



Teaching and Learning Resource

Teaching and Practicing Goal Setting in a Course Onboarding Module

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ABSTRACT

Educational Practices in Kinesiology 4(2): Article 3, 2024. Teaching about the empirical evidence and basic tenets of setting and pursuing goals is a common topic in undergraduate kinesiology courses, especially in sport and exercise psychology. Yet, many textbooks and materials include goal setting as an applied skill or behavior change process buried in the middle of the term. The purpose of this article is to share a proposal for opening the course by first covering the topic of goal setting. In this article, we define types of goals and share a goal setting activity that may be scaled for a variety of courses and class sizes. The intention is to use the topic of goal setting as an opportunity to orient the students to the course; this is especially helpful in course design strategies that include increased student autonomy, such as specifications-based or gamified courses. The method of instruction includes lecture and guided activity, along with an adaptable worksheet. By first learning about goal setting in behavior change, students can better grasp the concept before immediately applying the skill to their own goals for the course. The estimated time commitment for this process is about 150 minutes, or two to three class meetings. The benefits of this activity are twofold: first, students learn about, and practice goal setting based on evidence-supported strategies for successful behavior change and goal pursuit, and secondly, students intentionally practice goal setting by identifying a detailed path and set of actions that should help them be most successful in a specific course.

KEY WORDS: Course Orientation, guided learning, autonomy,

■ INTRODUCTION

Goal setting is an important life skill that has wide practical applications in most behavioral contexts. Helping students learn to set goals, and engaging in discussions about the importance of goal setting strategies can impact learners in their classrooms and beyond in their individual pursuits. In college classrooms, particularly in behaviorally focused topics in kinesiology classes, instructors can engage students in both the practical skill of setting of goals for success in their class as well as meta-cognitive thinking about how and why goal setting works in many other kinesiology-adjacent settings. In this article, we will explain the commonality of goal setting across our discipline, principles of effective goal setting strategies, and how to structure a goal setting activity. The purpose of this article is to highlight the similarities between goal setting for behavior change

or high performance and goal setting for success in a college kinesiology course. The measurable learning objective related to this resource includes assessing the degree to which students successfully compose goal statements based on the three types of goals suggested for pursuing challenging outcomes and how well the student's goals align with the possible paths to success in the course. Audiences for kinesiology learners can vary widely - so long as the course includes a component related to goal setting toward positive behavior change or high performance, then this activity can be made relevant. Additionally, this activity could easily be adapted for lower division and introductory type courses in kinesiology, through upper-division or advanced topical courses including fitness testing and exercise prescription, sport psychology, exercise psychology, strength and conditioning, or adaptive and/or special populations exercise and physical activity courses. The resource can also be used in small to large course sizes.

Goal setting is an important skill and a case can be made that any student can learn how to set effective goals for every class. Whether the instructor uses a traditional course design or a course design with increased student autonomy, such as a specifications-based course (Nilson, 2015), ungrading based course (Blum, 2020), or gamified course (Deterding, et al., 2011), this resource can help students identify the right path to take for their ideal outcome. The activity can be adapted by the instructor as needed and as appropriate for the course given the aim is to equip the students with a specific path toward success with actions the student decides they are best prepared to pursue.

Goal Setting is Common in Kinesiology Classes and Theories

The evidence supporting goals and effective goal setting approaches is a common feature in a variety of kinesiology courses. This is especially true for courses that focus on behavioral changes (e.g., fitness and exercise prescription, coaching, sport and exercise psychology, personal training). Goal setting is also commonly placed within behavior change theories as a mechanism for change or a change process, or within motivational theories to enhance participant autonomy and drive toward success. For example, in Weinberg and Gould's (2024) *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology* textbook, the chapter on goal setting sits within a unit dedicated to a variety of psychological skills and mental training. Here, goals are discussed as a driving focus for high performance outcomes and reducing anxiety around pursuing challenging athletic endeavors. Rhodes et al. (2024) in *Psychology of Physical Activity and Sedentary Behavior* include a unit on theoretical models for behavior change – goals and goal setting is listed as an aspect of several theories, including social cognitive theory, control theory, and the multi-process action control framework. In these exercise psychology focused interpretations of behavior models and theories, goals often provide the impetus toward action, or as a means of increasing one's self-efficacy toward adopting more physical activity. Marcus and Forsyth (2009) provided detailed plans and instructions for health behavior coaches to work with clients in their text *Motivating People to be Physically Active*. Last, in the American College of Sport Medicine's (2018) *Resources for the Exercise Physiologist*, goal setting is described as a key element for understanding and facilitating behavior change. Given the ubiquity with which goals are discussed in applied kinesiology courses, the activity we describe here gives students an early and specific exposure to making a detailed goal driven plan.

