



Using Goal-Setting in “P(paw)LANS” to Improve Writing

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Abstract

We taught a fifth grade student in resource room how to set goals and monitor his progress toward achieving them in the area of story writing by using the self-regulated strategy development model. The steps of this approach are included in the mnemonic PLANS (Pick goals, List ways to meet goals, And make Notes, Sequence notes). These steps were used to help this student improve his writing in terms of content, elaboration and word count through both goal-setting and learning the steps of the writing process. We enhanced this model by giving greater emphasis to the goal setting dimension and changing the mnemonic to P(paw)LANS. Post-testing showed that the student’s writing improved in both length and in the quality of story elements included in his stories. The student also seemed to gain confidence and show heightened self-awareness of his strengths and weaknesses as a writer.

Keywords

writing, goal setting, narrative writing, self-regulated strategy development, goals

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Writing is a complex and multifaceted process which has been defined as a problem-solving activity (Hayes & Flower, 1986; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986). As in any problem solving task, one must identify the problems and set goals to organize how to solve them. Effective learners are goal-oriented (Winne, 1997), and so they seek to find the important objectives of any writing assignment. However, those students with learning disabilities have difficulty identifying the objectives of writing assignments or knowing their weaknesses which makes goal setting difficult (Graham & Harris, 2005)

The PLANS strategy (Graham, MacArthur, Schwartz & Page-Voth, 1992; Mason, Snyder, Sukhram & Kedem, 2006) helps writers successfully create effective goals in writing through scaffolding the process of how this is done for them. PLANS is a three step writing strategy that addresses goal setting while students engage in authentic writing. In step one, a mnemonic, PLANS, directs the writer to complete each step of the writing strategy: **P**ick goals, **L**ist ways to meet goals, **A**nd make **N**otes, **S**equence notes. The next two steps ask the student to write and then to check the story to ensure that their goals have been met.

Benefits of Goal-Setting

We enhanced PLANS by giving greater emphasis to the goal-setting dimension of this strategy, as goals serve as three major purposes according to Schunk (1990): 1) Goals structure effort by providing a target for our efforts. 2) Goals provide information on progress. 3) Goals serve to motivate performance.

Creating goals can be extremely motivating when done correctly where positive results are met (Reid & Lienemann, 2006). Aldermann (1999) and Licht (1993) recommend implementing the following steps for goal-setting:

Principle 1: establishing goals

Principle 2: ensuring goals are appropriate

Principle 3: establishing feedback and monitoring procedures

Therefore effective goals require that the student understand the assignment and its purpose. Once students have understood what needs to be done, creating goals will help to keep them focused on the task, ensure that they monitor their progress as they write, and promote self-checking of work once writing has been completed. To ensure that students understand and evaluate the assignment before they set goals and begin to write, we designed and introduced the mnemonic PAW before PLANS. To help aide with memorization, we ultimately modified the mnemonic from PLANS to P(paw)LANS.

Ultimately, when students have the opportunity to see that the goals they set have been accomplished, they achieve a sense of satisfaction. This feeling will motivate them to complete the goals as they be self-evaluate themselves and their efforts continuously. (Schunk, 2001).

Our Student, Jasper

We used our enhanced version of the P(paw)LANS strategy with one of our 5th grade students, Jasper. Jasper attended re-source room for an average of 3 days a week

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for 55 minutes. During those sessions, we worked on various literacy skills including word attack, spelling, comprehension, writing and support with assignments from his regular education class. We taught and practiced this strategy with Jasper for a part of each resource room session for a total of 5 weeks. Jasper showed difficulties typical of a student who has a language-based learning disability: generating ideas, brainstorming, planning, spelling, revising/editing, handing in assignments on time and following directions to assignments. He made excuses when he could not complete an assignment effectively. Although he was a well-behaved student who worked hard, his difficulty with executive functioning and attending to many different areas in writing, combined with his high level of performance anxiety seemed to significantly affect his academic performance. His teachers regularly commented that his organization and mechanics of writing were well below his peers in the general education class.

