Learning a Lot vs. Looking Good: A Source of Anxiety for Students

Anastasia S. Hagen, *The University of Texas*

Many teachers have observed that some of their best students also appear to be the students with the greatest amount of anxiety towards school. Teachers have often asked themselves, "Why is this bright, capable student feeling so anxious about what they will be asked to do in my course?" This article is an attempt to provide some insight into this situation with respect to the way students set academic goals.

Carol Dweck, a motivation researcher, has suggested that there are two different kinds of goals that students may have in academic settings: learning goals and performance goals. A learning goal is one in which the student is primarily interested in learning the material. To put it another way, these students seem to be interested in learning for the sake of learning. They tend to persist at a task, even if they are not immediately very good at it. They are also not likely to become discouraged and stop at the first sign of having trouble. Instead, they continue to work at a task with the goal of trying to learn from it. If they start having problems, students with learning goals try to understand what they have learned to improve their performance. Another important characteristic of students with learning goals is that they usually have a more positive attitude toward learning and believe that if they just keep at it, they eventually will master the material.

Students with performance goals, on the other hand, are more often trying to achieve some preconceived standard. They are primarily interested either in proving that they are good at something, or if they do not feel that they are good at something, trying to avoid being evaluated on what they see as their low ability in that particular area. In other words, what is most important to students with performance goals is that they perform well at all costs. If they fear that they will not perform well, they are likely to try to avoid working at the task all together. If they experience difficulty with a particular task, they tend to grow discouraged and give up quickly. Students with performance goals also frequently have a more negative attitude toward academic tasks that appear threatening to them. At least part of this negative attitude is reflected in a higher level of anxiety, especially when students doubt their ability to perform well at a particular task. It appears then that students with performance goals are more interested in "making the grade" than in learning what they are expected to learn.

Why students pick one type of goal The reason why students select either learning goals or performance goals appears to be related to the way they look at intelligence. Carol Dweck and her associates have identified two different ways that students see their own intelligence. For example, some students believe that their ability in a particular area is fixed and that there is very little they can do to change that ability. They believe that they are just naturally better in some academic areas than others, and that this ability will not change. The problem with this view of intelligence, which is called the entity view, is that students who hold this view believe that if they have to work hard to accomplish a task, they must not be very good at that task. Therefore, because the focus of this view of intelligence is on ability, students who hold the entity view tend to work hard at tasks only when they know they are already good at them. If they believe that they are not very good at the task, they often try to avoid the task. If they cannot avoid the task, they are likely to have more anxiety toward performing the task, and will often give up quickly at the first sign of trouble. The entity view of intelligence is related to performance goals because students with performance goals are mainly interested in proving that they are

good at something, or trying to avoid letting it be known that they are not good at something.

In contrast to the entity view of intelligence, the incremental view of intelligence is based on the belief that a person's intelligence increases as they continue to learn new things. While the emphasis of the entity view was on ability, the primary emphasis of the incremental view is on the effort required to learn something new. The advantage of this view of intelligence is that students who hold this view believe that putting in the effort to learn something will pay off in the end because their ability will have increased as a result of having to learn something new. The incremental view of intelligence is related to learning goals because students with learning goals are more likely to work at challenging tasks with the belief that with the right amount of effort they will be able to master the material.

Table 1 summarizes the relationship between learning and performance goals and the incremental and entity views of intelligence.

Theory of Intelligence	Primary Emphasis	Type of Goal	Current Ability	Pattern of Behavior
Entity Incremental	Ability Effort	Performance Goal Learning Goal	*If high* *If low* *If high or low*	Performs well Low anxiety Performs poorly High anxiety Performs well Low anxiety

Table 1: Learning vs Performance Goals
(Adapted from Dweck, 1986)

Note that an interesting pattern exists for students with performance goals, one that seems to be based entirely on how they see their current ability. If they believe that they are good at a particular task, they act much like the students with learning goals. But this is true only until they begin having trouble at a task, at which time they

begin to question whether they really have high ability for the task. It is at this point that they may begin acting more like the students with the performance goals and low confidence. The reason for this appears to be that these students believe their ability is fixed, such that when they start having trouble, it is easy for them to reach the conclusion that maybe they were not as good at the task as they thought they were. This can bring lowered confidence in their ability, and with that increased anxiety in the learning situation.

Implications for the classroom There are a variety of things that can be done to help students with performance goals feel less anxious about school, or at least less anxious about the courses you teach. The first suggestion is to provide clear behavioral objectives at the beginning of the course. If students with performance goals know from the beginning what will be expected of them, it could help them plan and implement strategies that will help them meet their goals with less anxiety than they might feel if they are not sure what they will be required to do.

Another suggestion to help students feel secure in their learning environment is to provide students with the opportunity to practice the material they will be tested on, but it is important that these practice exercises not be graded. These exercises would allow you to provide feedback to students before they have to take the exam, and because the exercise would not be graded, it may encourage students to try things (learning goals) that they may not be willing to try if the exercise was graded.

But perhaps the most obvious area in which anxiety plays a role is in testing. Students with performance goals and low confidence in their ability are particularly prone to test anxiety because they know that they must perform well on the test in order to earn a good grade in the course. And because performing well is most important to these students, they will feel very anxious when they are unsure if they are "good enough." While some kind of testing or evaluation is a necessary part of every course, it would be helpful if testing could be made less anxiety-producing for students. One way might be to use some type of mastery-based testing in which the student has more than one opportunity to master the material. But while this method may be helpful for anxious students, there are also many

disadvantages, the most significant of which is the increased time required from teacher to write, administer, and grade multiple tests for each student.

Another possibility is to give several tests spaced out over the course of the semester or quarter, each of which is worth a small percentage (perhaps 20%) of the total course points. Students with performance goals are frequently highly anxious when there are only one or two tests that determine their entire grade in the course.

The suggestions outlined above are things that many teachers already routinely do in their classes. There is much more that still needs to be done to understand why some students are more anxious than others in academic settings, but hopefully this article has helped to shed some light on this very difficult question.

References

Dweck, C. S. (1986). Motivational processes affecting learning. *American Psychologist*, 41, 1040-1048.

Dweck, C. S., & Elliott, E. S. (1983). Achievement motivation. In P. H. Mussen (Gen. Ed.) & E. M. Hetherington (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology* : Vol. IV . Socialization , personality , and social development (pp. 643-691). New York: Wiley.

Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95, 256-273.