Inspired students to set and achieve goals which really challenged them

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Why this Teaching Method Matters

Researchers note the relationship between setting challenging goals and student achievement (1). Both laboratory and field studies consistently demonstrated decades ago that setting specific and challenging goals leads to enhanced performance (2). In addition to the immediate increased student achievement resulting from setting goals, completing challenging goals is also closely related to increased self-esteem and self-efficacy (3).

Although there is ample evidence that setting challenging goals has a number of positive outcomes, this does not mean students come to our classes ready and able to establish solid learning goals for themselves. As faculty, we must find ways to not only develop challenging learning environments for our students, but to create learning environments whereby students set goals that challenge themselves. Inspiring students to set and achieve challenging goals is highly correlated with most IDEA items, although it is most strongly related to items #2 (helped students answer their own questions), #7 (explained reasons for criticisms), and #8 (stimulated intellectual effort). These items pertain to motivating students to take some responsibility for their own learning and to giving a rationale for feedback provided to the student. Interestingly, item #15 does not correlate with items #33 (amount of reading) and #35 (difficulty of the subject), and it correlates only weakly with item #34 (amount of course work). This suggests difficulty and amount of reading do not result in students setting challenging goals for themselves, and that amount of work assigned may not be a critical factor. The inspiration to set, accept, and achieve goals must come from the students. That said, the teacher can help students to set reasonable goals by demonstrating that course objectives and assignments are reasonable, relevant, and achievable. For example, researchers (4) have noted that when students value the time they spend preparing for class, they are more involved and more positive in their attitudes.

Applying this Teaching Method in the Classroom

There are a few things you can do in your course to inspire students to set and to achieve challenging goals. A primary factor is **to demonstrate to the students the importance of the subject matter covered in the course**. Everyone is more willing to work longer and harder when there is value to the task to be completed. There are many ways to show the direct application of the material in the class: problem-based learning, cases, scenarios, application problems, web quests, or even service-learning projects. Find a way to show students that the material learned can be used to directly help individuals or to solve pervasive issues in society.

A second way to inspire students to set challenging goals is **to have them assist you on the first day of class in developing the course syllabus**. I have asked my introductory psychology course to do this on a number of occasions with solid success. The only requirements I present to the class are that I need to be able to assign them a grade that reflects their mastery of the material, and they need to be cognizant that within the class there exist multiple learning preferences. The students decide on the number of examinations, the days of examinations, types of papers to be written, and other aspects of the course. I can make adjustments to maintain standards, but overall I have found that I will end up with a syllabus and course that students are more invested in because they have helped to create it and have assisted in setting course goals and assessment measures. Student "ownership" of the goals has often resulted in more consistent effort and better performance.

A third method is **to make students accountable for their work and display it for external audiences**. For

example, if students know that their final projects will be published on the web, they will challenge themselves to complete more extensive projects (5). In order to realize success, students need to have prompt and informative feedback as they complete their projects. It is also important that students develop an understanding or awareness of their own level of performance. Metacognition, or knowing what one knows, is an important skill for students to develop in meeting challenging goals. Evidence suggests that when students are taught to develop improved metacognitive skills, they are more likely to meet goals and achievement improves (6, 7).

A final method to inspire students to set challenging goals is **to have them contract for grades**. Grade contracts have been reported to reduce the anxiety level of the student by having them focus on tasks, instead of worrying about specific grades on specific assignments. Research has demonstrated that grade contracting results in enhanced student learning and in students setting challenging goals in the course by contracting for a high grade at the beginning of the semester (8). Overall, your "goal" is to help students to understand the importance of the content of your course and then to design methods to help them to meet challenging goals. It is well accepted that expectations of high levels of work will result in higher level of work. This turns into a wonderful self-fulfilling prophecy when challenging goals are encouraged, supported, and realized.

Applying this Teaching Method Online

There are many ways in which emerging technologies can be used to assist students with setting and achieving challenging goals. Online polls can be used to gather student input on course goals relevant to their interests. Text chats and emails can facilitate quick and private communication with students about their individual learning goals.

It's often possible to make student progress towards learning goals more visible in online environments, which has benefits to students and instructors. For example, you might ask students to set up personal wikis or blogs with pages or categories for each of their learning goals. As the course progresses, have students update their sites with supporting evidence showing how they are achieving goals. Instructors can monitor the wikis or blogs and provide students with feedback through comment tools as appropriate. Consider making these e-portfolios available to other students in the course or open to the Web—authentic audiences that can moti-

vate students to take more ownership of their work (9). Having students host their wikis or blogs on their own websites, as part of their "personal cyberinfrastructure" (10), can also motivate them to take more ownership of their learning.

A critical component in achieving goals is the formative assessment. Students setting goals must have information as to the extent to which goals (e.g., learning) are being achieved. There are a variety of methods in which formative assessments have been adapted to the online environment (11, 12).

For instance, one popular classroom assessment technique is the minute paper, whereby the student writes for one minute in response to a prompt such as, "What do you feel is the most important thing you learned today?" Such prompts can easily be submitted online through polling questions, discussion boards, or blogs. Very short responses, carefully worded, could also be submitted through a microblogging service like Twitter.

Other forms of feedback can be helpful, too. It is now very easy to set up relatively quick online appointments to discuss student goals and achievement toward those goals. Chats can be scheduled for times that might be very difficult in the past, particularly in situations in which either the student or the instructor has small children. Also, when structured properly, online communication typically takes much less time that face to face meetings, while still building strong interpersonal connections.

Finally, a social networking site could be established whereby students post the goals that they would like to be public in an effort to gain peer support. Students may set personal goals related to study time or class attendance and then be held accountable through the social networking site. This kind of public peer accountability can actually be easier to implement in online environments than in face-to-face environments where the time available for sharing individual goals and progress is more limited. Behavior modification and motivation literature (7, 13) conclude that public goals are more likely to be achieved than private goals.

Assessing this Teaching Method

It is essential to determine the extent to which the goals have been accomplished in any area of goal setting. This not only justifies the rationale for setting goals, but also demonstrates to the students the learning realized by setting and achieving challenging goals. The easiest way to assess the value of setting goals is to document when

goals have been accomplished. For this, it is important to state goals in ways that are specific and measurable. Another way to assess the impact of setting challenging goals is to look at work turned in with this method, versus methods in the past where goals were not set. Compare final projects with projects completed in the same course the previous year. Finally, you could use any of a number of classroom assessment techniques to determine whether setting challenging goals results in deeper learning or more critical thinking: focused listing, minute paper, concept maps, and directed paraphrasing (14). Learning is facilitated when individuals set reasonable, yet challenging goals, and then supported in reaching those goals.

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