Jasper was new to the school and to the United States. Since his performance on these skills were well below his peers and were similar to those of students who had been formally diagnosed with a learning specialist, we felt it was beneficial to have him receive additional support in resource room. Since we work at an independent school, we have the flexibility to provide resource room support without a formal diagnosis of a learning disability. In future months, Jasper was recommended for an evaluation and is currently undergoing one.

Enhanced Version of P(paw)LANS

Using the self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) model (Graham & Harris, 2005; Harris & Graham, 1996; Harris, Graham, & Mason 2006), we followed these steps for teaching PLANS:

Stage 1: Build background knowledge for P(paw)LANS

Before introducing the P(paw)LANS writing strategy to Jasper, we wanted him to understand the importance of goals and how to create effective goals. Therefore, we defined effective goals as measurable, suited to requirements of the assignment and achievable in a short term so that gains could be seen. We also discussed the definition of goals as ‘specific steps that we will take on to complete a task’. Moreover, we discussed the importance of goals: ‘That they provide directions, reminders and a map that will help get us to our final destination or product.’

Stage 2: Discuss the rationale of goal setting in P(paw)LANS

To help Jasper buy into the importance of setting goals, we discussed how goals can help improve our schoolwork. Afterwards, Jasper could state that goals were important because they helped to tell a person what he was to do.

Stage 3: Model how to create and use goals

We moved on to modeling how to create appropriate goals. We reiterated that goals should be associated with methods for improving the way we write so that we can communicate effectively with our readers. First, we brainstormed goals together to get a sense of Jasper’s skills. Jasper stated extremely broad goals that revealed a minimal understanding of the assignment and a complete lack of awareness of his own skills. As a result, he made goals that were either too difficult or too easy to accomplish, which is typical of students with learning disabilities (Reid & Lienemann, 2006).

For example, one of his initial goals was, “To write a good story that will get a good grade.” There was no specific way for

Jasper to measure if he would have accomplished this goal, thus making it difficult to address and follow. Another goal he initially created that was too difficult to accomplish was, “My writing will have zero spelling errors.” Jasper struggled with spelling especially when he was spelling while writing stories. In addition, Jasper had minimal, if any, goals that focused on revising and editing his work, an area in which he needed support.

Once we had a sense of Jasper’s ability to set goals, we helped him to understand the definition of goals and how to write goals that were measurable. We explained to Jasper that his goals needed to explicitly state what he was working on and how it would be measured when he had completed it successfully. In addition, he would have to think of his strengths and weaknesses as a writer as he

was creating goals, a task that requires practice, introspection and understanding of his writing skills and the writing process.

To do this, we first produced examples of acceptable and unacceptable goals, followed by us working together to provide, following by Jasper providing goals independently given a specific topic/scenario. Jasper worked on identifying two components of the acceptable goals. He identified the specific skill that each goal addressed and underlined the way it would be measured. For example, for the acceptable goal, “I will have a maximum of 7 spelling errors in my writing piece.” Jasper identified the specific skill as spelling and underlined ‘maximum of 7 spelling errors’, as the measurable element of the goal.

Table 1: Examples of Acceptable and Unacceptable Goals

Unacceptable Goals

1. “I will make my story exciting.”
2. “I will have good spelling.”
3. “My story will be funny.”
4. “Characters will talk in my story.”
5. “I will use a variety of vocabulary words.”
6. “I will make sure my story makes sense.”

Acceptable Goals

1. “I will make my story exciting by having one unexpected twist where a new character is introduced.”
2. “I will have a maximum of 7 spelling errors in my writing piece.”
3. “I will have a funny part in my story where something funny happens to a character, and all the characters laugh.”
4. “There will be at least two separate places where I will use quotes between two different characters to show that they are talking to each other.”
5. “I will use at least 2 words from my spelling word list in my story.”
6. “There will be a maximum of 5 places, where I may have forgotten to remove a word from my story which does not make sense.”

