

USE OF REALITY THERAPY AND STUDENT BEHAVIORAL CONTRACTS

A model that has proven effective for promoting more self-responsible thinking in students comes from the work of William Glasser (1975). His work in the area of "Reality Therapy" offers a useful process to encourage students to make a commitment to more positive behavior.

1. Establish involvement with the student

As discussed earlier, we are not going to be very successful changing a dysfunctional pattern or closing a gap in expectations without demonstrating a personal commitment to the welfare of the student. The student needs to know that we care, can be trusted, and have their best interest at heart. If the student suspects that we are simply using the process to gain more solid ground for later disciplinary action, the result will likely be an insincere effort on the student's part.

2. Focus on the behavior

To initiate the process, it is critical that the student understand that our goal is not a personal indictment, but the facilitation of more functional and positive behavior. Therefore, we need to maintain the focus on the behavior in question and not peripheral matters (e.g., our frustration, the wisdom of the behavior, historical problems from the past, etc). We might use clarifying questions to help the student self-reflect, such as, "This is what I see: _____. How would you describe what is happening?"

3. The student must accept responsibility for the behavior

After the problem behavior has been identified the student needs to accept responsibility for that behavior. It is critical that we do not shame or blame the student. For students struggling with inappropriate behavior, there is likely a corresponding problem related to external locus of control. We need to promote the student's cause-and-effect reasoning. The cause: the problem behavior; the effect: unwanted consequences.

4. The student should evaluate the behavior

We typically over-estimate the degree to which students evaluate the consequences of their choices. Students who tend to externalize the causes of their problems will usually also resist constructive self-reflection. While the student spends time thinking about why they are "bad" they are resisting reasoning how they can change unwanted behavior.

5. Develop a Plan of Action and/or Behavioral Contract

Leading the student through the first four steps of the process may be sufficient to raise the desired level of awareness and consequent behavior change. However, if the problem is habitual and/or the student lacks motivation to change, a plan/contract stage is probably necessary. Working together with the student, write a plan that details how the problem behavior will be remedied. The more this plan is written by the student, the more effective it is likely to be.

6. The Student Must Make a Commitment to Following the Plan

Throughout the process, we need to help the student recognize that they are in control. If they do not like the plan, it should be modified and written in a way that they do like, as long as it works for us and the rest of the class. The contract is not something that is being inflicted on the student. It is a support tool, and we are not going to beg, or nag, or take ownership for their choices. We are their leader and cheerleader, but we cannot *make* them do anything. We need to voice appreciation for their good intentions, but reiterate that what we need is behavior change. We need to see them "walk the walk" not just "talk the talk."

7. Follow up and Follow Through

Once a plan is in place it offers a number of benefits. First, we have a common language to use with the student as a result of the reflection process and the concrete plan that now exists. Second, we share clarity of expectation and consequences. Third, we have shifted the locus of ownership of the problem onto the student. Our job now is to use those benefits to support the success of the plan.

The language in the contract will allow us to use fewer words when we want to positively recognize the student's success or when we see the student getting off track. For example, if one of the problems was disruptive behavior in cooperative groups and the contract outlines appropriate group behavior, we might only need to look at the student and say "role?" Before the behavior contract was in place this interaction would not have been meaningful to the student. Now it will trigger a whole series of thoughts for the student: a) the teacher is recognizing that I am straying from my intention; b) I need to ask myself whether I am doing a good job of my role; c) have I crossed a line and do I need to accept a consequence?