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Setting Goals to Improve Study Skills in a Blended Learning Course

ABSTRACT

This article explores the challenges of fostering personal, self-regulatory skills in higher education. Study skills, such as learning how to learn, time management, motivation, and social competencies, should be systematically addressed to enhance students' academic success. The presented course design incorporates a learner-centered teaching model and goal setting within a blended learning framework. The assessment of higher-order learning objectives tied to subjective, personal development poses a significant challenge. A participatory goal-setting approach, informed by goal-setting theory and research on implementation intentions and habit formation, is introduced. This method empowers students to set, pursue, and evaluate their goals, aligning with self-determination theory and fostering the experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This approach is designed to facilitate active student engagement and foster lasting behavioral change. The article discusses the psychological theories behind motivation, performance and long-term behavioral change, the rationale for the course structure, and experiences from offering the course over four semesters, including changes made and plans for future development.

Key words: study skills – self-regulation – goal setting – blended learning

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit den Herausforderungen der Förderung von Selbstregulation von Studierenden im Hochschulkontext. Study Skills wie Lernen, Zeitmanagement, Motivation und soziale Kompetenzen sollten systematisch verbessert werden, um Studienerfolg und Gesundheit der Studierenden zu fördern. Das vorgestellte Kursdesign weicht als Blended Learning Kurs mit einem lernendenzentrierten Lehrmodell und partizipatorischer Zielsetzung als Prüfungsleistung deutlich von üblichen universitären Fachkursen ab. Die Prüfung und Bewertung von subjektiver, persönlicher Entwicklung im Bereich der Selbstregulation stellt eine große Herausforderung dar. Es wird ein partizipativer Zielsetzungsansatz eingeführt, der auf Zielsetzungstheorie und der Forschung über Umsetzungsabsichten und Gewohnheiten basiert. Diese Methode befähigt die Studierenden, ihre Ziele zu setzen, zu verfolgen und zu bewerten, was der Selbstbestimmungstheorie folgend Autonomie, Kompetenz und soziale Eingebundenheit der Studierenden fördern sollte. Dieser Ansatz ist darauf ausgerichtet, Studierende zu aktivieren und dauerhafte Verhaltensänderungen zu fördern. Der Artikel stellt die psychologischen Theorien dar, die Motivation, Leistung und dauerhafte Verhaltensänderungen beschreiben. Daraus ergibt sich die Wahl der präsentierten innovativen Kursstruktur und Prüfungsform. Es werden die Erfahrungen aus der Durchführung dieses Kurses in vier Semestern vorgestellt und die durchgeführten Änderungen und zukünftigen Entwicklungen diskutiert.

Schlagwörter: Study Skills – Selbstregulation – Zielsetzung – Blended Learning

Introduction

The Department of Teaching and Learning at the heiSKILLS Competence and Language Centre at Heidelberg University provides the university with new inspirations from didactic research and practice. This includes offering courses and workshops with tailored content to both lecturers and students. In some of our courses open to students from all disciplines, we aim to improve students' achievement and well-being by focusing on study skills such as time management, social competencies, and learning how to learn. This aim raises the inevitable question: can the development of personal, self-regulatory skills be taught (successfully) in a university course? Moreover, can these skills be effectively taught in a course that is not specific to any discipline? Which didactic approach is suitable when we are not dealing with the typical content of university courses, but with highly personal and challenging topics? Which teaching-learning activities and in particular, which form of assessment lends itself to these atypical learning objectives directed toward the development of self-regulation?

To tackle these challenges, I have devised and tested an approach based on a shift to learner-centered teaching and goal-setting theory. A participatory goal-setting approach was integrated into a blended learning course that includes synchronous and asynchronous online learning and in-person workshops. This article first describes the course content and the associated didactic challenges, before it subsumes the reasoning behind the course concept and the theoretical and empirical background of the participatory goal-setting approach. It then presents the course structure and didactic approach in more detail. Based on the experience from four semesters, each with 45 participants (15 students in three focus groups), I conclude that students' knowledge, self-reflection, and the sense that they can change, and make this change last, improved noticeably. Thus, this concept provides a valuable route to learning study skills.

What Are Study Skills in Higher Education?

Imagine Noah, a first-year undergraduate student in Physics. Their student life involves attending multiple lectures and seminars, completing tasks, both individually and in groups, to hand in during the semester, and preparing for final exams. In addition, Noah works a student job, applies for summer internships, plays basketball, and attends to their personal life. At university, students such as Noah learn about their subjects and perform increasingly challenging tasks. Moreover, they face some typical challenges. For example, they:

— learn and sustain professional and personal skills
— structure when and how to complete their tasks
— develop own arguments and solutions and express them in written and spoken form
— sustain physical and mental well-being
— navigate working with instructors and peers.

