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Garrett T. Van Curen
Fair Lawn High School

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Cover Page Footnote

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Supporting Growth Mindset in the Post-COVID Classroom: A Case for Skills-Tracking and Goal-Achievement Strategies

GARRETT T. VAN CUREN
Fair Lawn High School

As education moves towards a post-COVID world, the student mental health crisis and its impact on student motivation loom large. Recent studies have pointed to a link between decreases in student motivation and increases in feelings of depression and anxiety, coupled with a lack of support systems and face-to-face interaction brought on by sudden shifts to online learning (Tan, 2021; Usher et.al, 2021). In his introduction to *Tackling the Motivation Crisis*, Mike Anderson acknowledges that the on-going “motivation crisis” in the United States is nothing new, but the “COVID-19 pandemic seemed to make things worse...as schools across the globe shut down and learning moved online, even more students seemed to struggle with engagement” (Anderson, 2021). Additionally, according to a survey conducted in Spring 2020 of over 20,000 students in grades 5-12 across 166 public schools in nine states, only about a quarter of 11th and 12th graders said they could motivate themselves to do school work. That number was closer to about a third of 9th and 10th graders (YouthTruth Student Survey, 2020). The evidence suggests that student motivation has become a pervasive and insidious problem for teachers and students alike, and it is one that we all are likely dealing with in one form or another.

In an effort to tackle the aforementioned issue in my classroom this school year, I have begun to incorporate goal-setting and skills tracking, inspired by some of the

tenets of Achievement Goal Theory (AGT), which provides an important lens through which to understand goal-setting and self-management. Specifically, I was driven by the idea of “mastery-based goal-setting,” which de-emphasizes short-term successes, and instead, advocates for a deeper, more enduring motivational pattern and a better chance of increased self-efficacy, or a belief that a student can succeed that is intrinsically motivated, even in the face of challenges and setbacks along the way, and even in areas the student may be new to or unfamiliar with (Shim et. al, 2013). The question for me, however, had been about how to meaningfully get students to see the value in perseverance and consistency in the face of adversity; specifically, how can I get students to invest in the belief that one can grow over time to meet one’s goals? To meet this challenge, I decided to place a greater emphasis on “soft skills”¹ in my classroom, which I supported with the use of weekly student trackers and student-teacher conferencing.

To better assess my students’ comfort level with skills-tracking and goal-setting, however, I decided that on the first day of school this year, I would have my 9th and 10th grade English students create vision boards for one or more goals they wanted to set for themselves, school-related or otherwise. The responses were personal but tended to center on grades. Most of the goals were a variation of “get good grades” or “do

¹SEL has become a more positive reframing for critical life, or “soft,” skills like peer interaction, self-monitoring, goal-setting, etc. (Jones, Doolittle; 2017).

better in math this year,” while others contained a bit more nuance and introspection. One centered around the recognition that the student needed to make better choices and stay away from negative influences in order to achieve better grades. As I went through each of my students’ vision boards, I left a comment: “How are you going to get there?” I asked them the same question in class the next day. I was met with blank stares. A few chimed in, “I’ll work hard” or “I’ll practice every day.” Though such intentions were important elements to the end-game, I asked them what that would look like, day in and day out, and how they would adapt to meet new challenges that might get in the way. This is where they struggled.

Students spent so much of the past year and a half like pencil-pushers, feverishly working behind their keyboards accepting work, submitting work, getting a grade—rinse, repeat. However, they hadn’t had to spend much time self-assessing or determining how they could adjust their practices to meet their ends. Additionally, most of the “end goals” weren’t established by the students; they were imposed upon them. The lack of emphasis on mastery-based goal-setting in favor of short-term goal-setting, like submitting Google assignments and ticking boxes for points, coupled with an absence of in-person support to help scaffold goal achievement, has made both figuring out what skills to develop as part of a student goal and how to define or achieve that goal, daunting for students. Then, I had an epiphany in one of the most unlikely places: SAT and ACT prep. In addition to teaching high school English, I’ve been an SAT and ACT prep instructor for 10 years, and I’ve found some of the skills I’ve used as an instructor uniquely transferable to my own classroom. These practices focus on goal-setting and

weekly skills tracking with numerous opportunities for conferencing.

Influencing my pedagogy was Joe Feldman’s *Grading for Equity*, which explains that students need opportunities in the classroom to see how their actions and decisions impact specific outcomes in their learning. This is a process, he argues, that should be formalized and integrated into the structure of one’s classroom in order to help students monitor their thinking and decision-making, consider how they plan to achieve goals, collaborate effectively with their peers, and think about their own thinking, i.e., what works for me and what doesn’t (Feldman, 2019). Student trackers help to support this process of tracking goal achievement, while monitoring “soft” or SEL skills. Trackers are simply reflection data sheets students can use to record their performance over time, while helping them to reflect on how they learn, where they are progressing, and where they need to work on their skills. As Feldman emphasizes, student trackers help students develop soft skills while keeping a formal “log of their performance over time to identify trends, strengths and areas of struggle and for improvement” (Feldman, 2019). Trackers also “redefine the grade from being arbitrary and owned by the teacher to being within a student’s power to affect through self-assessment, planning, actions, and reflections” (Feldman, 2019).

