

Goal Setting: An Important Part of Teaching

by Lorie A. Annarella

I first heard the word “conation” as a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Kathryn Atman discussed this concept in a class she taught called “Mentoring.” Conation, as it turned out, was a fancy word for striving. Dr. Atman’s class was developed to familiarize teachers with conation or striving techniques through goal setting (Atman, 1994).

I was intrigued. I knew motivation was important to teachers as well as students. No teacher wants to see students with bored expressions and glazed eyes. You want to feel the students are traveling with you and learning to contribute to the discussion. To teach a class successfully you have to motivate the students to want to learn—to strive. Without striving and motivational drive to learn, students will not accept and utilize formalized presentation of factual knowledge. They stagnate and begin to let knowledge pass them by. Teachers need to encourage and facilitate learning so that students will desire knowledge. So the problem becomes: how can students be taught to desire and want to learn in order to utilize knowledge throughout life?

Goal-Setting Process

We might take a look at the goal-setting process in connection with the desire to strive toward a goal.

- (1) When students are asked to identify their dreams, wants, needs, and desires, and are also asked how these things might be achieved, the first step in goal setting has been taken. We are asking students to dream and imagine something they feel is important to them.
- (2) Students are then asked to set goals in order to achieve those important items that they want and to give themselves reasonable time limits to achieve the goals. Writing down the goals and the steps needed to reach the goals is important because it validates what the students are thinking, doing, and working

toward. Some students may have nonacademic goals, and that’s all right. The idea of this exercise is to get students to formulate short-term goals for themselves. The goals must be of their choosing, coming from their internal wants, needs, and desires. When the goals are chosen, the process has begun.

Students can learn to share their goals with other students in the class. They can be given time to discuss the techniques they need to develop in order to reach their goals. By doing so they are being taught to cooperate with their peers. They are learning that their classmates have individual differences from them, but that they also have some similarities. They can learn to be empathic learners; and they can also learn that they are not alone when faced with tasks to accomplish.

The idea of sharing teaches community, which is a type of character education. Since people learn through doing or “hands-on,” students who are involved in goal setting will become aware of a set of values that are embedded in the goal-setting cycle as they become part of the process.

- (3) Next, students are asked to brainstorm what they need to do to achieve the goals they set. Students need to list several actions that will achieve the goals. They need time to reflect on the process they have developed for reaching their goals. These reflections should also be written down and discussed if the students want to discuss them.
- (4) Students next have to physically perform the tasks that they have listed to acquire their goals.
- (5) After performing the tasks and reaching the goals, students can acknowledge success by

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giving themselves treats or just pats on the back, because they have succeeded in reaching their set goals.

There is a need to celebrate the accomplishment of goals. Students need to experience joyfulness when they have completed tasks that they have set for themselves. It helps to create self-motivation and drive. If the goals haven't been reached, students must look over their task lists to achieve the goals or to restructure them. Perhaps the goals were too difficult to achieve in the time set for their accomplishment. Perhaps more steps need to be put into place to reach the goals.

After the goals have been reached, new goals can be chosen in the same way. When new goals are chosen, the cycle is repeated.

Why Goal Setting Is Important

Much of the time contemporary society teaches us to function without much spiritual energy or drive for inner peace as we climb the ladder to success. The idea of striving for these goals, in many instances, has been replaced with apathy. Students with strong family backgrounds and supportive relatives and friends get support and encouragement from such sources. But because of the changing lifestyles of our society and changing social mores, many students find themselves in a climate over which they have no control. They find school too much to cope with, they have no strong peer group, or the peer group they belong to creates a negative pull in their lives. They become potential dropouts.

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Many of the problems that existed only in large inner city schools have now reached our suburban schools. The tragedy at Columbine High School in 1999 is only one manifestation of this problem. In many schools, gang members give their undying support to other members of the same gang. They are kind, supportive, and loving to fellow members of the gang. Opposing gangs are brutal to each other; they are taught to hate and to kill opposing gang members.

Today these negative elements are becoming more and more prevalent in student populations.

The students I am referring to are "at risk" students. The reasons they are at risk are many: the breakdown of the family, triggered by the staggering divorce rate; the satellite family of relatives and friends, no longer available to many children; our transient society, which sometimes prevents children from making close friends.

Several years ago an eleventh-grade student showed me her fourth-grade class picture. She pointed out that only five children in her class were still in her school system. Many at-risk students become apathetic because of the changing social mores and violence they live with—they do not care, or they appear not to want to care. "At-risk" students are often singled out and given counseling. Sometimes this is effective and sometimes not. Many "at-risk" students are discipline problems. Punishments such as in-school or outside suspensions may place "at-risk" students at even greater risk.

Goal-setting programs can help motivate student learning. The basic "striving" program is one in which students begin to learn about themselves and their abilities to strive toward goals. By going through this process students set a pattern for their striving. The students are interested in gaining something, and they have set patterns or plans in order to achieve the goals. By going through this process they are enriching themselves with knowledge of who they are, what their expectations are, and what their future might be.

I implemented this process with tenth-grade English students. Many of the students were considered "at risk." There was considerable apathy regarding the study of English and also apathy toward school in general. I introduced two classes of these students to the goal-setting cycle. At first the students were skeptical, but as I incorporated the cycle into our daily program of learning, they discovered they were having fun with it. They liked the idea that they could set their own goals. Many times these students hate being told what to do. I told them that whatever the goals they set out to accomplish, they would be responsible for attaining those goals.

The students needed something visual to chart their progress, so I had them work together and make a wall chart for each class. As progress was made in attaining each separate goal, a star was put behind the name of the person. We would have the students take turns for one-week intervals tending the charts; they were called "star keepers." The stars became such a popular idea

that during oral discussions those who gave acceptable answers, or good contributions, would ask for stars. Students would put the stars on their shirt collars, on their faces, or their hands.

It was an elementary idea, but they loved seeing their names up on the chart with stars behind them. They were being recognized; they belonged somewhere, even if it was only forty minutes a day in English class. Things just took off from that point. That year, the students wanted to have spelling contests. In one month's time they were spelling nearly 100 new words correctly. I am not a proponent of spelling bees, but they wanted to have spelling contests, so we did. That year they also wrote term papers. Everyone handed in a paper, and what made it even better was the fact that the students took pride in their work. Looking back on that year brings sweet remembrance.

Energy and Creativity

Goal setting teaches accomplishment. It teaches students that they have not only the ability but the will to succeed. The qualities of the will are present in everyone—energy, mastery, concentration, determination, persistence, initiative, organization (Assagioli, 1973). By developing character-education values in the classroom students become aware of their own energy.

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learns his or her individual value. Goal setting also teaches students to be creative and inventive and to think for themselves. We are participating in a creative act when we validate the creative or inventive act of another (May, 1975). By teaching goal setting teachers encourage students to be creative and also teach them that they are special. Through goal setting students can learn that there is great power in knowledge, and that the energy to vector the power of knowledge lies within them. Ideally, they will come to know that life is a journey where “you become what you believe you are” (Buscaglia, 1983).

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