This is true for Noah, as it is true for students of languages, medicine, history, or any other discipline. This observation leads us to the concept of study skills: certain competencies essential for higher education transcend particular subjects and fields of study. The course presented in this article addresses the following core study skills:

— *Learning*: With a deeper understanding of how people generally learn, retrieve, and retain knowledge, studying can become more effective and enjoyable. Mastery of various learning techniques, exam preparation, and test-taking strategies helps students adapt to the requirements of different lectures and seminars. Actively designing their study environment and reflecting on appropriate times and durations for studying supports sustainable learning.

— *Time management*: Students must keep track of a long list of short-, medium- and long-term tasks, which need to be prioritized and scheduled. Studying already provides a challenging time management task and also competes with work, hobbies, personal relationships, household chores, and rest. Successful time management, in particular achieving a healthy work-life balance, is a key factor in long-term achievement and well-being.

— *Overcoming procrastination*: Procrastination is a problem that almost every student experiences in a mild form, but it can become severe enough to jeopardize academic success and mental health. It can lead to impaired performance, severe stress, and unhealthy working patterns. To overcome procrastination, improvements in learning and time management need to be enriched with the development of stress management and coping skills and reflection of emotional and motivational factors.

— *Motivation*: Building motivation to start, continue, and finish their tasks is necessary for any student. Following the basic needs proposed in self-determination theory (DECI & RYAN 2000), keeping track of academic goal pursuit and progress (competence), setting own goals and taking responsibility for their studies (autonomy), and establishing a supportive connection with instructors and peers (relatedness) contribute to a student's overall motivation and achievement.

— *Social Competencies*: As working with others is not only necessary but can also be highly motivating, and group study may improve learning outcomes, the majority of disciplines in higher education require students to collaborate with peers and instructors to complete their studies. Improving interpersonal skills such as communication and conflict resolution makes these challenges more manageable for students and lets them enjoy the advantages of supportive collaboration in academic settings.

Other important study skills addressed by heiSKILLS, which are not addressed in the presented course, include academic writing and presenting as well as critical thinking.

This list should be understood as open-ended – advances in society, the practices of academia and teaching, different fields of study, and technology (e.g., the recent advent of AI tools in higher education) may lead to important additions. Even though the specific content discussed in the core areas may change, they still offer an enduring set of helpful focus points for self-reflection and improvement. In the presented course, I have clustered the students into three groups that typically present similar challenges and foci. The three focus groups are *motivation and social competencies* (typically focused on basic self-reflection), *learning and time management* (typically focused on optimization of operational skills), and *overcoming procrastination* (problem-centered, with a focus on stress management and negative emotions).

Putting it in a broader perspective, study skills courses are aimed at improving self-regulation, goal orientation, and motivation in students to lead to greater academic success (e.g., HENNING & MANALO 2012). Apart from its central role in successful university education, improved self-regulation has been shown to influence further career success (e.g., PORATH & BATEMAN 2006), interpersonal relationships (e.g., RIGHETTI et al. 2022), and general life satisfaction (e.g., FERACO et al. 2022). Offering supportive structures that facilitate the development of these skills follows the Humboldtian ideal of humanistic education, as it empowers students to take on the challenges of work, society, and personal life as responsible and free adults.

The Challenge: Can Study Skills Be Taught in a University Course?

Study skills rely on behavior that is prototypical for highest-order learning objectives, for instance following the SOLO taxonomy by Biggs & Collis (1982). They necessitate students to reflect, evaluate, and create tailored solutions to their personal challenges. Basic knowledge can be instrumental, and highly valuable, in guiding student's self-reflection and development of operational skills. However, to achieve the focal aim of this course, students have to go far beyond the reproduction of knowledge and replication of pre-defined strategies. For instance, we define the following objectives for the area of learning (for objectives of the remaining modules, please refer to the addendum):

> *After this module, students can …*
> — describe the concepts of "self-directed learning" and "deep learning"
> — identify the requirements for learning in their subject
> — reflect on their learning experiences, strengths, and weaknesses
> — select and apply learning techniques
> — actively shape their learning process

Note that instead of directing these activities toward a discipline of study and its intellectual domain, students direct them toward themselves and their behavior. From this follow the

particular challenges with privacy, emotions, and the difficulty of assessment discussed in more detail below.