Before setting up trackers, definitive goals need to be established with students. I begin preliminary sessions with new test prep students by asking a simple question: “What is your goal?” I’m bullish about this question because I want numbers so students hold themselves accountable and give themselves something concrete to aim for. It is also important that goals are realistic and targeted for the student. To guarantee this is the case, students need to be involved in setting those goals. Some students may say

their goal is an “A,” having only received a parade of Fs, Ds, and the occasional C in years past. It’s unlikely an “A” is happening so suddenly. Getting students to set rigorous but achievable goals is something I spend time on in my own classroom, as well as with my test prep students. You’ve been having trouble breaking 1000 on your SAT practice tests? Let’s set our initial goal of scoring just 50 points over 1000 for at least the next two or three weeks (some flexibility to account for set-backs and bad days is crucial to keep the goal alive). You passed by the skin of your teeth in your English class last year? Then maybe a C- is the way to go quarter one. Once we do that, we can move on to a C+, maybe even B-. Achievable, short-term goals that lead students to the long-term are critical. Additionally, honest benchmarks that students set for themselves are crucial. They need skin in the game, and they need to see that the game is winnable. I have open and honest conversations with my students about goal-setting during individual conferencing throughout the marking period and I’ve found it helps make a major difference in terms of accountability and transparency.

An additional model for the skills-tracking work I have incorporated in my classroom is the student progress report. These reports help students track specific skills, strengths, and weaknesses each week in my test-prep sessions. Reports are shared with me via Google Drive so I may make my own notes and comments for students to consider. For example, I might leave a comment asking a student, “Did you find any of the reading genres in the reading section more or less difficult this week? Which ones took longer to complete?” A question like this is simple on its face. On the ACT, for example, there are four reading passages, each in a different genre, like “social science” or “literary narrative.” Each reading passage, depending on genre, is

organized differently. The nuances in text organization, language, and tone are significant when it comes to processing passages, comprehending text, and analyzing point of view. Students may not think about differences in genre as having any impact on their understanding, so a question like this gives them pause. It requires reflection, self-assessment, and most importantly, honesty.

Ultimately, the goal in skills tracking from week to week is to get students thinking about what’s working and what’s not in a specific area/skill of their choosing (or one that I may suggest for that week, like “vocabulary” or “time management,” depending on class make-up and our current unit of study). For students struggling with establishing a goal for the week, I typically model questions like, “Where am I still struggling?” or “What writing skill do I still feel uncomfortable with?” to help spur them along. The practice of having students complete a weekly self-assessment “check in” via their skills tracker allows them to reflect on their past week and plan for the week ahead (see Fig. 1).

Weekly Reflection Journal

Name: _____ Date: _____
 Mr. Van Curen _____ Class: _____

1) What areas, topics, and/or skills did I focus on this week? How did that go?	Reflect and explain below:	Give yourself an honest grade on how these things went (circle): 1 2 3 4 5 1- Still needs work 3- Feeling pretty good about it 5- Crushed it
2) What were my STRENGTHS this week? How do you know?	List your strengths below:	Discuss examples of where/how you exhibited these strengths:
3) What areas could I improve upon next week? What was challenging?	List things to improve upon/ challenges below:	Discuss how you might improve upon at least ONE of these things (be specific):
4) What major projects, obstacles, assignments, or tasks do you have coming up in the near future?	List them below and include the due dates:	Discuss what you need to do to set yourself up successfully to accomplish these tasks (be specific):

Weekly skills tracking also helps shine the spotlight on the end goal and keep it in front of students, while helping them continually update their plan for getting there. The updates themselves, a critical part of the process, often happen in individual or small-group conferencing, which I model on the individual and small-group reading conferences explored in Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle's *180 Days*. While my conferences are not centered around a piece of literature like the reading conferences explored in Gallagher and Kittle's work, I employ some of the same methodology as a framework: conferences are brief and frequent (generally once a week) and focus on the student's skills tracker. I ask questions that include, "What are you trying to get done this week?" and "How is _____ coming along?" While meetings are less formal and mostly conversational, they afford me an opportunity to check in with my students and help hold them accountable. If their goal is shifting or they find that they're having trouble achieving the next step, I suggest updates or other resources.

Ultimately, my aim throughout this process has been to instill a growth mindset in my students. As Carol Dweck reminds us in her pivotal work on growth vs. fixed mindsets, "students fare better if they believe that their intellectual abilities can be developed...than if they believe that their intellectual abilities are immutable" as students who have a growth mindset tend to see difficult tasks as a way to increase their abilities (Dweck et. al, 2015). Integrating skills tracking into the secondary classroom as a formative way to support student self-management is critical to fostering student growth and supporting social-emotional learning now more than ever. If the goal is to help students become more competent, more adept, and more intrinsically motivated students who can better monitor their own

learning, then providing them with a concrete way to track their own learning skills helps demystify the self-growth process. These exercises leave both teacher and student with a trail to help track progress, scaffold learning, and digest reflections, so as to better understand what students have, what they need, and where they're going.

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