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Educational Goals

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Educational Goals

Extensive research on goal setting has revealed the critical importance of goals in supporting optimal human performance and motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). Studies examining the use of goals have consistently found that goals elevate effort, increase persistence, and lead to greater success in achieving desired outcomes. The power of goals comes from their ability to direct attention to defined targets, focus strategy development, mobilize effort, and provide benchmarks for evaluating progress (Latham & Locke, 2007). The general findings of goal research have been replicated across many disciplines including the field of education.

The importance of goals in education

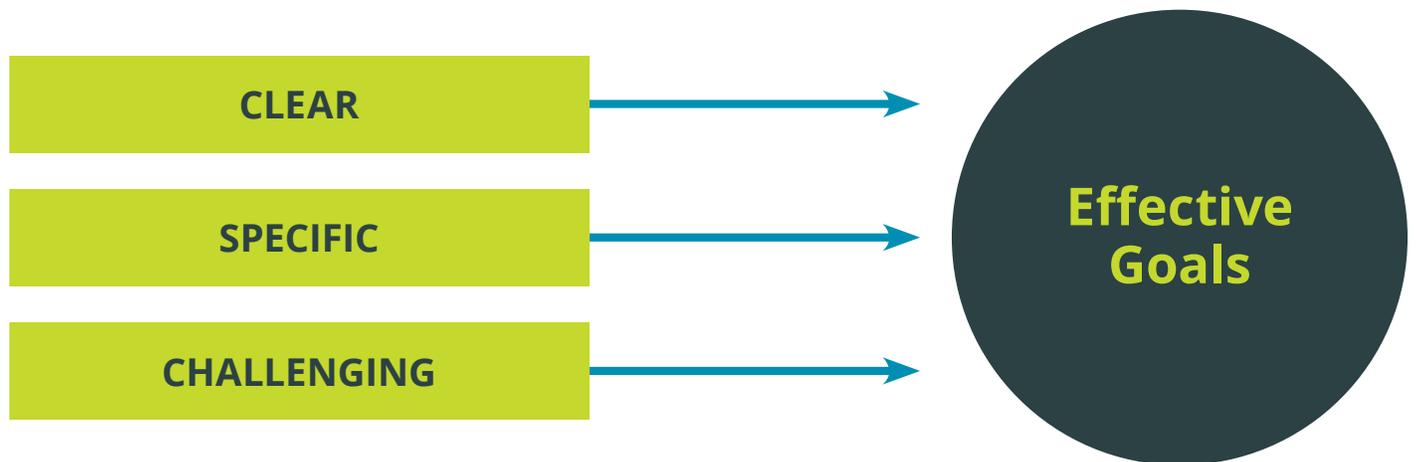
Research in education has found goals to be essential for increasing student achievement and motivation (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010). Comprehensive meta-analyses have found the effective use of goals to be one of the most powerful instructional interventions known for improving student academic success (Hattie, 2009). As Hattie (2009) writes, “having and sharing challenging goals/intentions with students is a major condition of successful learning.” Students provided clear and challenging goals significantly outperform peers given easy, vague, or no goals—with performance gaps approximating 250% in some studies (Wood & Locke, 1987). Furthermore, investigations into successful teaching have consistently found the setting of effective goals to be a hallmark of superior teachers (Hattie & Clinton, 2008).

The presence of goals is even more critical in online and blended learning settings. Given reduced opportunities for interaction between students and instructors in online courses, there is increased need for effective goals to guide and motivate students. Surveys of online learners have found that difficulty understanding instructional goals is a significant and frequent barrier to academic success (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). And in an analysis of almost 29,000 online student questionnaires, researchers found the factors most predictive of student persistence to be clear communication of course goals and learning outcomes (Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, & Swan, 2010). Finally, assisting students in setting and monitoring learning goals is critical for supporting the self-regulatory behaviors required of successful online learners (Dembo, Junge, & Lynch, 2006).