More abstractly, the overarching aim of the presented course is to empower students to *determine their status quo* (is-state), know *what is required* of them and *what they could and want to achieve* (ought-state), and *develop solutions* to bridge the gap between is and ought. Furthermore, they have to learn how to *implement and sustain* their solutions and put all of these steps into practice. Even further, as affordances change across contexts and time, these skills include active and independent *adaptation to change*. To have any lasting effect, students must be active creators of their own, tailored solutions, over and over again, instead of remaining passive recipients of "99 tricks how to learn" (see, e.g., FERACO et al. 2022).

Shifting from Teaching Knowledge to Facilitating Self-Reflection and Behavioral Change

Within this conceptualization of study skills, there is no "one size fits all" solution on how to learn, manage time, work with others, and find motivation and grit. The approach I presented in this article is grounded in the constructivist notion that not the instructor, but the students are experts regarding their own life and academic success. This approach takes us from "the teacher has to tailor the skills for the student" to "students tailor skills to their subjects and idiosyncratic challenges themselves". Students need to be empowered to take responsibility for their learning journey. The structure and content of the course (with what is known as the shift from teaching to learning; BARR & TAGG, 1995) mirror the active and self-reflective approach that students need to succeed in academic self-regulation in the future.

The specific operational skills needed can differ immensely between contexts and disciplines of study. Nevertheless, the shift of responsibility to the students also makes it possible and valuable to teach students from different disciplines in one group. The comparison with peers from different disciplines supports students in understanding what study skills are through discovering similarities and differences, getting to know operational forms that are less common in their current environment but may be helpful in the future, and transcending deeply ingrained preconceptions of how to study traded within their disciplines (which might not be the best option for them).

To keep it short, study skills, if we understand them as skills of self-reflection and behavioral change, cannot be taught in the traditional sense, with the teacher as the active expert and students passively receiving a pre-made solution. Nevertheless, they can be learned. In this article, I present an attempt to provide a stimulating and safe environment for proactive self-regulation and development within the structure of a university course open to students from all disciplines.

More Challenges: What Are the Implications for Assessment?

With these courses, I am part of the regular university structures. Students participate in my courses as part of their degree programs and receive ECTS for completion of the course. This structure requires me to assess whether students do the coursework and make progress. This presents a challenge for this particular seminar, as the learning objectives are directed toward the self, toward the honest reflection of the is- and ought-state, and attempting measures to tackle discrepancies between them. To achieve this task, students need to open up in a supportive environment in which they are accepted as they are (the "it is ok not to be ok" attitude discussed further below), and have to honestly and actively work on themselves and accept imperfection, shortcomings, and failures. This clashes with the spirit of competitive assessment and assigning grades to the efforts of highly diverse students.

Fortunately, the fact that the seminars are electives (students actively choose to participate in a seminar of this nature) and that I could forego marking for a mere pass/fail assessment alleviates some of these obstacles. The following puts a focus on the assessment approach I chose to align with my learning objectives.

The highly tailored and personal nature of the higher-order learning objectives within the course poses a challenge, even for mere pass/fail assessments. So, should I just not assess these objectives? Should I be content with assessing whether students acquired some basic knowledge and completed self-reflection tasks, which are collected in a portfolio format? While constructing the course and striving for constructive alignment (BIGGS 1996) among the learning objectives, the planned activities for the students, and my assessment, I realized that there was no assessment for the higher-order learning objectives that I deemed most important. As learning follows assessment, such a plan would make it less likely that my students reach real-life, sustainable behavioral change. Even more, I would have little other than my subjective impression to evaluate achievement.

Thus, the course sorely needed a form of assessment for the higher-order learning objectives. As elaborated on above, many typical examination strategies in university courses would not align with these objectives, and might even backfire and impair openness and willingness to work on real change. Finally, I resolved to test the idea of a participatory goal-setting approach.

A Solution: The Participatory Goal-Setting Approach

After the necessary scaffolding is done, when students have already achieved lower-level learning objectives (e.g., they are already able to describe the concepts of "self-directed learning" and "deep learning") and had some insights on the is- and ought-state, I open the topic of how to set a goal. This prepares them for the next, crucial task, which is to set a goal for themselves within their focus area (e.g., learning). For example, a student may discover card filing as a study strategy and set the goal, "In the next four weeks, I want to

use card filing twice a week to learn the content of my lecture on macroeconomics". At the end of the semester, we meet again and they can report in detail about their experiences with the method, the obstacles they encountered, and a revised plan for how they could profit from the technique in the future.

