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Values first, goals second

Simon Thomas, De Montfort University International College 5 Nov 2020

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I have a certain disquiet about the way we in higher education so often relate success and failure to the attainment or otherwise of goals. This focus on goals is present at all levels of university hierarchy, from enrolment targets set by management, through publication and grants targets set for and by researchers, to the constructive alignment of courses so that learning outcomes determine assessments and course content (Biggs, 1996). Students may be encouraged to set specific, measurable goals in order to proceed towards successful completion of these courses, and there is considerable evidence that a focus on setting and striving towards such goals can indeed enhance academic attainment (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010), as well as deepening a sense of wellbeing as targets are met (Brunstein, 1993). Yet this potentially endless chain of measurable and attainable goals is, by nature, outcomes-oriented and future-focused. We might beneficially pause to consider where they are leading, and whether a focus on process and the present moment might be both a more productive and humane way of spending our time than focusing on setting, breaking down and pursuing goals.

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Aside from conceiving of the present largely as time and space to be consumed productively for future attainment – which is itself arguably a waste, as well as negligent by definition – the pursuit of goals can be problematic in other ways. First, the deepening sense of wellbeing generated by attaining goals seems contingent upon successfully attaining those goals. Just as success can enhance wellbeing, failure might diminish it; and, given challenging goals, failure is sometimes inevitable. So, it may be worth seeking more stable ground on which to base wellbeing. Second, if the contingent sense of wellbeing caused by successfully attaining goals is threatened by subsequent failure to achieve an end, the

response to this threat might be *defensive*, in which an acquired sense of wellbeing is protected through self-deception, or by attacking the cause of failure. Such a response would not be the honest reflection on strategy and effort necessary for learning. It is also self-defeating, since it negates the purpose of setting measurable goals in order to successfully progress. Additionally, if failure to achieve set goals diminishes wellbeing, students might consequently be discouraged from persisting in future tasks or feel inadequate. When wellbeing depends on the necessarily uncertain attainment of goals, we might thereby set the conditions of its undermining.

Furthermore, pursuing goals set by others (academic institutions and departments, course leaders, and so on) is open to abuse, since these goals will not always be those that our students, on reflection, share: pursuing them can reduce a sense of autonomy, which can also undermine wellbeing. Dissent from such goals, however, requires stepping away from them in order to reflect on why they are being pursued in the first place.

As an alternative to the various problems caused by this future-and-outcomes-focused approach, we might usefully consider basing our use of time and space on values and grounding our courses on fostering the values that we and our students would like to enact or embody. In practice, this might mean asking students, on the first day of a course, to decide which values they would like to enact, both as students and thereafter, given their chosen subjects and perhaps ideas of future careers. Once they have generated a list, they could be asked to consider how to enact these values. For example, do they value learning from failure? If so, what actions could they take when they receive assessment feedback in order to enact this value by reflecting on their performance in a way concordant with experiential learning? Shared class values could be published to the class and referred to in class, with instructors encouraging students to act in ways which adhere to those chosen values. We as educators could benefit from living this way, too, since it would free us from the goals of others and return us our autonomy, as well as providing us with a meaningful, self-determined way of being.

Such a model of teaching and learning better fits with what we know about how learning happens. We should focus on the process of learning rather than on hoped-for results, and we should embrace failures as a means to improve strategies or effort – which is worth enacting in itself, both for ourselves and as a model for students, since it is humane and autonomous. This values-based alternative is process-oriented, which is what research suggests we should want in our education programmes; in place of the goal being separate from our present moment, the embodiment or enactment of a chosen value is itself the goal, and is enacted in our present, giving meaning to the present moment beyond its utility value for the future.

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