Jasper practiced creating goals until he could do so effectively. At that point, it was assumed that he had memorized the definition

and technique for creating acceptable goals. To ensure that Jasper was making correct goals during the writing process, we checked

his goals before he began to write his story. Initially, all of Jasper’s goals were not quantifiable measures. In addition, some of his goals tended to be easy to accomplish (i.e. “Have at least one event happening in your (my) story”).

Once Jasper was able to create acceptable goals and understand the significance of goal-setting, we were ready to work on combining goal-setting with writing by using P(paw)LANS. Prior to introducing P(paw)LANS, we collected a writing sample, so that we could assess his skills and see how much progress he made once P(paw)LANS was introduced and utilized.

Jasper’s initial writing sample showed some understanding of the narrative genre but with only a few basic narrative elements. We used his performance on his writing sample, Graham and Harris’s (1989) rubric for measuring story elements (Appendix A), and our experience as English teachers to set instructional goals for Jasper. Jasper included a main character, a starting event, a goal, action and ending, but he lacked location, time, and closing reaction. He also lacked elaboration, details, emotions and reader's engagement.

Essentially, Jasper failed to understand the purpose of the assignment. His writing piece seemed to go off on an unrelated tangent that did not go with the beginning of the story, and re-iterated facts from the story that logically should not have been repeated.

Based on Jasper’s understanding of the definition of goal, our lessons on creating goals and his initial writing example, we decided to modify PLANS to P(paw)LANS:

Jasper’s stories improved tremendously after learning to use our enhanced version of PLANS.

PLANS

Purpose of writing (Pick topic, Audience, Why am I writing?)

List goals

And make....

Notes

Sequence Notes

(Original: Pick goals, List ways to meet goals, And make Notes, Sequence notes)

Since Jasper had difficulty connecting the purpose of the assignment to his goals and making the goals specific to the assignment, we felt it was important to have him focus on discussing the purpose of the assignment. To get all essential parts of the purpose, we introduced the mnemonic PAW (Pick topic, Audience, Why am I writing?)

Before Jasper could create goals, he needed to answer all the points in PAW, to get a full sense of the purpose of writing.

By modifying the ‘P’ in PLANS, we hoped that Jasper would now be forced to take

time to understand the assignment and why he was writing it. In fact, on the next piece of writing where PLANS was used, we saw a change in Jasper’s attention to the assignment based on our modification of the strategy. In his next writing assignment, Jasper was able to successfully complete the purpose.

Stage 4: Memorize the method used to create and use goals, and introduce other steps of P(paw)LANS

During the first step of P(paw)LANS, Jasper learned the writing process by being introduced to the mnemonic and by memorizing what each letter stood for through daily mock quizzes on the mnemonic. Every day Jasper came to resource room, he was asked

to take a post it and write out the mnemonic P(paw)LANS and what each letter stood for. At first this task seemed difficult for him, but shortly after, he began to note that the ‘quiz’ was too easy, and that we should challenge him.

At this point in P(paw)LANS we supported the steps "and make notes" by having him generate and sequence a list of notes that would be used while he was writing. First, we modeled how Jasper would generate notes. Together we discussed how to write them. Jasper was now cued in to the idea that he had to keep the purpose in mind while creating notes. We encouraged Jasper to re-read his purpose when he was brainstorming for his notes. In addition, we questioned where else he could go to find ideas on what to write about next. He correctly answered by stating that rereading or looking at the story may give some ideas about what should be written next.

Jasper was also familiar with the bullet point method when generating notes, and was able to create notes using bullet points relatively easily. When we modeled note-taking while using bullet points, we stressed that complete sentences were not necessary, which Jasper readily picked up as well.

We used think-alouds during our modeling to show Jasper how to sequence the notes correctly and how to remove certain ideas that did not fit.