Formulating the goal is an important step in initiating change, as I discuss in more detail below, and reporting back after the implementation period offers accountability as well as reward for their effort. Both the goals and students' feedback on goal attainment allow me to assess participation (setting and reporting on goals is necessary to pass the course) and evaluate progress on the learning objectives. Most importantly, students set their own goals – they actively shape the trajectory of the course and take responsibility for setting goals they want to follow. This directly aligns with the learning objective of, for instance, "actively shaping their learning process". Even if they end up not following through, this offers a valuable learning opportunity. The course supports students in setting effective goals – they do so within an in-person workshop, independently but in the presence of the instructor and their peers, using worksheets that guide them through the process of choosing and refining their goals. It also holds them accountable for reflecting on their effort within another in-person meeting at the end of the course.

In addition, the participatory goal-setting approach is designed to motivate students. This activity may improve motivation via three factors, seen from the angle of self-determination theory (DECI & RYAN 2000). Setting goals makes progress and achievement measurable for students (sense of competence), it involves peers and the instructor of the course in the implementation of change (sense of relatedness), and students choose their own goals, methods, and timelines to achieve them (sense of autonomy).

Some Background on Goal-Setting Theory and Beyond

To understand the high expectations I hold for this approach, it might be helpful to recapitulate some of the psychological theories and empirical findings on motivation, performance, and lasting behavioral change.

Goal Setting

As perhaps the most established psychological theory within this area, goal-setting theory (LOCKE & LATHAM 1990) has been widely applied across various fields, including organizational management, education, and sports psychology. After decades of research, it can be concluded that setting goals has a strongly positive effect on performance and motivation (e.g., LATHAM & LOCKE 2007).

However, this field of research also revealed that not all goals are created equal. The key factors that this theory includes to predict the success of a goal are specificity, difficulty, and feedback mechanisms. To increase motivation and achievement, this theory posits that specific, challenging goals lead to higher levels of performance and motivation compared to vague or easy goals. Setting clear and specific goals (specificity) is supposed to create a cognitive roadmap that directs an individual's attention and effort toward the desired outcome. Goals that are challenging but attainable (difficulty) should stimulate individuals to exert the necessary effort and commitment, which leads to improved performance. This aligns with the principle of self-determination theory, which highlights the importance of a sense of autonomy and competence in motivating behavior (DECI & RYAN 2000). Moreover, according to this theory, regular feedback and progress monitoring are integral to the effectiveness of goal-setting. Feedback enables individuals to track their performance, make necessary adjustments, and stay motivated (Latham & Locke, 2007). This is consistent with control theory, which emphasizes the importance of feedback loops in self-regulation (CARVER & SCHEIER, 1982).

These principles have been combined into an easily teachable guideline on how to formulate an effective goal, the "SMART" goal (e.g., O'NEILL, 2000). In my courses, students are prompted to check whether their goals are:

— *Specific* (specificity)
— *Measurable* (feedback)
— *Attractive* (difficulty)
— *Realistic* (difficulty)
— *Time-bound* (feedback).

If necessary, they reformulate their goals until they reach a SMART statement. For instance, "I want to try out card filing" may become "In the next four weeks, I want to use card filing twice a week to learn the content of my lecture on macroeconomics". Here, it also becomes clear that students can only formulate these goals themselves, in a participatory approach – only they have the information necessary to make the goal specific, challenging but attainable, and to provide feedback on it.

Implementation Intentions

After setting motivating goals, participants face the difficult task of implementing new and sometimes radically different behavior. They can usually foresee that they might struggle with this and that they will face a multitude of barriers within their everyday life. To support them in overcoming these barriers, I prompt them to anticipate any challenges to goal achievement they might encounter, and formulate an if-then-statement with the content "If <barrier> arises, then I do <solution>".

If-then statements, also known as implementation intentions, have been the subject of extensive research in psychology and have demonstrated significant effects on academic achievement (GOLLWITZER & SHEERAN 2006), health behavior changes (ADRIAANSE et al. 2011), and goal pursuit in work-related settings (HARKIN et al. 2016). These statements involve the explicit specification of an action plan, typically in the format: "If situation X arises, then I will perform behavior Y" (GOLLWITZER 1999). They offer a practical strategy for increasing self-control and adherence to intentions in real-world contexts, as they bridge the intention-behavior gap by promoting goal attainment, habit formation, and self-regulation. By forming these specific plans, individuals establish a mental link between a situational cue and the intended response, which helps automatize the behavior (WEBB & SHEERAN 2006). This can make it easier to follow goals and resist distractions.

Habits

The next challenge that presents itself after a successful behavioral change is how to make change last. Even if my students made a great study plan in one week, I have achieved little with my course if they then fall into their old habits and never make a study plan again. Therefore, I directly address this challenge in my course and aim to equip students with the necessary knowledge and preparation to make change last.

