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Expert Viewpoint

Five Steps to Revolutionize Learning Using Student Goal Setting in the Workshop Classroom

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In the last 30 years, a series of innovative findings in neuroscience, metacognition, and learning have inexorably changed how we think about educating students. The notions that learning is individual and contextual, that a student's opportunity to learn is framed by their life experiences, and that students must be actively engaged to learn at their highest potential have become articles of faith for educators.

That these changes emerged alongside the growth of technology — study apps, student laptops, and digital classroom instruction — has fully entwined these two new ways of thinking about learning. Teachers use software tools as a significant part of their strategies to provide individualized learning experiences tailored to students' ability levels.

With an ocean of tools available to educators, it can be tricky to decide which tools to use and how to use them. Much of the frustration with technology in education comes down to this: With so much to pick from, it's difficult to ensure quality, consistent experiences aligned to academic standards and learning targets. What teachers most need, then, is not another app; it's a way of understanding and contextualizing how students use technology alongside their other learning priorities and tools.

Student Goal Setting: Why and How

Student goal setting — the process of working with students to set a short-term learning goal, track progress toward that goal, and celebrate success — can fill that gap. Large-scale research summarized by the work of Hattie (2021) and Marzano (2009) has shown that appropriate student goals have a significant impact on student achievement.

The best goal-setting teachers use them as a tool to help students understand what they are ready to learn, to connect that learning to what is meaningful for them, and to make choices about what and how they'll learn next.

The kind of classroom that emerges is what one teacher I spoke with calls the "workshop model" of instruction. Workshop classrooms are full of students working on different tasks individually and in small groups; while all students are looking toward the same general standards, each student is pursuing a different path toward that standard through activities that are appropriate to their interests and ability levels.

Workshop classrooms are a little bit louder and more chaotic than many educators (and especially principals) are used to, but they hold tremendous promise for meeting students where they are and promoting academic growth for all students.

What Effective Goal Setting Looks Like

My new book, "**Step into Student Goal Setting**," captures the best from research and practices on how to do goal setting well, based on research and on the direct experiences of nine highly effective educators. Following are five important steps to setting the most effective goals for students:

- **First, start early.** While we often think about goals as part of a college and career strategy for secondary students, even the youngest students have aspirations and interests that goals can tap into. Connecting who students want to become and what they want to do with academic learning is a great tool for building relevance.
    - *Goal Setting in Action:* For my book, I spoke with a first-grade teacher who allows students to choose their own books for independent reading. Involving her students and giving them choices based on their individual interests has been a helpful motivator. One of her first-grade students rapidly improved his reading skills because he wanted to learn more about frogs and was interested in the new facts that he could learn about frogs by reading more challenging books.
- **Second, build the habit.** The best goal setting educators talk to each of their students every month or even every week about their goals. These short, informal conversations are key to helping make students' goals a commonplace part of school life.
    - *Goal Setting in Action:* The first-grade teacher who had a student who was interested in reading about frogs frequently checked in with him with short conversations where she would help him gradually select higher reading level books. These check-ins helped him keep progressing toward his goal.
- **Third, showcase success.** Setting goals without access to regular formative assessments is like asking students to run in place: They put in the maximum effort with few signals about

the progress they're making. Tying ongoing assessments to goals can help students better visualize their progress toward key academic standards.

- *Goal Setting in Action:* A middle-school math teacher who loved bringing data into conversations would go over a benchmark assessment with his students and analyze the results during their first one-on-one meetings. This starting place provided students with an opportunity to set goals and see their progress.

- **Fourth, create personal relevance.** All students have individual interests: those things they come into your classroom caring about. They also have situational interests: the things they're motivated to care about because of the enthusiasm and passion of their teachers and peers. Both these areas are rich sources of goals that help students understand the meaning behind their learning.
  - *Goal Setting in Action:* Whether a student is interested in frogs, robotics, or videos and animation, finding ways to allow students to bring those interests with them into the classroom helps them connect with what they're learning. The reading teacher who helped a student engage with his interest in frogs while learning valuable reading skills was creating personal relevance.
- **Fifth, use student choice.** While not all students will be ready to set their own goals today, the ultimate objective is that all students take control of what and how they learn. To get them there, provide students meaningful choices over the activities they engage in, the academic areas they focus on, or the ways they show mastery in a subject. With their personal goal in hand, a student can focus on their individual learning and over time build the ownership they need to continue learning over the course of their lifetime.
  - *Goal Setting in Action:* Some examples of supporting student choice are active listening, allowing independent time for goal setting and reflection, and reminding students of the hard work and progress they've already achieved. Encouraging students to be part of creating their own goals and reflecting on those goals more deeply connects students to those goals.

In many ways, technology is the "force multiplier" that can make this all possible. A classroom with one or two educators can't reasonably expect an adult to guide five to 10 different activities at once, all reaching students from where they are. Providing meaningful activities where students can self-direct their learning allows them to practice key knowledge, apply knowledge in new situations, and work with standards at greater complexity while freeing teachers to focus on students who most need direct intervention.

Starting with Small Steps

A school culture where all members are focused on helping students achieve meaningful and ambitious goals — what some researchers call "academic press" (Leithwood and Sun, 2018) — won't emerge overnight. While changing a culture seems complicated, it really is nothing more

than the sum of a thousand small actions that communicate a common message to students, teachers, and leaders.

Even if your classroom or school can't take on a full goal-setting practice today, little changes like providing students with opportunities to break down academic standards into their own words, or to discuss their areas of focus for an academic year, can begin to plant a culture focused on student growth.

Workshops never begin with all their tools in exactly the right place. As you progress from beginner to expert in any craft, you find the tools and workstations that meet your needs, and the most effective workshop begins to take shape.

The workshop classroom will also emerge over time. As you go to find your tools, consider what your group of young makers is ready for, where their skills lie, and what they ultimately want to build. Combining these tools with the techniques that direct them toward the right ends will help make sure learning in your workshop creates growth, builds motivation, and reinforces student agency.

References

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About the Author

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