Setting Goals to Promote Academic and Personal Achievement[1]

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Introduction

Learners begin to envision their futures in both academic and personal settings even as children. The future that we develop motivates us to engage in learning environments, work experiences, and social encounters/settings. As instructors, we have the opportunity to help learners develop academic and personal goals that will develop and shape their future. However, many instructors struggle with assisting learners in utilizing their goals to develop behaviors that influence their personal and academic achievement. Learning environments that engage learners provide opportunities for various factors to influence a learner's goal-directed behaviors. This publication assists instructors in developing their knowledge of goal theory, thereby allowing them to assist learners in utilizing their personal and academic goals to develop goal-directed achievement behaviors.

Goal Theory

Goal theory is a conceptualization of human motivation (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meese 2008). Schunk (2012) identifies goal theory as the purpose and reason for a learner's engagement in achievement-based activities within a learning environment. Ormrod (2014) states that achievement goals are developed by a learner to attain new skills or knowledge. Ormrod explains two major types of achievement goals: mastery goals and performance goals.

Regardless of the goal that a learner establishes, failure can occur. When failure occurs repeatedly, a learner may develop a phenomenon called learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is defined as a learner's lack of motivation, cognition, and emotion toward a task or behavior due to continued failure of achievement (Schunk 2012). The phenomenon of learned helplessness occurs when learners believe they have little to no control over the outcome of a situation, behavior, or task. This lack of control can manifest over a period when the learner has failed to accomplish a specific outcome related to a similar task or behavior.

Mastery Goals

Learners develop mastery goals when they wish to develop new knowledge or master skills (Ormrod 2014). Ensuring learners have mastery goals is essential for an instructor regardless of the learning environment. By having mastery goals, learners are more likely to engage in learning activities that they deem helpful in the achievement of their established mastery goal. Learners who have mastery goals engage in learning environments, develop connections between new information and prior experience/knowledge, and engage in all steps of the learning cycle. For these reasons, learners who have established mastery goals are social learners, engaged in all learning environments (formal, non-formal, and informal), have greater knowledge gains, find meaningless tasks boring, are more involved in school activities, and learn from their mistakes (Ormrod 2014).

Figure 1. Effects of learning goals on motivation (adapted from Schunk 2012)

Mastery goals affect a learner's achievement gains or behaviors by influencing the learner's cognitive processes and beliefs (Pintrich 2000). A learner's personal desire to reach a goal increases when a mastery goal is developed. Once a mastery goal is established, the individual continues to learn and develop knowledge, which allows for their self-efficacy toward the concept to increase. As a learner's personal desire or self-efficacy increases, motivation to engage in any and all learning opportunities in formal, non-formal, and informal settings increases. By engaging in an instructor's lesson, learners are able to note progress toward their goal and increased development of their content knowledge. As progress is noted by the learners, they become more engaged in achieving their mastery goal. In turn, progress toward a goal and increased engagement in learning opportunities leads to achievement gains and the achievement of the established mastery goal (Schunk 2012). This process is illustrated in Figure 1.

Performance Goals

Performance goals are developed by learners when they have a desire to display a defined behavior (Ormrod 2014). Specifically, performance goals include an element of social comparison for learners to look proficient or competent in front of their peers. Learners who have only developed performance goals are less engaged in a learning environment and tend to complete only tasks in which they know that they can be successful. Therefore, learners will not engage in a behavior if they believe that they will fail to accurately complete it. Performance goals can have negative effects on comprehension, retention, and engagement in learning environments: cheating on assignments/assessments, comparing personal ability to peers, viewing mistakes as failure and inability, seeking positive feedback, having anxiety about formative and summative assessments, and utilizing rote memorization as a main learning strategy (Ormrod 2014).

Learners who have established performance goals have a defined skill they wish to enhance. Therefore, learners only engage in activities that pertain directly to the development of the defined skill. As learners engage in task development and engagement activities, they continually compare themselves to their peers. This is done to ensure that learners are perceived as the best at the skill or not to look incompetent when they complete the skill. Through social comparisons, learners continually assess their personal ability to conduct the defined skill. Due to a limited frame of reference, learners who have performance goals are typically disengaged in other learning environments. This process is illustrated in Figure 2.