I decided to use a model of habit formation grounded in psychology and neuroscience introduced in "Atomic Habits" by Clear (2018) for the course, as it is highly practical and easy to understand without psychological background knowledge. The model highlights the role of small, incremental changes in behavior that make up more meaningful habits and is based on four key components: cue, craving, response, and reward. From these steps, it derives the significance of making key parts of desired new behavior obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying, respectively. By doing so, individuals are thought to create a reinforcing loop that drives the formation of positive new habits. This model aligns with principles of behavior change and habit formation from established theories such as the habit loop (DUHIGG 2012) and the transtheoretical model (PROCHASKA & DICLEMENTE 1983).

Clear's model (2018) also provides food for thought on how to break existing, negative habits (can we make them invisible, unattractive, hard to perform, or less satisfying?). I perceive it as crucial to discuss how students can deal with habits they already have and that may present a barrier to their goals. For the topics of the presented course, I do not encounter a blank slate; students already arrive with many helpful pre-existing skills and experiences but also with deeply ingrained bad habits and misconceptions about how to study successfully, manage their time, be motivated, collaborate with others, and overcome procrastination. Also, some bad habits not related to their studies may compete with study goals in general – as a frequent example from my courses, excessive smartphone use comes to mind. Students readily engage in the discussion on how to curb bad habits, while they often express surprise that they

had not learned about the habit cycle, goal-setting, and implementation intentions earlier. After all, these techniques are straightforward and highly applicable to various life domains.

In this section, I have outlined the reasoning and foundation behind the participatory goal-setting approach. The following describes how I implemented this procedure within a course structure specifically designed to scaffold the process of goal setting, implementation, and lasting change to improve study skills.

A Blended Learning Course Using the Heidelberg Toolbox for Study Skills

The resulting blended learning course combines a self-study phase with online materials, and in-person workshops followed by an implementation phase and a final send-off session. All 45 students attended the first meeting and then divided into three focus groups: motivation and social competencies (typically focused on basic self-reflection), learning and time management (typically focused on optimization of operational skills), and overcoming procrastination (problem-centered, with a focus on stress management and negative emotions).
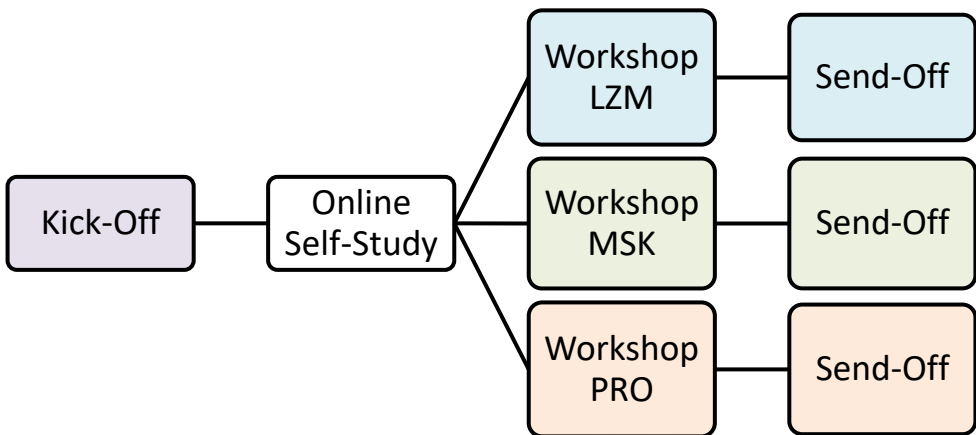

Figure 1

Structure of the study skills courses (second semester), with an online kick-off session for all groups combined, a first self-study phase with online materials, and workshops and send-off sessions divided into three focus groups: learning and time management (LZM), motivation and social competencies (MSK) and overcoming procrastination.

Online Kick-Off

In the first two-hour meeting, my main aim is to inform students about the course content. They choose a focus group when they register but in the kick-off session, they have the opportunity to choose another group or opt out of the seminar altogether. I stress this point to strengthen motivation and commitment to the seminar (via a sense of autonomy through informed choice) and prepare their role as active learners. In this session, students learn that this seminar is about them and their active participation is what makes it successful. This first activity also evens the way to form cohesive, supportive groups of peers, which is an additional objective of the kick-off session. In the second part of the session, students separate into the focus groups and work together on a learning contract. This allows them to get to know each other and ideally leaves them with a sense of belonging to a group when they enter the self-study phase. Frequently, the students have used this opportunity to set up contact opportunities, such as messenger groups. This session is held online, as this provides very high flexibility to invite a larger audience (students on the waiting list are also invited) and manage registrations to focus groups quickly and effectively. In the early semesters teaching this course, I discovered that students often became overwhelmed when they entered their focus groups before individually thinking about the learning contract. I have now split the learning contract activity into an individual phase, where students submit answers to an online form, and a group phase to exchange introductions and share these answers to form a written learning contract for the group.

