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Personal Goals: An Exercise in Student Self-Assessment

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T^{his} summer I am reading Linda Nilson's book *Creating Self-Regulated Learners: Strategies to Strengthen Students' Self-Awareness and Learning Skills*, which



offers instructors a wealth of assignments and activities to help students grow their self-regulation and metacognitive abilities. Teaching students how to learn well on their own and to evaluate that learning is a



goal I have been pursuing for the past few years, and I am convinced that occasional, brief self-assessment exercises can help college students perform better as well as understand the learning process.

I teach Spanish, and over the years I've noticed that as language students move to higher levels of the curriculum and higher levels of proficiency, they are able to identify the content (grammar, vocabulary) and skills (narration, speculation, speaking on abstract topics) that are most challenging to master. But despite their increasing language proficiency, they are still novices when it comes to self-regulated learning. They lack the broad array of study strategies and self-assessment practices required to demonstrate learning in the areas of greatest challenge.

In recent years I have begun to ask students in my upper-division Spanish courses to formulate personal goals at the start of the term. Nilson argues that goal-setting characterizes self-regulated learners and is one of the first things such students do when given a new task (17-18). Since my advanced students have studied Spanish for several years and have a stronger sense of their strengths and weaknesses as language learners, I ask them to shape a significant portion of the coursework for the term, usually 15-20%, in the form of personal goals. They first write two or three personal goals for the semester, using a list of sample goals as a guide. Next, they identify their methods of pursuing these goals, making detailed statements about the resources they will use and the practice work they will do during the term.

Once students see the distinction between effort and learning, they begin to look for and incorporate evidence of learning in their reflection essays.

Each student creates a Google Doc with his or her goals and methods, to which I respond with comments and required revisions. Twice during the term students write a short reflection essay (three or four paragraphs) in which they must evaluate progress on their personal goals and include specific evidence from their work to demonstrate their learning. Students submit the reflection essays electronically on the same Google Doc where they formulated their personal goals, and I use the comment feature to post feedback in the margins. The following example contains a portion of one student's first reflection essay with my comments in the margin:

spoken in Spanish with the students there. I also made a Spanish playlist of songs on my iPod that I listen to when I go for runs, and as I fall asleep. As I listen to the songs, I try and think about what message the song is trying to give off. Specifically I have listened to the song Fotografia and as I have listened to it more, I have realized it is about heartbreak, and that the guy is missing someone, therefore can only see her in photos.

In the next few weeks, I hope to Skype my Chilean friends, watch a movie in Spanish, and continue to Facebook chat and listen to Spanish songs. I am learning to speak with more fluidity, and am getting better at forming verb structure and sentence structure without as much delay. I am also getting better at comprehension of Spanish. It takes less effort to understand what people are saying as I practice more and more.



The reflection essays are the essential ingredient in making this a meaningful exercise in self-assessment.

Most advanced-level students recognize where they struggle in learning Spanish and are able to articulate concrete goals; however, the results of the first reflection essay reveal a gap between what students want to accomplish and how they demonstrate achievement. As I give feedback on their first reflection essay, I almost always indicate the need for more specific examples that indicate progress toward a personal goal. Sometimes students underestimate the time required to do independent work toward goals, while others fail to locate appropriate resources. Most often, though, students confuse the act of doing work toward personal goals with actual evidence of progress, and that is why I love this particular form of self-assessment: it opens students' eyes to the difference between demonstrated effort and demonstrated learning.

Once students see the distinction between effort and learning, they begin to look for and incorporate evidence of learning in their reflection essays. Depending upon their stated goals, they might include examples of a more expansive vocabulary, more sophisticated knowledge of a Spanish-speaking culture, greater facility in comprehending and commenting on a complex reading, or more elaborate description and narration during conversation. Seeing what constitutes a real demonstration of learning also helps them reformulate goals, when necessary, or make better choices about resources and work methods in pursuing their goals. In their second reflection essays I usually find more substantive evidence of progress, which tells me the students are understanding better the relationship among goals, practice, and learning.

When I think about the goals of advanced disciplinary courses and the most effective kinds of assessment, I am more and more persuaded that self-assessment exercises like personal goals contribute to stronger student learning. Raising my students' levels of awareness about how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning doesn't require time-consuming evaluations loosely connected to course objectives, nor does it involve radically redesigning course content. Self-assessment exercises can help students learn to learn more effectively, moving them toward stronger performance in particular courses as well as higher levels of learning proficiency.

Reference: Nilson, L., & Zimmerman, B.J. (2013). *Creating Self-Regulated Learners: Strategies to Strengthen Students' Self-Awareness and Learning Skills*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

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