

Research Based Strategies for the Classroom

Part # 8 - Setting Objectives

Introduction

Setting objectives involves specific teacher and student behaviors, including both decision-making and communicating. First, teachers select and refine learning goals. These goals may be narrow or broad, specific or general. Studies of effective goal setting suggest that goals with a narrow focus will actually minimize learning, because students focus on what has been communicated as important. If goals are too focused, students will ignore related information. Second, goal setting is an act of communicating. Since students focus on what has been set forth as an objective, communicating those objectives becomes central to success. Setting objectives, then, becomes a thoughtful exercise in considering how to generalize selected learning objectives while ensuring student focus, then letting students in on the process through clear communication.

Key Research Findings

- Instructional goals should not be too specific. When goals are too narrowly focused they can limit learning (Fraser, 1987; Walberg, 1999).
- If students are encouraged to personalize the teacher's goals, then learning increases. Student ownership enhances learning focus. Studies show the benefits of students setting sub-goals derived from the larger teacher-defined goals (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Morgan, 1985).
- Some studies indicate that student learning "contracts" are effective in developing student ownership and completion of goals. A contract would be an agreement between student and teacher for a grade the students will receive if they meet established criteria (Kahle & Kelly, 1994; Miller & Kelley, 1994; Vollmer, 1995).

Implementation

Setting learning goals is another instructional practice which benefits from fine-tuning. Teachers who set, define, and communicate appropriate learning objectives employ research-based strategies such as:

1. Goals should be flexible and general. If a goal is too focused on a narrowly defined outcome, it limits learning potential. If students are shown one example of successful learning it will inhibit the possible range of artifacts students would create in their authentic construction of

knowledge. If students understand that the goal is for them to learn how a piston works, they may fail to learn its relationship to other parts in an engine.

2. Student ownership makes a difference. Ask students to create their own goals. Help them personalize and refine their own set of goals by sharing examples, modeling the process, or creating strategies for documenting and completion, such as contracts, video-recordings, or learning journals.

3. Allow students enough time to adapt goals. Give students time to adapt the concepts and ideas in goals to their interests, learning styles, and existing knowledge base.

4. Use advance organizers to introduce goals. Use related strategies to enhance goal introduction to students. Advance organizers can help students prepare for, focus on, and personalize goals.

5. Help students understand different kinds of goals. There are short-term and long-term goals. In classrooms with different instructional practices, setting and meeting objectives may need to take many forms. Provide students practice setting personal goals and meeting them in different contexts.

6. Focus goals on understanding. Ensure that goals are less about accomplishing tasks and more focused on understanding and applying concepts.

Additional Resources

The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory publishes an online resource entitled Pathways to School Improvement. Pathways synthesizes research, policy, and best practice on issues critical to educators engaged in school improvement. See Critical Issues: Working Toward Student Self-Direction and Personal Efficacy as Educational Goals.

<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/learning/lr200.htm>

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