Stage 5: Support the use of P(paw)LANS

Not only did he memorize the mnemonic, but he practiced identifying the purpose of writing assignments and developing goals for a narrative assignment similar to the assignment he created before P(paw)LANS was introduced. We continued to monitor both his goals and purposes of writing to make sure that he was developing them cor-

rectly. After he watched us model methods of coming up with the purpose of the assignment and developing goals immediately one after each other, he was able to do the same.

Stage 6: Independent performance of P(paw)LANS

Once we modeled the entire P(paw)LANS strategy for Jasper, we worked on completing the process of the strategy together, and once we felt that he was able to complete the strategy on his own we let him practice it independently, with support ready when necessary. The first writing activity he was asked to complete independently was one that we had modeled for him initially. Since the writing activity was to create a new detailed ending for the open-ended story, we instructed Jasper to use what we did as a guide, and create a new set of notes for a new ending.

During the second step of PLANS, Jasper used the purpose, goals and notes he created from step 1 to write his narrative ending to the open ended story. At this point, the entire pre-writing process (PLANS) was complete. For our initial model example, we took the purpose, goals, and sequenced notes to help us write our story. We re-read the goals to make sure he understood them. We showed Jasper that the list of goals should be readily apparent while writing the story, so that they serve as a visual reminder of what needs to be accomplished as we write.

As part of independent practice, we re-modeled areas such as think-alouds because it seemed he needed more of this to achieve complete independence. We modeled getting stuck and showed Jasper how to take a break and use positive self-talk, look for suggestions or support to help him move on. While modeling, we would go between goals, notes, and our writing piece to make sure that we

were including all ideas, goals were being addressed, and our story was making sense and flowing. Although this interplay seemed quite challenging and demanding to Jasper, he was able to understand and write a piece with support from us, ultimately feeling comfortable and able to write a piece on his own.

Lastly, Jasper had to master checking if his goals were met. We felt it was important for Jasper not only to check his goals but also the purpose of writing, since that was also an area of difficulty for him. Therefore, when we completed our modeled example, we checked if we met our purpose in writing.

We re-read our story and checked to see if we stayed on topic by asking who our main character was, what problem were we trying to solve, and what events/goals we had to solve that problem. We also checked each individual goal by numbering the goals, and used that corresponding number in our writing sample to identify when the goal was met. Any number that was not included was not met. Therefore, we would have to go back and make changes.

When Jasper was asked to check his own writing, he observed that he correctly addressed the purpose of writing, which he was proud of. However, he observed that he did not address all of his goals, and was disappointed in himself and began to make excuses and hide his work. We reassured him and discussed that the beauty of this writing strategy is that he can catch his errors even before he shows it to anyone, so there was no reason for him to be hard on himself. Jasper was comforted that through goal setting he would have control of catching many of his errors before others did.

Jasper's Gains

We evaluated Jasper's gains according to two criteria. First, we counted the length of each story. Then, we used the same assessment rubric (Graham & Harris, 1989) to measure the presence and quality of each of the following story elements: main character, locale, time, starter event, goal, action, ending, and reaction. A full description of the scoring criteria is provided in Appendix A.

Table 2: Jasper's Stories' Scores

	Story Elements	Word Count
Pre Story	5/19	81
First Story	10/19	219
Second story	12/19	331

As Table 2 shows, Jasper's stories improved tremendously after learning to use our enhanced version of PLANS. His first story

only scored five out of the nineteen possible points on the Story Grammar Elements scoring scale. Yet, he scored ten and then twelve

possible points on his second and third stories, respectively. Similarly, his word count increased, more than tripling from 81 words in his first story to 331 in his third.

Essentially, these results show how Jasper's writing improved after learning this strategy. The sheer increase in length is important, particularly as word count is correlated to higher overall quality ratings (Gregg, Coleman, Davis & Chalk, 2007). In fact, when looking at Jasper's third story, marked qualitative improvements were observed. First, it was apparent that Jasper understood that the first step of correctly completing a writing assignment is to think about the assignment and purpose of writing. This time he began his story right where it left off from the open ended response. He wrote, "Michael gets an award for coming first place," instead of summarizing the beginning of the story. He also wrote with more detail and elaboration, explaining plot lines and details well enough that the reader could create explicit images. For example, he wrote,

When Michael came through the door the phone rang, he went to pick it up, when he said Hello it was the other fisher man, his name was Bob. Bob said, "Congratulations on getting the award today!"