Goal Setting is Beneficial for Performance

Across many of the applied settings for kinesiology, goal setting has been shown to be an effective behavior to improve performance and outcomes. Burton and Weiss (2008) conducted a review of studies examining goal setting in sport and physical activity settings. These researchers found 70 of 88 studies (80%) demonstrated moderate to strong goal setting effects on performance or persistence outcomes. This is important information for kinesiology students to consider as they develop their professional practice strategies to work with future patients and clients in health, exercise, and sport settings. Additionally, goal setting has been shown to be effective in learning outcomes as well. For example, in a quasi-experimental design, Chu and colleagues (2023) found students learning a foreign language performed better than a control group when they engaged in a learning process that began with a goal setting practice. Clark et al. (2020) found students who set task-based goals improved in their completion and course performance. As well, Poe et al. (2021) found students reported that setting goals in a course increased their own perceptions of learning. In another example, researchers in China found that learners with high emotional self-efficacy had stronger academic performance than other groups; membership in the high emotional self-efficacy cluster was predicated on strong skills such as goal setting and time management (Yu et al., 2022). When performers in a variety of contexts set goals there are significant positive effects toward their targeted outcomes. In educational contexts, when instructors support and provide explicit activities to help students set goals, the learning context is more conducive to bolstering student efficacy and leads to better academic outcomes. Therefore, it's important to equip instructors with specific and explicit practical strategies to guide students in goal setting.

Fundamental Goal Concept and Goal Examples

For this resource, the *Fundamental Goal Concept* (FGC; Burton & Weiss, 2008) is used as the guiding framework for the types of goals that students should consider setting and where their focus ought to be. The FGC guides performers toward a goal setting strategy using three types of goals: outcome goals, performance goals, and process goals. First, a definition for each type of goal from the FGC is given. Then, a sport and classroom example is given to highlight the nuances between each. Outcome goals are long-term in nature, describe the result of some performance or series of performances, and serve a motivational function – an example would be winning a running race, or the final letter grade in a class (Weinberg & Gould, 2024). A performance goal is also results oriented but tends to be more individually controlled. Performance goals may include both short term and long term, marking a highly controlled result of a performance or series of performances (Weinberg & Gould, 2024). In a sport context, as opposed to the outcome goal being winning a race, which is dependent on the performance of outdoing others, a performance goal would be the specific time a runner would hope to achieve as they finish the race. So, a runner could aim for a 20:00 minute finish in a 5K race – they may end up first place or in 100th place, but they were able to focus on their more individually controlled aspect of the performance. In a classroom setting, performance goals can be set for modules or unit outcomes, or a total set of attendance or essay points they will attempt to accumulate, or the number of practice quizzes they will take. These performance goals serve as checkpoints throughout the term.

Last are the process goals, which reflect behaviors or processes the performer engages in *during* the performance, that are completely within their control (Weinberg & Gould, 2024). These processes

should help the performer accomplish their performance goal. One way to think about these process goals are as “Actions of Excellence”. Following the running race analogy, process goals would be focusing on the opening mile pace, arranging to intake fuel or water at certain checkpoints, and setting out race gear the night before. These are all “actions of excellence” that should bring about the best performance and are within the control of the performer. For a student, actions of excellence could be engaging in habits or practices that the student knows they are capable of and have helped them have success in the past. Examples of actions of excellence a student might take could be making a goal to visit office hours once per unit, studying for the exam for 45 minutes each day for four days leading up to the test, or visiting the writing center with a draft of a paper before the deadline. The FGC suggests that when performers in any context use an outcome goal for motivation but focus their efforts toward the more controllable performance and process goals, then the promise of success is even more certain. Therefore, to align with the premise of the FGC, students should engage in a complete goal setting strategy using all three types of goals. A complete goal setting strategy encompasses the result of an experience and sets out to identify a plan to get there. This strategy would begin when students write their outcome goal first, followed by a series of performance goals that when achieved will result in the outcome. Then for each performance goal, the student should write several process goals, or actions of excellence, by reflecting on their strengths and the strategies they know have helped them be successful in other classes. The focus and emphasis on setting and pursuing controllable performance and process goals *is the fundamental* aspect of the FGC.

