

Goals, Motivation, and Performance

Three music educators are discussing their students:

TEACHER A

My students always want to compete for first chair; and when they challenge and fail, they give up and quit trying.

TEACHER B

And my students only want to go to contest to get the rating and the prestige. I can't seem to get them to see contest as a learning experience.

TEACHER C

All I've heard today is how the orchestra wants to beat Edgewood at the orchestra competition this weekend.

TEACHER A

I wonder what we can do to get our students to realize the need to work hard for themselves, to set a goal and challenge themselves to reach it for their own musical growth, not to look better than everyone else. I don't want to destroy the idea of teamwork they have developed, but it seems that being number one is more important than personal achievement.

These music teachers are concerned about what motivates their students—what energizes their behavior. The teachers are concerned about the goals their students are setting for themselves and what they, as music instructors, can do to encourage intrinsic motivation and musical development. Motivating students to do their best and to reach their highest potential is important to all music teachers, whether they teach individual students in the studio or direct large performing groups. Fortunately, recent psychological research in motivation has resulted in several goal-orientation theories that have important implications for improving learning and instruction, especially for musicians.

GOAL THEORY

Goal theory proposes two general goal orientations students can adopt: a *task-focused* orientation with an intrinsic focus on learning and improving; and an *ability-focused* orientation with an extrinsic focus on getting good grades or rewards, doing better than others, or receiving public recognition.¹ Task-focused versus ability-focused goal orientation is similar to the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; however, goal theory deals with cognitive processes that are the same within individuals but that can vary depending on the context, which makes goal theory specially applicable to classroom and studio situations.

Students who adopt task-focused goals are interested in developing new skills, trying to accomplish something challenging, and gaining knowledge or understanding. These students are more likely to see a strong link between their effort and the outcome (“If I try hard, I can do this”) which, in turn, will help them work harder and ultimately do better.² Such a mastery goal seeks to increase competence.

Students who adopt ability-focused goals are concerned about how their ability will be publicly judged by others. These students seem to attribute their success or failure to their level of ability. (“If I have to practice more than others to learn my music, I must not be as good as they are.”) This type of goal leads them either to strive to be the best³ or to avoid effort all together in order to protect their ability and self-worth.⁴ An ability-focused goal requires a positive evaluation of competence.

GOAL THEORY AND MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

By its very nature, musical performance invites the development of ability-focused goals. Students are encouraged to strive for the best performance, which is often publicly recognized. Some students see themselves as having more or less musical talent than others, leading them to attribute their success or failure to their ability rather than how hard they work. Students who believe their success depends on their level of ability or talent are more likely to give up rather than work hard when they encounter a

challenge. Competitions, contests, and auditions can promote social comparisons and encourage ability attributions.

Nevertheless, many of the competitive aspects of musical performance cannot, and should not, be eliminated. The aim then becomes how to balance the ability-focused orientation inherent in performance with a task-focused orientation to increase motivation and encourage perseverance.

Carol Ames, in her article "Classrooms: Goals, Structures, and Student Motivation," suggests that the goal orientation stressed in the classroom or studio influences the goal structure adopted by the students.⁵ So how can teachers create a task-focused environment within performance groups or competitions that will promote students' musical growth and still maintain quality performance levels? Teachers create task-focused goal environments by the ways in which they select and deliver *tasks*, by whom and what they give *recognition* to, by the evaluation strategies they emphasize, and by how they exercise authority and encourage autonomy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PERFORMANCE STUDENTS

Focus on meaningful tasks that emphasize musical literacy and promote skill and technical development. If the performance group is the only musical experience available to students, teachers should develop musical skills for all students regardless of individual ability and structure rehearsal environments to encourage task-focused goals. Classroom and studio teachers alike can help focus attention on tasks rather than ability through effective lesson or rehearsal techniques and through strategy acquisition.

Rehearsals or lessons that include a balance of varied musical activities and intensity levels appear to improve students' attention to task.⁶ To accomplish this:

- select a diverse and varied repertoire that challenges students' musical growth but does not frustrate or discourage them;
- maintain fast-paced rehearsals or lessons that keep students actively engaged;
- build technical skills by beginning with concrete examples and progressing with advanced skills and abstract applications as each student is ready.
- explain and demonstrate the elements of proficient playing.⁷

In addition to traditional music reading skills, independence and competence can be fostered by helping students develop a repertoire of musical skill-improvement strategies by demonstrating how a particular strategy can be effectively applied.⁸ Music teachers' admonitions to keep trying and work hard frequently do not result in improved knowledge and skills because the strategies needed for success are not clear to students.⁹ When a musical or technical problem arises in a rehearsal or lesson, the teacher needs to model effective strategies by thinking aloud the processes required to correct the problem. This think-aloud procedure makes the process

more apparent to students and aids in their own strategy development. For example, when intonation problems occur, isolate the possible causes (imprecise rhythm, fingerings, shifting, bowing, or concentration), suggest strategies for treatment, and apply technical skills to correct the problem.