Self-Study Phase

After the kick-off session, a self-guided study phase of four weeks begins. The objectives of this phase are to acquire some basic knowledge of the given topics and intensify self-observation and reflection. To this aim, I instruct students to complete materials from the Heidelberg toolbox for study skills. These online materials consist of various modules aimed at one core study skill each and are freely available online. Each module contains a series of short videos, combined with tasks in a portfolio format that students can fill out digitally or in a print-out version. The videos provide information, while the portfolio requires students to apply their knowledge, observe their behavior, and reflect on it. Using these materials in a prolonged self-study phase opens the opportunity for students to observe themselves critically within their actual, day-to-day student life at semester time. With these materials, there should be at least four weeks between the kick-off session and the workshops.

Workshops

During the self-study phase, students engage with the course topics and frequently discover new questions, gaps in their knowledge, and which areas they would like to further develop. The following six-hour in-person workshops center around addressing student-specific questions, deepening knowledge, and exchanging views with their peers. In response to student feedback from the first semesters, I now split the workshops into two three-hour sessions, scheduled one to two weeks apart so students will not become overwhelmed with new input and ideas.

In each workshop session, the group and I gather open questions and goals, then create an agenda for the day that addresses the topics most important to the group. I flexibly choose teaching-learning activities to fit these topics and match the aims and dynamics of the group. The objective of these workshops is to guide the students in developing specific solutions tailored to their aims. With the participatory goal-setting approach, students are then motivated to implement these solution attempts. I instruct them on how to set SMART goals and a worksheet guides them through setting a goal for themselves within each topic (e.g., a goal for learning and another goal for time management within one focus group).

Implementation Phase

Now, the implementation phase for the goals set by the students begins. To enable meaningful goal-setting, there should be at least a month between setting the goal and the last meeting, where students reflect on their successes and failures. I have found it particularly helpful when this phase included the busiest time at the end of the semester because many goals targeted this period, where students feel the most pressure to study effectively, manage their time, stay motivated, and collaborate effectively. Simultaneously, this often means that the course adds workload to a time that is already busy.

Send-Off

Thus, the send-off session is kept to two hours and revolves around the evaluation of goal attainment. To reach this objective, I have chosen a combination of a private, reflective teaching-learning activity with a more social and open plenary part. First, students receive the goal they wrote down in the workshop (e.g., their goal for the area of learning). Then, they each write a 5-minute paper dealing with what they achieved toward this goal along with barriers and supporting factors they encountered. Afterward, they pair up to discuss what they want to share, before ending with an open sharing round with the whole group.

This activity combines two well-known techniques: "5-minute-paper" and "think-pair-share". After completing it (for both goals in the LZM and MSK focus groups), students are prompted to set a new goal for the future and provide feedback on the seminar through anonymous online evaluations and a feedback round.

This session has undergone many changes since the first round, where I initially envisioned it as a counterpart to the online kick-off session. In the first semester, all focus groups met again online to evaluate their goals together and exchange views from the different foci. It quickly became clear that this design was flawed, as it compelled participants to evaluate their goals in front of many peers they had never met before. While individual reflections on goals were of high quality, group discussion became impersonal and stifled. In the second semester, I changed this session to an in-person meeting with each focus group separately. This led to much deeper discussions and a more satisfying closure of the course.

Assessment

As detailed above, students submitted their portfolios from the self-study phase, attended classes, and set their own goals to pass the class. This form of assessment not only matches the learning objectives of the course but also represents the shift of responsibility for learning to the students and provides a valuable learning opportunity in taking ownership of their studies. The portfolio and formulation of the goals function as a formative assessment for me, while the evaluation of goal attainment in the send-off session is a form of summative assessment for participants and me. Participants receive their certificates at the send-off session. If students miss class, written self-reflection tasks allow them to catch up and complete the course.

Taking the Course Fully Online

After four semesters, this three-phase blended learning course, beginning and ending with a two-hour session, has proven both successful and adaptable to changing demands on timing and format. I once tested an online-only version of this course structure. While student satisfaction remained high, I noticed a less open and vulnerable exchange between participants and a higher tendency for students to "fly under the radar" and not contribute to any of the activities, across a range of different individual-, pair-, and group-level activities aimed at improving participation. Subjectively, the online group produced lower-quality goals and self-reflections than any of the in-person groups – active participation and personal connection are central to the success of this concept. Based on this (limited) experience, I see an online format as an option if the context demands it, while I would recommend at least the workshops to be in-person.