The characteristics of effective educational goals

The most effective goals are clear, specific, and challenging (Locke & Latham, 2002). Clear goals provide explicit success criteria and an evaluative standard that can be used to assess learner progress. For example, the use of grading rubrics can make assessment expectations transparent to learners and clearly communicate areas in need of improvement (Stevens & Levi, 2011). Specific goals direct attention to goal-relevant information and away from goal-irrelevant behaviors. Goal specificity, for instance, assists learners in recognizing important ideas in complex texts and can help instructors focus their feedback effectively (Rothkopf & Billington, 1979). Challenging goals present difficult but achievable learning targets that energize and motivate learners (Dornyei, 2001). Consistent with Vygostky's concept of the *zone of proximal development*, effective learning goals should be slightly beyond a student's current abilities and, as a result, often require peer or instructor scaffolding to reach initially (1978). The setting of suitably challenging goals requires understanding students' current abilities as well as frequent formative assessments that are used to update educational targets in response to learner progress.

In addition to the characteristics of good goals mentioned above, several contextual factors strongly influence goal effectiveness. Goals are most successful when there is high learner commitment to attaining them. It is important to get student buy-in regarding the value of assigned goals and make goal achievement personally meaningful for learners (Ambrose et al., 2010). A learner's belief in her ability to achieve a goal, known as self-efficacy, also strongly moderates goal effectiveness. Early opportunities for success in pursuit of a difficult goal can significantly improve learners' confidence in its eventual attainment (Bandura, 1997). Finally, the complexity of a desired educational outcome should influence the type of goal set. If the primary objective is motivating learners to increase their proficiency on a task they already understand, then *performance goals* (e.g., "Improve your score by 5%") are most effective; however, if the primary concern is helping students acquire new knowledge then *learning goals* (e.g., "Identify three strategies for solving problem X") are most effective (Seijts & Latham, 2012).



Designing effective goals for online and blended learning

Thus far we've identified the characteristics of good goals as well as several important factors influencing their effectiveness. We now consider several ways to apply this knowledge in a typical online and blended learning setting to promote optimal learning.

Creating challenges

A crucial component of effective goal setting is calibrating goal challenge accurately. Several strategies for obtaining information about student ability can be employed in an online and blended learning setting. These include diagnostic assessments at the commencement of a course, surveys asking students to rate their familiarity with relevant topics, reviewing pre-requisite course syllabi, and frequent formative assessment activities to identify patterns or gaps in student understanding (Ambrose & Lovett, 2014). Identifying students' prior knowledge is only the first step, however, as consistently motivating goals require frequent updates to reflect learners' increasing skills (Czikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Fostering commitment

It is important that goals be perceived as meaningful to students and that there exist a strong learner commitment to achieving stated objectives. The greater the commitment

to achieving learning goals the more effort and persistence students will display in pursuing them (Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, and Alge, 1999). Strategies for increasing learner commitment to goals include making them relevant to students' lives, explaining why goals are interesting or valuable in their own right, asking students to make public commitments regarding the achievement of goals, encouraging students to participate in the goal-setting process, and connecting goals to students' interests and aspirations (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Supporting self-efficacy

Goals will not be motivating if learners do not believe they are achievable. In fact, if students perceive goals as too difficult they may reduce effort and commitment to avoid risk of failure. For this reason educators must work to foster high self-efficacy among their students, ensuring learners believe goals are attainable and that goal achievement is within students' control. Strategies for increasing learner self-efficacy include providing opportunities for students to experience early success (e.g., simple tasks or assignments at the beginning of a course to build confidence), sharing examples of past students who have succeeded and with whom students can identify, and creating a positive learning atmosphere that embraces the educative value of failure while emphasizing the incremental nature of knowledge acquisition (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2012).

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Providing feedback

Sustaining learner motivation and self-efficacy requires frequent and ongoing feedback about student progress (Seijts & Latham, 2012). The more challenging the goal, the more frequently feedback should be provided. Strategies for increasing learner feedback include regular formative or low-stakes testing, requiring students to submit paper rough drafts or project proposals prior to final due dates, and frequent contact with students to discuss their progress. Additional suggestions, such as making students keep learning journals or self-assess their own work prior to submission, can help instructors identify class-wide learning difficulties as well as encourage students to engage in valuable self-regulatory learning behaviors.

Where can I learn more about goals?

Locke and Latham, the foremost experts in goal setting theory, provide an excellent introductory summary of the goal-setting literature as well as brief descriptions of its major findings (2002). For educationally targeted ideas regarding the setting of challenging goals as well as suggestions on how to increase learner goal commitment see (Ambrose et al., 2010). For a thorough discussion of the difference between learning and performance goals, as well as guidance on when to use each, see the article by Seijts and Latham (2012). Hattie (2009) provides a helpful summary of research on the use of goals in education to promote student academic achievement.

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