Instruction that emphasizes meaningful musical literacy tasks, technical-skill development, and strategy practice is effective for enhancing a task-focused orientation. These strategies, however, will be inadequate if the classroom or studio orientation remains competitive and ability dominated.

Give recognition for effort and developing skills rather than for aptitude or prior musical accomplishments. Students reflect all levels of musical ability, and each student needs to be nurtured and developed. Emphasizing ability by such means as public auditions and testing for chairs and positions chosen by competition may reinforce the notion that some have greater musical ability than others and undermines the motivation of struggling students. When competitive structures are used, balance them by using systems for recognizing individual effort and improvement, and by stressing that musical ability and skills can be continuously improved through instruction and practice.¹⁰

When music reading and skill development are emphasized, a foundation is created for students to set individual goals for their own improvement and for students and teachers to monitor progress toward those goals. Success is greater when students feel the instructor helps them acquire individual objectives for improvement and when they can work on personal as well as group goals.¹¹ To help achieve success, teachers need to model for students how to set goals that are specific, short term, and attainable with a reasonable amount of effort; have students keep a weekly goal sheet or journal; regularly evaluate their progress to help them trace their own musical growth; and reinforce the idea that ability can be developed. Success at recognizing progress, however, requires that students gain the ability to evaluate their own efforts toward both individual and group goals.

Make evaluations private rather than public, encourage self-evaluation skills, and provide opportunities for improvement. Evaluation procedures have important implications for student motivation. An ability-focused environment that emphasizes grades, public

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evaluation, and social comparison leads students to become more focused on their ability in comparison to others rather than on working with others to achieve group goals. This danger to motivation is reduced, however, if evaluations are conducted privately, are based on individual effort and progress, and are accompanied by an opportunity to improve.¹² Task-focused goals can be maintained in competitive situations by focusing on self as a group—doing our best, learning what we can do to improve, and doing better than we did last time.

If developing individual goals is to have an impact on motivation, students must also learn how to self-evaluate their progress toward those goals. Having students assess their own progress gives them confidence in their increasing competence, strengthens self-efficacy, and keeps students working productively.

If opportunities for improvement are offered and evaluation is tied to progress and feedback on quality, mistakes can be framed as opportunities for learning and errors can be treated as a way to learn and improve.

When students develop the ability to self-evaluate their own progress and the progress of a group, they can use these skills to increase their own decision-making opportunities within the group.

Create environments that allow for developing student autonomy and responsibility. Involving students in authentic decision making can promote autonomy and responsibility. Many performing groups already have outstanding student leadership programs that utilize section leaders and student advisory boards. The challenge, however, is to provide opportunities for all students to develop leadership and responsibility. Students' evaluation skills are enhanced when students are allowed to evaluate the rehearsal, determine strengths and weaknesses, and suggest strategies for improvement. Student involvement in decision making encourages a cooperative attitude of working together toward common goals.

A successful way to allow for choice and develop responsibility is to encourage student participation in small group ensembles, not for competitive purposes, but to promote individual musical growth and group decision making. Ensembles choose their own music, select their own goals, and establish their own criteria to evaluate progress. Students in ensembles must deal with musical aspects of performance, which are often determined and controlled by the director. As students struggle with issues of technique, dynamics, blend, balance, intonation, and expression, they will truly think like musicians and expand their musical literacy.

If task-focused goals are stressed, what results might be anticipated?

- Students will expend effort to fulfill group commitments and achieve group goals rather than to compete against each other.
- Peers will be seen as sources of information and as co-participants rather than as a threat to one's self-esteem.
- Feelings of belonging and social responsibility will add impetus for greater effort.
- The focus will be on effort and learning, and the intrinsic interest will be high.
- Students will develop musical skills, critical thinking, and decision-making skills that will benefit them in all areas of their lives.

When the three teachers at the beginning of this article incorporate task-focused goals into their programs, their conversations are likely to sound very different:

SAMPLE JOURNAL ACTIVITY TO HELP STUDENTS CREATE TASK-FOCUSED GOALS

Today, I improved on:

I still need to work on:

My goal(s) for this week (or next rehearsal):

The obstacles I need to overcome to achieve my goal(s):

My plan for achieving my goal (time, practice technique, specific skill, people who can help me, etc.):

How I will know when I have achieved my goal:

TEACHER A Since I eliminated the competition for chairs and rotated positions, my kids are working harder. They don't give up when things get difficult, and they're willing to help each other out rather than just compete against each other.

TEACHER B My students told me that the rating at contest wasn't as important to them as knowing they had worked hard at some challenging music. They just want to do their best.

TEACHER C My students are excited about the marching band competition tomorrow. They've been working really hard to improve the program, and they keep coming up with ways to make it better.

TEACHER A I really feel as if we're a team, all working toward the same goal. That's a great feeling! \emptyset

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