Integration of Goal Setting May Vary Based on Class Topic and Instructor

Goal setting is an important part of increasing a student’s efficacy toward pursuing class related goals. Students should be primed to think about strategies and behaviors they are capable of, or have used in the past, to be successful in school or other performance settings - especially behaviors they can control. Setting aside time to deconstruct a course and helping students to arrange a goal setting strategy for success and their goal grade is suitable for most any class. This approach may be particularly effective in course designs that aim to increase student autonomy, such as specifications-grading (Nilson, 2015), ‘ungrading’ (Blum, 2020), or gamified course structures (Deterding et al., 2011). In these course designs, often, students are not required to complete all the available assignments or assessments. Therefore, engaging in a goal setting practice, with guidance from the instructor, can help students set a path for success and checkpoints for reflection and adjustment. For example, students can identify how many points and assignments they will attempt per unit, and the total points those attempts should amount to toward their final score or grade.

Across all kinds of course designs and types, instructors can help students with their strategies by highlighting what assignments or assessments have been over- or under-estimated by past students. Instructors may also point out key resources that students can access to help increase the performance on those assignments and assessments. Additionally, students can discuss strategies and habits they may engage in together to help keep one another accountable, such as arranging weekly study groups or peer reviewers. In kinesiology classes where goal setting is taught as part of a concept, model, chapter, or strategy, instructors can draw on this activity for an immediate and practical example of how to develop a goal setting strategy; students would then not only practice goal setting, but they would be engaged in defining and describing how goal setting works in the theory or model or research area being covered in class – this accesses metacognitive thinking and

helps students see the value of goal setting in real time and in their future workplace with clients and patients.

Guiding Goal Setting During the Course Onboarding

The course “onboarding” process reflects all activities and instructions a teacher provides students to help prepare them for the upcoming course term. This can be email messages before the class or semester begins, activities that students complete online or in class in the first few days, or documents that provide students information about the course like the syllabus or schedule. Including a goal setting activity as part of the course onboarding process can help the students begin practicing stronger self-regulation and identifying key habits and strategies that they should use to be successful in the course. The activity we describe below is part of the course onboarding process in a sport psychology course; goal setting is an important concept in sport psychology and psychological skills training for high performance. Therefore, we align the course onboarding experience with a chapter in our textbook. This way students are primed to think about what goal setting is, how it works in sport settings, and then we guide students to apply those concepts to the class. Additionally, it’s important to note that our sport psychology course follows a gameful course design strategy (see Deterding et al., 2011); students can select from a variety of assignments with varying point totals toward demonstrating competency in up to five learning outcomes. The example that follows will reflect this specific course design strategy, however, the activity can be effective in a variety of course design strategies.

■ METHODS

Classroom Management

This activity is situated across the first two or three course meetings, depending on whether the class meets on a Monday-Wednesday-Friday or a Tuesday-Thursday schedule. At our institution, and in the course we are basing this activity on, a 3-credit hour course meets for 150 minutes a week, therefore the activity would take three days on a Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule, or two days for a Tuesday-Thursday schedule. Spreading the content across these 150 minutes allows the instructor to pursue three distinct objectives, rather than trying to include everything within one course meeting. We use this activity in courses that have as few as 10 students, upwards to courses with 50 students, and across lower and upper division classes. It is true, however, that an instructor could spend as little as 15 or 20 minutes to briefly describe types of goals and then have students quickly sketch out a plan for the course. However, we argue that this misses a larger opportunity to thoroughly connect goal setting as an applied skill related to kinesiology and the content that may come up in a course.

Course Structure

We describe this activity across a Monday-Wednesday-Friday course schedule but note that instructors can transition between topics as needed if meeting on a Tuesday-Thursday schedule. On the first day of class, we focus on introductions and answering student questions about the course. To facilitate these introductions, we follow the recommendation of Hermann and colleagues, by conducting a dual-interview process (see Hermann et al., 2010). This is also when the course design

strategy is reviewed, and how students can think about setting a pursuing a goal grade in the course – for our class, we describe the gameful nature of the course. A gameful course design strategy essentially offers many more points and assignments to the student than is necessary and organizes the approach to the class much like a video game. For more information on this strategy please see our other papers that report on the means we use to facilitate the course, as well as analysis of the student experience (Jones et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023). Through the aforementioned introductory activity, students are presented with the basic structure of the class and the expectations for students to demonstrate success. We explain how each assignment type is connected to a particular learning outcome, and then the array of assignments they can choose to pursue. We also describe why we are turning to the middle of the textbook first, before we even cover the “introduction” to the field chapter. We share that we want the students to learn *why and how* they can set themselves up for success in the course.

