# Establishing goals for a personal learning strategy: Coaching learning

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**Establishing a goal, and setting out to achieve it, is common enough. However, when the process of achieving a goal becomes an exploration for developing a personal learning strategy, then the possibilities start to open up for a specific approach to better learning.**

## A disposition to learn: Opening the door

Students are often defined by their outcomes. Yet it is the process of learning that should receive the greatest attention, since it is always the richness of the process engaged in by the individual, that leads to the best and most enduring outcomes. A mere hunger for results usually leads to a variety of learning shortcuts. Indeed, it is true that a concentration on content often inhibits the student's engagement with the ways of learning that may lead to a deeper, and more perceptive, engagement with the subject's content. Ultimately, the dynamics of the classroom begin to change for the better, and results improve, when the defining mark of success becomes students possessing a disposition to learn in contrast to achieving a hierarchy of outcomes.

## Student learning: Each their own teacher

There are a variety of factors that can lead to students underachieving in the classroom. It is true that some suffer from low self-esteem. Yet this is potentially easily addressed and does not define the struggle of most. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature pointing to an overuse of self-esteem in education and parenting (Barry, Grafeman, Adler & Pickard, 2013; Fuller, 2012; Squires, 2013; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). An avalanche of prizes, ribbons and accolades for achieving the mundane, with little concerted or planned effort, does not lead to self -reflection on the part of the student as to how he or she could do better by approaching their learning from the best possible perspective. When added to this the belief of being special and perfect "just as you are", that all that is needed is to "follow your dreams" and "believe in yourself" to achieve positive life outcomes,

then attending school may become a wasted effort, and the teacher an imposition, to a life propelled forward by a tsunami of affirmations. An effort to bolster confidence, as the stimulus for learning, is often superficial to the student's real needs, and totally external. By contrast, students are more likely to succeed by taking charge of their own learning and establishing internal stimuli, so that a disposition to learn becomes their personal narrative. Teachers are in a unique position to foster this process intentionally, constructively and thoughtfully.

A means to achieving this outcome is by the teacher coaching the student to establish worthwhile goals and strategies for achieving them. Goals focus a student's attention on their learning needs including establishing successful strategies and learning approaches. Goals, to be useful, need to be within the student's reach, be relevant to their learning, and worth obtaining. Important to the process of student's benefiting from goal setting is that goals must come from the student and they must personally learn and experience their value. This is because setting goals has to do with what the student is able to learn for himself or herself. Learning is unique for each student, since a variety of circumstances, specific to each journey, identifies the needs that the individual must discover for herself or himself.

## An individualised strategy: The path less trod

As the student is encouraged to establish a personal learning goal, they usually become more committed and responsible for implementing strategies to ensure that the goal has a good chance of being reached. Therefore, a goal needs be established along with an accompanying strategy. Students can then become accountable for how successfully they are attending to their strategies. As goals, strategies and outcomes are related to the class, it often becomes apparent that goals are unachieved because strategies were not maintained. Alternatively, different strategies may need to be attempted before a successful approach is reached. In this way, the student, and others, learn from their testimonies, and discover successful learning strategies that lead to goals being met. In this way a process of self-discovery unfolds

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and a learning culture emerges. A good learning culture in the classroom encompasses the goals, the successful strategies devised to achieve them, and the underlying disposition to learn that the students come to embrace.

## Coaching for learning: Teaching beyond content

Throughout the process, the teacher acts as the primary coach. Students should be encouraged, guided and challenged in establishing goals and developing strategies to achieve them. The best outcomes are produced when the emphasis is placed on establishing positive approaches to learning that leave the student feeling satisfied with the process. Goals come and go; are achieved or not achieved. What is important, is to establish a successful learning strategy that leaves the student with a good learning characteristic. In this way students learn that good outcomes are not automatic, but come about through deliberate approaches to learning that develop into learning strategies applied in the classroom and at home.

## As it happened

At Prescott College, South Australia, a Year 8 English class was encouraged to establish goals and the accompanying strategies to achieve them. Discussion addressed what goals were and the benefits that students might be able to experience if they established them. At first the process moved slowly. Only three students readily thought of a goal. The students were never rewarded for establishing a goal and there was never a due date. The student created their own goals and asserted them as theirs totally. Goals were never assigned. After a week, testimonials of goals set and achieved, started to encourage others to join the process. After a few weeks all students had established a goal. Students generally 'bought in' because of the confidence and enthusiasm that had been generated by others. The rewards were viewed as internal, as they experienced the benefits for themselves, intrinsically. Many students came to establish goals enthusiastically, most because they believed that it was worthwhile, and a few because they felt they had to fit in.

Initially weekly goals were established, and then fortnightly. Many students rolled their goal over into the next week until they believed it had been reached. Others took on new goals. Daily 'check-ins' established how they believed they were progressing with their strategy, and then weekly 'wrap ups' assessed progress. During these times strategies were discussed. A final session engaged students giving testimonials on how the process had worked for them. Some of these testimonials can be accessed as videos (jlewis@prescottcollege.sa.edu.au).

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## What happened: Personal observations

Generally, students were able to provide a before and after scenario. Qualitatively it was noted that confidence had increased, grades improved and important lessons about learning, and self, were shared. Most goals were task orientated. Improving in spelling tests was popular. However, some were personal; a choice that was encouraged. For example: Being a more organised person; speaking in front of others; growing in confidence. A few joined in grudgingly. One shared, "What if you are perfect the way you are?" This was a fascinating response, paralleling a growing sense of entitlement amongst American college students (Twenge and Campbell, 2009), and a clear inhibitor to successful learning. A couple of others established goals, but lacked the confidence to act on them consistently. One student dramatically improved, then pulled back and returned to underachieving. Such students present a more demanding puzzle that needs solving.

## Reflections: Informing futures

Why some embrace goal setting and others are indifferent is an important consideration. While it is true that when the student is ready the teacher begins, it is even more so, that when the student is ready, the student begins. The desire to learn and improve gives rise to the need to set goals and establish strategies. There are numerous reasons why students refuse to "buy in". A narcissistic disposition will not see the need to make changes. Such students must first come to see the benefits of further personal development. By contrast, some are so weighed down by experiencing disappointment that little will budge them out of their cul-de-sac of resistance. They live in a cycle of disappointment and apathy that has become well rehearsed. These students should be encouraged to devise small challenges to 'test the waters' slowly, experiencing at first small measures of success. For this reason, achieving goals must never be used for assessment, determining success or failure, or as a trigger for discipline. The students are being encouraged to buy into a disposition to learn well. Some move quickly, while for others it is a long and arduous process, however over time a receptive, effective and successful culture for learning emerges in the classroom.

## References

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