

Meeting Warm up

Goal Writing with “Beautiful Questions”

Crafting More Meaningful Professional Learning Goals

Learning Goals:

- Provoke professional conversation
- Generate new ideas/ways of thinking
- Develop more effective and meaningful goals

Agenda:

- Learner’s mindset warm-up
- A new way of goal-writing
- Write and workshop your goals for 2021-2022

What does an educator with a Growth mindset look like?

- *What kinds of things do they say?*
- *What kinds of things do they do?*
- *How do they act in faculty meetings and when working with colleagues?*

Capture your thoughts here:

Folio is a leadership collaborative for educators. We help our members drive change by making professional growth a strategic priority.

Why Teachers Need to Become Students

In the opening line of his poem, “You Shall Above All Things,” e. e. cummings advises the reader that, “you shall above all things be glad and young.” What great advice! And how easy it was when I was 22 years old and in my first year of teaching after college. As my career has developed, though, and as I’ve stepped into increasingly demanding administrative roles, I have realized just how challenging it is to *stay* glad and young, and just how deliberate I have to be in order to continue to adhere to this advice.

It was this “glad and young” mindset that prevailed when I responded with an enthusiastic “yes!” to an unusual request from our school’s orchestra director. She wanted me to play a toy instrument—a ratchet—with our intermediate strings ensemble in their winter performance. “This won’t take too much time and won’t be too hard,” she said, hoping I’d agree. “You’ll be joined by four other teachers and administrators, as well as my husband, so you won’t be alone up there,” she added. It was this last bit that made me a little nervous. Her husband is, after all, an accomplished professional musician. I had no idea what I’d signed up for.

Fast forward eight weeks and there I was, wearing a full tuxedo, seated on the stage of our chapel, surrounded by seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students, thinking, “I should have practiced more. I’m not ready for this. I’m not even a musician, what am I doing here?”

Despite these very strong feelings of nervousness and self-doubt, the concert went reasonably well. And while I made a few mistakes, I suspect they weren’t immediately evident to anyone other than me and the conductor. It was a fun adventure, one that I was glad to have had, and one that I hope to have again. What surprised me, though, is just how often I found myself returning to the whole experience. In the weeks and months following that winter concert, I revisited the process of rehearsal and performance time and time again, and with each visit I saw new lessons that I could draw from it. What I discovered is just how much I can learn about teaching, about schools, and mostly about learning from my short time spent with that intermediate orchestra.

Looking back, I can distill my learning down to three major elements that have remained with me in the months since our performance.

Step Away from Expertise

I am not a musician (a fact that my family will quickly confirm), and so this “gig” was a major step outside of my comfort zone. The students around me took their work seriously, and my lack of musical ability was quickly apparent to everyone. I had to work harder than I ever expected just to keep up with the conversation that was taking place about the music—never mind the performance of it—a struggle which proved quite humbling.

It quickly dawned on me that what I had done was to return myself to being a novice at something. Which got me thinking: As teachers, administrators, or school leaders, how often are we novices anymore? How often do we allow ourselves the insecurity that comes with being bad at something—or at least not being good at something? The longer we teach, the further and further we move from that state of uncertainty that accompanies learning something for the first time. This is not to say that we don’t encounter challenges, but rather that we rarely step back into a position of being completely and wholly new at something. Despite this, we ask our students to learn new things all of the time. In many cases (such as my physics class), we are asking students to start from scratch in a particular area or discipline.

When I sat down to rehearse that first time with the orchestra, I was struck by the intensity of the experience of trying something new, knowing that I’d have to perform at some point in the future. Sitting where my students sit gave me a much needed booster shot of empathy for the student experience. It was also a concrete and effective reminder that learning often starts from a place of not knowing and that we as teachers need to value this. We ought to celebrate the not-knowing as much as we do the knowing. We need to create learning experiences that honor the starting point as a way to launch the learning process, and we need to acknowledge to

our students that we do, in fact, expect them to begin as novices. Sharing in that experience and building the resultant empathy can help with that acknowledgement.