On the second day of class, we cover a textbook chapter reading on goal setting (see Weinberg & Gould, 2024); the expectation is that the students have at least skimmed the chapter prior to the lecture. This course meeting operates the way many of the forthcoming meetings will, especially when the aim is to review content. These meetings blend lecture and active learning activities with the aim of reviewing the reading material and discussing the implications of the concepts, theories, and empirical findings. We tend to lecture for about 5 minutes at time, and then present students with questions where they either respond individually or engage in think-pair-share activities to help process the mechanics of goal setting, theoretical basis for setting goals, and practical strategies for athletes and/or exercisers to use in pursuing sport and fitness goals. During this class meeting we discuss how being a student is like being performer in any other context. We describe how the evidence supporting goal setting in sport can be applied to pursuing academic goals. We talk about the course as a 16-week “season,” with small and large performances, that culminate in an outcome or final standing. Then, on the third day of class, we apply goal setting to the students’ plans for their goals in the course by following the activity we describe below. Separating these three objectives allows for reflection in between course meetings and helps focus the student and instructor to contextualize the class, highlight theory guiding goal setting, and intentionally set goals for the course. By the end of the final course meeting, students should have specifically defined their outcome and final performance goals and set shorter-term performance and process goals that make up their goal setting strategy for the course semester.

Equipment

For the most widely applicable version of the equipment needed, a basic worksheet can be used – a version of the worksheet we use is provided in the resources section. The worksheet should have two parts to it: (1) a place to write out their performance goals and process goals, and (2) a table or planning document. After giving the students a place to write their final outcome goal for the course and a few short-term performance goals that will help them arrive at their desired grade, they can move to the planning portion. Instructors can organize the planning portion worksheet by learning goals, by key project types, by month, or any combination of those as you see fit – we provide two approaches and encourage the students to select whichever makes the most sense to them, or to do them both and cross-check for accuracy. If your syllabus contains a table of the assignment or assessment types or grade categories, simply copy that table to the worksheet and add another column where the student can list their goal grade.

In our course, students identify a total of 10 goals. Students write 10 goals because our course is divided into three units, and we attempt to follow the principles from the FGC. Therefore, because the course itself is a singular performance and has one end result, a final grade, they write one outcome goal. Then, they write one performance goal for each unit, and two process goals for each unit – which brings about the total of 10 goals. Instructors should select the number of goals students should write based on the organization of their course. The FGC, and the textbook we use, suggest having more performance and process goals than outcome goals, because performers should be in control of pursuing performance and process goals. So, first students write their final outcome goal for the course, noting the final grade they aim to achieve; then, they write three more performance goals, one for each unit noting how many assignments and points they will attempt. When added together, these three unit performance goals should equal the total points specified in the final outcome goal. Finally, for each unit, the students write two process goals (six total process goals). These process goals will be the actions of excellence they will focus on during that shortened period. These process goals are not necessarily measurable, but more behavioral, like visiting office hours or the writing center, studying with a peer, etc. They should be controllable habits and behaviors that they know contribute to their best performances in class. During the third course meeting, where students complete the activity described here, instructors first pass out a worksheet. Students are instructed to review the syllabus and the online course learning management system (e.g. Canvas, Blackboard, etc.) to see all the assignments, and the point values of those assignments as they complete the worksheet. We encourage students to think thoroughly about what performances are needed to reach their goal grade. We also encourage sharing and discussing with their peers in class to identify different ways they may go about creating the goal setting strategy.

Student Instructions

1. Review all the assignment guides and deadlines, closely examine the grading scheme for the course, and ask your instructor any clarifying questions about the expectations of students in this class.
2. Write out a final outcome goal for yourself for this class (i.e., what grade you aim to achieve).
3. Write out one performance goal for each unit (or module, etc.) that will help you stay on track towards your final outcome goal. These performance goals, when summed together, should clearly arrive at the final outcome goal.
4. Write out two process goals (things you should be doing most days/weeks) for each performance goal. Process goals should be behaviors that others can observe you doing to meet your performance goals.

