Goal Setting as Motivational tool in Student's Self-regulated Learning

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Introduction

The concept of management by objectives has long been used in business in enhancing good staff performance. There has been growing interest among teaching researchers in exploring the influence of goals within the academic field. Much of the early work in this area of motivational research has been done with children rather than with college students. Only recently have the theories been extended to college classrooms. Goal setting can dramatically influence students? self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 1995) and motivation (Ames, 1992). In this study, the author would try to explore if goal setting can serve as effective motivational tool in enhancing their self-regulated learning process, thus academic performance for college students.

Goal setting as motivational tool

Zimmerman and Risemberg identified six components of academic self-management: motivation, methods of learning, use of time, physical environment, social environment, and performance (Zimmerman and Risemberg, 1997). Through learning these self-management skills, students can exert control over their learning and thus promote academic achievement. In the present study, the focus is on examining how students use goal setting as motivational tool in the process of self-regulated learning process.

If motivation is one crucial factor, how can teachers know that students are motivated in their learning? Ames (1992) defines student motivation as goal-directed behaviour that involves different ways of thinking and is elicited under various internal and external conditions. He augmented that motivational goals provide the mechanism for filtering perceptions and other cognitive process (Ames, 1992).

Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons (1986) suggest different ways for students to manage their motivation: setting goal, developing positive beliefs about one?s ability to perform academic task, and arranging rewards or punishments for success or failure at an academic tasks. Schunk (1991) further augmented that students who feel more confident in their ability regarding a task are likely to engage their repertoire of strategies and persist in their use than those having no confidence in their competence.

Educational research indicates that high achievers report using goal setting more frequently and more consistently than low achievers (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986). Furthermore, students are more motivated to accomplish what they have planned for themselves and they tend to work harder on self-made goals than externally imposed goals and that participation in goal setting can lead to high goal commitment (Schunk, 1991), thus enhance performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). O'Connell (1991) also advocates that the school should assist students in developing goals for themselves, and that teachers should reinforce these same goals.

Indeed, some researchers advocated that some students are motivationally oriented toward learning goals; others are oriented toward performance goals (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Koller & Baumert, 1997; Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993). Differences in such orientation may affect their classroom performance. For example, performance-oriented students tend to be discouraged when faced with obstacles, while learning-oriented students would be encouraged rather than discouraged by obstacles, thus still keep trying and result in better performance (Dweck, 1986; Schunk, 1996). And that performance-oriented students who perceive their abilities to be low are more likely to possess a sense of helplessness; whereas learning-oriented students who perceive their ability to be low are more concerned with how much they themselves can learn, paying little attention to performance of others (Fuchs et al, 1997; Kaplan& Midgley, 1997; Thorkildsen & Nicholls, 1998).

Also, learning-oriented students are more likely to use self-regulated learning strategies (Greene and Miller, 1996; Pintrich, Marx & Boyle, 1993). Moreover, as students progress in the school years, they tend to shift from learning goals to performance goals (Meece, Miller, & Ferron, 1995). This is in fact not uncommon in the local setting where the education system has encouraged students? adoption of performance rather than learning orientation.

Methods

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been used. For quantitative approach, questionnaires have been distributed to students for their completion at the beginning of the semester. Students were asked to state the grade they expected to achieve in the module of Organizational Behaviour. The expected grades were then matched with actual results at the end of the semester. The collected data were analysed by using SPSS. For qualitative approach, focus group discussion were conducted in examining why students put specific grade as expected; what

are the barriers for their goal setting, and whether goal setting is an effective motivational tool in their study.

Participants

182 undergraduate students were invited to complete the questionnaire. These students were the final year students with computing major. Twenty of them were invited to participate in the focus group in discussing what are their barriers in goal setting..

Results and Discussion

A total of 182 sets of questionnaires have been completed by students and the return rate is 78%. 79.1% of students agreed that goal setting helps them to achieve better result in this course. When asked what grades they expected to achieve, 18.7% of students expected to achieve an A grade. While 56% expected a B grade and 23.6% expected a C grade and only 1.6% expected a D grade.

A statistical t-test was used to check whether the students? overall final results were affected by the students? goal setting. It is found that the resulting p-value of 0.039 significant at the 5% level of significance. The null hypothesis is rejected (The null hypothesis is that there is no difference between expected grade between students who have or have not set a target grade; the alternative hypothesis is that there is a difference in the expected grade between students who have or have not set a target grade).

