciate the fact that in the making of contracts initiative is left largely with the teacher. She determines in a large measure what shall go into a contract and how it shall be presented.

For the purpose of supervised study the teacher considers the contract the best instrument ever devised for this purpose. A technique has been developed for administering the contract whereby the pupil's rate of progress and particular difficulties are both readily determined. The contract is the blue print from which the pupil builds and by which the teacher checks pupil progress.

Experience with the contract brings to the teacher a realization of the fact that direction of study is more than a method, that it is a subject of instruction.

The six principles and those teachers who have seen the longest service in this district are unanimous in their commendation of the contract in its result-getting power.

### **Administrative and Supervisory Advantages**

As an administrative and supervisory device the contract is without a rival. The supervisor knows exactly what the objectives are for the week in every grade and in every subject in the system. He can go into any classroom, pick up a contract, see what is expected, and see the amount of progress made by each pupil through the contract. The critic may consider this a deadening sameness. It does not work out that way. Contracts vary with the personalities of the teachers making them. For instance, the contract in fifth grade English will be quite different in its general make-up from the contract in sixth grade English for the week, because of the fact that different teachers are making the contracts.

As stated before, the bi-weekly objective testing is definitely based on the two preceding contracts. This makes uniformity in testing possible and lends special significance to the median for purposes of comparison of results from the different buildings of the district. These medians are turned into the superintendent's office, are tabulated and returned to each building. The

building principal can thus compare her results in each subject with the results obtained elsewhere.

To provide for individual differences is a problem for all administrators. The differentiation of material in the contract for high, average, and low groups, based on the probable learning rates of these groups, aids materially in the solution of this problem. Indeed, the big objective here this year has been to provide for such differentiation.

What to do on Monday was a problem under the old system. The handing out of fresh material on Monday, in the form of contracts, has been the solution to this question. Blue Mondays have literally disappeared.

Beginning teachers take readily to the contract plan. The supervisor can readily demonstrate its use to a novice. The young teacher proceeds to her new work with a definiteness which was often lacking under the mass recitation system.

How to carry on to best advantage when teachers are off duty is a problem which is easily met by the use of the contract. When the substitute teacher steps into the room she takes up the work exactly where it was dropped and proceeds in accord with the directions of the contract.

The contract plan never fails to enlist the greatest interest when presented and discussed with community or professional groups. This may possibly be attributed to the fact that both those inside and outside the profession are conscious of the weaknesses of the mass recitation system and are hopefully looking for something to take its place.

To go back to mass instruction in our community, after two years' experience with contracts, would be unthinkable. The administrative, supervisory, and teaching advantages of the plan have so demonstrated themselves that even the occasional doubting Thomas has been convinced.