Post- Activity

There does not have to be a formal post-activity for this goal setting strategy. Yet, for some classes it may be helpful or more closely aligned to the overall content. In our sport psychology course, we invite students to write a reflective essay connecting their goal setting strategy for the course to the textbook chapter reading on goal setting. Whether an instructor includes formal post-activity assignments and discussions or not, when adopting this activity as part of the course onboarding experiences, we highly suggest reserving one to two other blocks of time during the semester to

have students revisit their goals. We typically reserve one full class meeting around the mid-term exam period at our institution to revisit goals. This can help students make any adjustments to their goal setting strategy depending on their progress. In our class, from the lecture and reading on goal setting, we are reminded that high performing athletes often must adjust goals as they meet or exceed or fall short of expectations, or when confronted with unexpected adversity. This applies to our students and the course as well. In these meetings, when we revisit goals, we talk about the other courses they are taking and ask students if they need to spend more or less time on certain classes than they originally thought. Students also reflect on their progress, and many adjust their goals to get a better grade (e.g., moving from an A- to A). Others realize they are not willing or not able to expend the energy needed to reach their original goal and adjust in the other direction (e.g., moving from an A to B+). These meetings allow students to discuss strategies with their peers and ask questions of the instructor. Ideally, students leave the meeting feeling like they have a good perspective on the time they need to allocate toward this class and the forthcoming assignments they need to complete in order to reach any adjusted goals. Of course, they may be able to simply celebrate that they are on track or ahead of their original goals.

■ DISCUSSION

There are several benefits from this resource, and of course a few challenges as well. We will begin with the challenges: first, allocating three full class days toward “course orientation” is not an insignificant amount of time. Secondly, students do not always fully engage in this practice. Many assume - and perhaps accurately - that they will continue to adhere to their habits and practices that have suited them well in college courses without much thought to how or why those practices may work or how they might be improved. We feel the time allocated to setting up a detailed goal setting strategy rooted in the course content merits the multiple class meetings and helps set a tone of autonomy and responsibility on the student to actively pursue their goals. We cannot always control the low engagement on the part of some students, as many instructors know. However, sharing how students have commented on the activity in the past, and providing examples of past student’s excellent work can really resonate with students. Many students also comment favorably on this activity, and the level of detail and planning they engage in – students note that they feel in control and most prepared for the course. Thus, some of the benefits we have seen include learning that many students express that they take this same approach to their other courses after sensing their confidence increase. We see comments that attest to the importance of this activity in our post-semester teaching evaluations and in the essays students write about goal setting for our sport psychology course.

We provide an assignment opportunity for students to extend their learning and demonstrate their comprehension of goal setting if they choose to pursue it. In that assignment, students write an essay about the process of creating a goal strategy, and how their goals connect to the guidance from the textbook and empirical evidence. We are then able to assess students on their content knowledge and application ability. When students identify the assignments and actions they should take to align with their goals, they can begin to see a path toward their goal grade. Being able to adapt and update their plans as the semester goes on boosts their sense of autonomy in the course, and their confidence to adhere to a plan. Many students adjust their goals after reviewing all their other courses. They note certain weeks in the term when they’ll need to study for an exam in another class for example. From an accessibility perspective, the basic worksheet can be printed off and

completed in writing in class, or online with a word processing application. The activity can also be completed as part of an online course – and in our experiences, we have taught this sport psychology course where the assignment emanated from in both synchronous and asynchronous online course modalities, as well as in-person.

The major point we hope instructors take from this approach is intentionality - explicitly guiding students how to write effective goal strategies for their class can provide the scaffolding students need beyond simply reviewing the syllabus and assignment guides. If we really want students to benefit from the practice of goal setting in our classes, then we should provide guidance and direction to help them set goals and make effective goal strategies. The more frequently students are reminded of their goals and to check in on their goal statements and progress, the more likely they are to engage in this practice and take ownership over making progress toward their goals. This is especially important in applied kinesiology courses when we share about the practice of goal setting in behavior change theories and models that will guide their future work with patients and clients.

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■ RESOURCE

Basic Prompts for Activity Worksheet

My FINAL OUTCOME goal for this class is:

UNIT 1 Performance goal:

Unit 1 Process goal #1:

Unit 1 Process goal #2:

UNIT 2 Performance goal:

Unit 2 Process goal #1:

Unit 2 Process goal #2:

UNIT 3 Performance goal:

Unit 3 Process goal #1:

Unit 3 Process goal #2:

Unit 1		Unit 2		Unit 3	
<i>Assignments</i>	<i>Points</i>	<i>Assignments</i>	<i>Points</i>	<i>Assignments</i>	<i>Points</i>
Total		Total		Total	