When using correlation technique, it was found that there is a positive relationship between overall and expected grade (treated as a continuous variable) (r=0.182, p-value = 0.014). The p-value of 0.014 and the sample correlation coefficient of 0.182 indicate a significant positive relationship between the expected grade and the final result. Those who expected higher grade tended to score higher grade in the overall assessment.

The results from the focus group indicates that one major reason for students putting specific grade as expected is due to their understanding of their perceived skills and ability in handling the module of Organizational Behaviour. The knowledge of their perceived skills and ability attribute mainly to three main factors. The first is their study effort. Study effort refers to the time and effort they are ready to spend in this subject. This in turn can be affected by their liking of the subject. The participants revealed that the more effort they put in the subject, the better skills and ability they would have in handling the assignment and examination.

The second factor is their prior knowledge in the subject. Prior knowledge includes exposure to similar subjects in previous years. Since

most students came from a science background, they have little or no knowledge in the subject of Organizational Behaviour.

The third factor is their related skills in the subject. This refers to the skills in handling case study and essay questions as required in most behavioural science subjects. Such writing skills, as according to the participants, were in turn mainly affected by their English competency. In fact, it is not uncommon for science students to have average to below average English competency and that the assessment mode they encountered were multiple choice or scientific calculation instead of writing essays. Thus, the course of Organizational Behaviour, which utilize essay writing as assessment mode would present a high level of difficulty to some students, particularly those from a science background.

The findings are similar to those of Cronbach and Snow (1977), and Peterson, et al (1982) studies in which they found that students who enter particular learning situations differ in aptitudes and prior experiences would affect student?s perception of their learning capability. For example, students high in reading ability ought to perform better on tasks requiring reading, which should earn them teacher praise and good grades. As a result, these outcomes may lead students to develop greater interest in reading, which may further improve their ability (Cronbach & Snow, 1977; Peterson et al, 1982). Schunk also found that students who previously have performed well in a subject area ought to believe that they are capable of learning a new task in that area, whereas students who have experienced difficulties may doubt their capabilities (Schunk, 1991).

When asked why they do not set goals for their study, participants provide a number of reasons. First is their perception on goal setting. The perception that goal setting have little effects on their academic performance in this subject explain why they do not set goals. Lack of goal setting experience also explains why they do set goals. Lack of knowledge and skills in the process of goal setting also comes into play. Lack of strong interest in the subject is another crucial factor why students do not set goal.

Majority of students agreed that goal setting serve as good motivational tool in their study. It is because goals as set provide direction in their study. Moreover, they voiced out that mere goal setting is not suffice in enabling them in achieving set goal. Others factors such as study techniques and skills are also crucial in enhancing their academic success. They also advocated that teachers can provide motivation in their study by arousing their learning interest, demonstrating ideas with examples, and using Chinese language in explaining abstract concepts. The findings

echoes with what has been found in previous studies (Schutz, 1993; Schutz & Lanehart, 1994).

Implications

Results in the present study have a number of implications for the teaching practitioners in enhancing student's motivation using goal setting technique in the self-regulated learning process. Before enhancing their goal setting technique, teachers should take responsibility in motivating students? interest in the subject. Different ways of arousing student's interest in the subject can be employed e.g. frequent use of examples. Even the use of language they are familiar with can be useful. That is, use of mother language in supplementing the use of English language may be useful in fostering student's understanding if the subject has to be taught in students? second language.

If students have developed intrinsic interest in the subject, they are ready to employ goal setting techniques in achieving academic success. First, teachers can help students adopt a proper perception of goal setting in serving as motivational tool in process of self-regulated learning. The awareness of importance of goal setting not only enhance student's self-regulated but also their life-long learning.

Having the proper perception is not adequate. Students should know how to put these goals into actual learning plans. Teachers can help students to take control of their motivation by equipping them with techniques and skills in goal setting and planing process. Workshops for enhancing goal setting techniques can be arranged with the assistance of student development officers or counsellors. In addition, workshops on study strategies and skills may serve as crucial support for students in putting goals into action.

Conclusions

Although goals provide direction, they do not guarantee successful performance. It is not sufficient to just have a goal; goals must be accompanied by effective study strategies and plans. The use of individual goal setting accompanied with appropriate feedback and teacher support is crucial in building effective motivational approaches and self-regulatory learning strategies in enhancing academic success. Indeed, students who set goals and develop plans to achieve them take responsibility for their own lives (Dembo, 2000) and that may be one goal of our education system.

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