Even More Challenges: Trust, Privacy, and Mental Health

As noted above, improving study skills and self-regulation often involves confrontation with extremely private and challenging personal truths, evoking strong emotions such as shame and guilt in students. These difficult truths and emotions can create barriers to recognizing the status quo, a necessary prerequisite to change. Therefore, acceptance and a non-judgmental approach, what I term the "it is ok not to be ok" approach, are crucial for meaningful progress. Establishing a nurturing and supportive teaching environment became central for me, a fact that is already reflected in the assessment and course structure.

The presented course has a very beneficial particularity: students come from diverse disciplines and years of study, and neither the instructor nor peers are part of the usual social context where students may feel pressured to maintain a certain image. With no grading involved, students pass and receive recognition for their effort, even when they acknowledge failures and imperfections.

Nevertheless, the nature of the topics covered necessitates a delicate approach to facilitate openness and trust within the group. The learning contract in the kick-off session plays a pivotal role in outlining shared expectations and fostering a sense of commitment to a safe and respectful learning environment. Further, the in-person workshops provide valuable contact time to build rapport and provide support.

The environment that students need to open up and feel safe to confront challenging topics varies between them. Balancing opportunities for group interaction and moments of quiet self-reflection ensures that the learning space accommodates the diverse needs and comfort levels of participants. I try to achieve this by utilizing various teaching-learning activities, such as 5-minute papers, sharing in dyads and small groups, and occasionally opening up discussions to the entire plenum.

Can I even require students to share deeply personal and challenging topics with me and the group? I feel responsible for clear instructions and meticulous monitoring of group dynamics to strike a balance between encouraging participants to engage with the material at a personal level and respecting their boundaries. The alternation between high-privacy activities and more open discussions ensures that participants have the autonomy to decide the level of disclosure that aligns with their comfort and readiness. In the end, students are required to regulate how much they open up, while I try to motivate them and respect the boundaries students set. I would not require any student to share personal details but I will encourage them to be open and honest when the atmosphere within the group allows it.

In addition, this challenge of confronting issues in personal self-regulation has another side. It becomes paramount to distinguish what is offered in this course from psychotherapy or self-help groups. While the course engages deeply with personal matters and problems that may touch directly on mental health issues or result from them, it is essential to maintain clear boundaries and uphold ethical considerations. It proved to be helpful to have resources and information at hand (e.g., counseling offered by the university, when and how to access

psychotherapy) so that students with the desire to seek further help are directed to appropriate contexts.

In conclusion, facilitating this course means creating an environment that fosters trust, respects individual boundaries, and acknowledges the challenges inherent in addressing deeply personal and emotional subjects. This ensures that participants can achieve the learning objectives I set for them and that they are supported in their learning journey while upholding the necessary ethical standards associated with such sensitive content.

Experience and Feedback

Across four semesters, 90 students completed the study skills course, earned a certificate, and evaluated the course. I have collected student feedback in structured, anonymous online evaluation forms. On a scale from 1 (very good) to 5 (very bad), the mean overall evaluations in the focus groups ranged between 1.1 and 1.4, with a global mean across all evaluations in two semesters of 1.33. Drawing on prior experiences with comparable evaluations, I perceive this as highly positive feedback. This also aligns with my subjective impression of the course, the feedback rounds I invited in the send-off session, and the open comments. For instance, one of the students wrote: "[The course] helped immensely and the dynamic of the group was very pleasant. Everyone contributed something and you realized that you are not alone if you lose motivation. Everyone has days like that, but there are always ways to get out of them. Thanks for that!"

I can only agree with this assessment. I have personally experienced the atmosphere in class as extremely pleasant – consistently, for all eleven groups that completed the course so far. The overwhelming majority of students were active, trusting, and supportive of their peers. In the online kick-off session, most groups already self-organized into chat groups to support each other during the self-study phase and continued to keep in touch. This is noteworthy, as these students started as strangers and came from widely different backgrounds.

The most notable aspect of the workshops was that students felt safe and trusted each other. Occasional tears and heavy silence, excited chatter, and frequent laughter sometimes were a challenge to manage, but to me also indicate how intensely students touched upon personal topics and connected with each other. Sometimes, it was almost impossible to end a dyad or group work, as students delved into in-depth discussions. As in the quote above, they were often surprised to find out that they were not alone in the challenges they faced, and that others provided completely new perspectives. I also remember many insightful questions in the plenum that took us far beyond the content of the self-study materials.