Application to Learning Environments

Instructors can utilize the various principles of goal theory to enhance learner interactions and engagement in the learning environment. While utilizing goal theory in a learning environment, instructors must consider the learners' previous experiences in education, the pertinent content/skill/behavior, and failure. When developing a new lesson or workshop, instructors should provide time for the learners to share their experiences and their previous experience with the content, skill, or behavior. During this time of sharing, the instructor can determine if the learners are engaged in the learning environment and if they have experienced previous failure regarding the lesson being presented. This enables the instructor to adapt the learning activities and identify learners who may require additional assistance.

Example Scenario

During a Master Gardener workshop, Ms. Robinson, a county Extension agent, begins by allowing the participants to share their experiences with growing plants. Marcus shares with the group that he has struggled to keep his
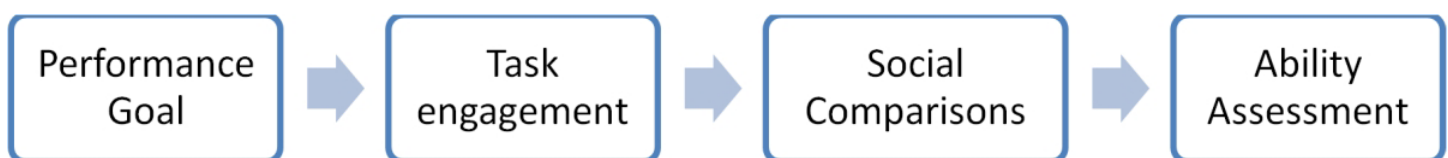

Figure 2. Effects of performance goals on motivation (adapted from Schunk 2012)

family's garden alive until harvest. While Marcus is sharing his story, Ms. Robinson makes a note that Marcus may need assistance with developing incremental goals to alleviate his fear of failing to maintain his family's garden. Later, during independent work, Ms. Robinson takes time to talk with Marcus individually to better understand his past experience and assist in ensuring his future success.

Learners who have developed learned helplessness struggle to engage in learning environments, particularly those that they associate with a previous failure. Learners who have developed learned helplessness believe that they have little to no control over the outcome of the behavior or task. To help learners overcome learned helplessness, opportunities for small successes must be developed. Instructors should assist these learners with developing incremental goals to achieve the desired outcome. However, engaging learners to participate in the learning environment can be difficult. To foster engagement, instructors should provide additional assistance to these learners to help ensure success.

Example Scenario

Mr. Dwyer, a high school agriscience teacher, was conducting a biofuels laboratory in his biotechnology course. During the lab he noticed that Rebecca was disengaged and separated from the rest of her lab group. When Mr. Dwyer approached Rebecca, she quickly stated that she never does well on her laboratory reports in her biology course. Once Rebecca finished, Mr. Dwyer asked her what parts of the laboratory report were the most difficult. Following their discussion, Mr. Dwyer established a new timeline for when each section of the laboratory report was due. Mr. Dwyer also provided Rebecca with examples of each section for her to reference as she constructed her laboratory report.

As learners construct goals, instructors must ensure that learners are developing achievable and realistic mastery goals. Instructors should help students develop a plan of action to learn or complete a given task by using specific activities that require students to perform in front of their peers. As a part of a learning activity, instructors should require learners to submit goals for the course, workshop, or unit. The learners' goals can be submitted individually in a written form or can be shared with the instructor verbally, either in an individual meeting or in a group environment. Submitted goals should be examined to determine if the learner has developed a mastery or performance goal and if the goal is attainable and realistic. Feedback should then be provided to the student to assist in the construction of mastery goals that are attainable and realistic given the individual learner's skills and abilities.

Example Scenario

At the beginning of a workshop, Ms. Flores asks the participants to take two minutes to write down what they want to learn from the workshop. After two minutes, Ms. Flores asks each of the learners to share ideas with the rest of the group. Once a list is formed, Ms. Flores constructs three attainable and realistic mastery goals for the workshop from the ideas shared by the learners. One of the goals is "to further develop our knowledge of greenhouse management practices." She then asks the learners to construct their own goals from their personal ideas, reminding each learner to create goals that are attainable and realistic. Ms. Flores rotates through the learning environment and talks to each of the learners to help them develop attainable and realistic mastery goals.

Conclusion

Instructors can increase engagement in the learning environment by assisting learners in developing goals that meet their needs. To increase learner engagement, instructors must engage learners in the development of mastery goals that are attainable and realistic. Mastery goals should be developed by the learners to meet their learner needs, interests, and skills. By assisting learners in the development of goals, instructors can help learners increase their knowledge, skill, and motivation to learn.

References

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