Be Mindful of Feedback

In light of my lack of musical expertise, it was apparent to our conductor early on that I'd need a lot of support. She was patient with me, but also good at providing clear and effective feedback. In our professional lives, it is rare that we receive specific and direct feedback that is tied to a particular performance task. While we may get annual reviews or summaries of class evaluations, feedback that is tied to a specific task and that is designed to immediately improve performance is the exception rather than the rule. Despite this fact, though, we are asked to give our students performance-based feedback on an almost daily basis. While I know that our teachers do this very well overall, it was incredibly instructive to my own practice to receive this kind of feedback.

The feedback I heard was direct, specific and clear, and immediate. Not merely praise or criticism, everything I was told followed a well-defined pattern: observation first, then suggested action. Every instance was based on direct observation (not speculation) and then provided me with guidance for next steps. For example, "I noticed that you entered right on the mark, try to replicate that next time." But it wasn't always positive either: "I hear that you played your part a bit late, watch me more closely, and I'll signal you when to enter." In fact, some of the feedback was frankly hard to hear because it was a concrete—and in this case public—reminder of something that I wasn't doing well. But because it was delivered in a caring tone and in a way that I knew wasn't personal, I was able to use it to improve my performance.

Playing with the orchestra reminded me not only of what good, effective feedback looks like, it also helped me remember what it feels like to *receive* it. We know that getting appropriate and constructive feedback is critical to student learning, but how often do we think about how our feedback is received? We need to be mindful of not only what we say, but how we say it, and to attend to how we construct the environment in which that feedback is presented.

Listen and Collaborate

Struggling through my performance with the orchestra would have been far more difficult (and far less fun) if I were asked to do it alone. I was grateful for the fact that throughout the whole experience, I was surrounded by a great group of people, of varying degrees of expertise, who created, along with me, a powerful ensemble. What a mirror this is for our daily lives in schools! Each section of each class that we teach represents its own ensemble, and we need to teach our students to recognize (and exploit) that resource for what it is.

In the orchestra we would fail spectacularly anytime we forgot to listen closely to our colleagues, even while focusing on playing our own notes. This practice of simultaneously listening and contributing (all in appropriate balance) is an essential skill, not only for our students, but for all of us in independent schools. In the classroom, a peer group can provide the motivation to challenge oneself, a context for new ideas, a sounding board for a burgeoning argument, and moral support for continued growth. Learning is, after all, an ensemble performance, and children often learn much better when the learning is done collaboratively.

But this lesson extends beyond the formal walls of our classrooms as well. As teachers and administrators in schools, we would do well to remember the value of listening and contributing in equal measure. Our schools are notoriously full of very busy people, and despite our best efforts to reach out to colleagues to connect and discuss recent work, new courses, or new opportunities to collaborate, it is hard to carve out the time for meaningful listening and partnership to occur in our schools. But we must. If we expect our students to listen and learn in collaborative and diverse environments, we must model it for them. Our colleagues bring enormous talent and skill to their classrooms each day, and in each school there exists a wealth of experience, care, and passion for

teaching. Just as I needed to recognize and rely on the expertise of those around me in the orchestra, we must ask our students and teachers to do the same.

Upon reflection, I've realized that there is a common element to each of these lessons: They were more available to me than they might have otherwise been because I stepped back into the position of being a learner. As educators, we know that our own continual learning is critical to our effectiveness. How can we instruct students on how best to learn, after all, if we've forgotten what learning is, what it feels like, or what challenges and joys it brings? In fact, many schools—ours included—pride themselves on creating lifelong learners. Prior to this experience with our intermediate orchestra, though, I would have argued that I *was* a lifelong learner. I thought I had that part of the job down, and it certainly didn't feel to me as though I had forgotten what being in the student seat felt like. But then I had to perform a piece of music. I was asked to sit where my students sit, and it was only then that I realized just how much I had to learn...

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<https://www.nais.org/magazine/independent-school/summer-2017/i-d-rather-learn/>