This example also shows Jasper's awareness of characteristic traits of narrative writing by his use of dialogue and quotation marks. In fact, there are many other instances of dialogue and conversation between characters in this third story, thus making it even more enjoyable to read.

This example further illustrates his awareness of the assignment. Since the assignment asked the writer to continue an open-ended story, a proficient writer would look for defining traits or qualities from the

beginning of the story to build on or to continue with. One of the qualities to look for would be style of writing. Since the beginning of the open-ended stories did, in fact, have dialogue and quotes, a proficient writer with awareness of the purpose of writing would continue and use dialogue throughout the entire story.

Finally, in many instances Jasper's story shows evidence of emotion, inner conflict, and moral themes. All three qualities were not apparent prior to this strategy instruction. Jasper writes,

Michael felt scared because he didn't know Bob, but he seemed (like) a pretty good guy. So Michael went to ask his parents if Bob could come over, his parents said Yes. Mike was really excited to meet Bob, but at the same time he was a little frightened because he thought the (should be 'that') he might be a bad guy or a good guy.

From this example, we can see that Jasper's writing has a clear purpose and audience in mind when he writes. In addition, he describes emotions, ends with a resolution, and includes a relevant moral, something that middle school teachers encourage students to have in certain creative stories.

The modified PLANS strategy helped Jasper learn and crystallize two important parts of writing along with the writing process. It helped him develop a method for understanding and following the assignment, and it helped him be more introspective about his writing skills, thus enabling him to write more effectively. Initially, Jasper was probably so evasive and cursory with his writing because he found the task daunting. Moreover, concerning the length gains, this strategy seems to offer such students a structure that

enables them to be more confident and comfortable with writing, and perhaps to even find writing enjoyable, which is the hope of all writing teachers.

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Appendix A: Story Grammar Elements (adapted from Graham & Harris, 1989)

Main character

0 if not present

1 = Just names person and/or what his/her powers are/what he/she rules

2 = well described early on with several adjectives such as physical traits (ie looks, size), personality traits stated (confident, guarded, nervous, amused, disappointed) or conveys personality (he smiled).

Locale

0 if not present

1 = 1 or 2 word naming the place

2 = specific adjectives: colors, aromas, objects, goes beyond 1 or 2 word naming the place.

Time

0 if not present

1 = long ago/one day/once upon a time/early or general.

2 = more specific date and/or time description.

Starter event

0 if not present

1 = opponent and his challenge described simply, not extremely well-detailed.

2 = very well detailed/worded, original/creative, more than just an ordinary sentence and/or far more clever than simple theme of opponent challenges mc. Also must be unified/cohere in that parts hang together well/clearly related. If several, only count first.

Goal (3 pts if two or more goals) MC reacts to starter event.

0 if not present

1 = Predictable, unsurprising, fights opponent

2 = creative and original

(If character witnesses a full event-- ie person killed-- this is not multiple goals, so only a 2)

3 = More than 1 goal (one goal may be in a dream) (opponent transforms and fights again) (multiple variations)

Action

0 if not present

1 = if present but simple, not highly developed.

2 = if highly developed: Given only for very high quality work. Give carefully.

3 = multiple episodes: problem resolved and new problem (or subplot with separate problem to be resolved) introduced. Usually same points as goal.

Ending

0 if not present

1 = brief, simple, one dimensional trick that is not so believable, does not tie back to opponent's weakness or new weakness suddenly introduced at end

2 = surprising/unexpected/very clever and well related to initial problem, well worded

Reaction-

0 if not present

1 = after ending, emphatic statement or a final response of a character to the consequences of the action

2 = mc does or says something very clever/humorous and unexpected -related to problem/rich moral or explanation.