The majority of goals that my participants set were specific, ambitious (with a tendency of being overly so), and fit the brief – at the send-off, we could evaluate if students reached their goals, what supported them, and the challenges they encountered. I see it as a great success that students openly admitted when they had forgotten about their goal or struggled to make progress, as this sparked productive self-reflective remarks and discussions with peers.

Naturally, it was a great joy to celebrate progress with the students who achieved their goals. I rarely experienced moments in class as rewarding as a student who proudly announced, beaming, that they had overcome a challenge they had struggled with for a long time. The group, which had learned a lot about the struggle of their peer across the semester, and I could share in this moment of joy and pride. This, to me, is a significant advantage of the participatory goal-setting approach presented here.

However, not every student profitted from the course. Some students dropped out during the self-study phase, while others turned in portfolios and goals that suggested that they tried to get by with minimal effort. There is a lot of freedom in the proposed assessment methods and course structure, and this leads to very unequal time invested by students – from much more than planned to very little. Also, quite naturally, some students struggled to organize the coursework and stick to assignments and course times. In general, I approach these issues as an opportunity to give feedback to the student and thus provide a learning opportunity about study behavior. One anecdote that illustrates this principle is the student who asked me to remind future students again and again that they had to start working on the self-study materials or set a deadline much earlier than the workshop, as they had only started self-study on the day before the workshop and could not finish the tasks. Needless to say, they participated in the "overcoming procrastination" group and were able to smile at themselves after a gentle reminder that this might be exactly the issue they were learning to self-regulate.

Similarly, some students wished for a much more structured course format, particularly during in-person sessions, and even met up with parts of their groups to fill this gap. My impression is that many of these requests reflect a high motivation to work on study skills and a great connection with the group, while these students also still struggle to work independently on study materials and take responsibility and ownership of phases they have to structure themselves. It was not always easy to provide students with the support they needed, but also challenge them to act independently and leave their comfort zone.

In summary, while I made changes to many details of the course, my experience with this concept was highly positive. Many students shared the impression that positive changes happened for them and that the course was a key catalyst for these changes. Whether they can make this change last, however, is beyond the scope of what I can assess with this project.

Which Insights Could Be Valuable for Planning Other Courses?

From the outset, many core elements of this course proved successful and have been retained as originally planned. In particular, I can only recommend participatory goal-setting as a didactical tool in higher education teaching. For instance, students could set goals to learn in-depth content about a topic, work on individual or group projects, or make a contribution to a class activity such as a shared Wiki. In my opinion, the success of these parts

is mainly due to the reliance on didactical and psychological knowledge and careful constructive alignment of learning objectives, teaching-learning activities, and assessment. Nevertheless, I found it crucial to evaluate all parts of the seminar and repeatedly adjust my plans in response to feedback. Over time, I have come to the impression that while online teaching formats have their particular strengths, they fall short during the workshop part of this seminar. Some teaching-learning activities were a huge success in one group while failing in others, teaching me to plan very flexibly and work with a toolbox of activities I use to tailor sessions to groups. This helps students stay motivated and perceive the relevance of the content. If course content allows for this flexibility, I would always make use of it in the future.

Conclusion

Study skills, if we understand them as skills of self-reflection and behavioral change (self-regulation), cannot be taught in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, they can be learned. This article presented an attempt to provide a stimulating and safe environment to improve study skills within the structure of a university course open to students from all disciplines. To this aim, I developed a blended learning course that combined self-study materials from the Heidelberg toolbox with a participatory goal-setting approach. This course was successfully rolled out in four semesters, each with 45 participants (15 students in three focus groups). Even while encountering several challenges, my experience with this concept was overwhelmingly positive.

I have great admiration for the students who took up my offer with such openness and courage. In their successes and failures, I have seen enormous gains in knowledge, self-reflection, and the sense that they can change, and make this change last – that they can take their studies into their own hands. This, to me, is the core of improving study skills as a facilitator: empowering students to be owners of their own higher education experience.

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Supplementary Material

Learning Objectives

Time Management

At the end of the module, I can...
— Describe basic concepts and tools of time management
— Describe the relationship between work-life balance, operational time management, and motivation
— Reflect on my own time management, strengths and weaknesses
— Apply time management techniques

Motivation

At the end of the module, I can...
— Describe a model of motivation
— Reflect on my motivation during my studies
— Apply techniques to influence my motivation

Social Competencies

At the end of the module, I can...
— Reflect on how successful communication works
— Recognise and provide constructive feedback
— Reflect on and actively shape my collaboration with others during my studies

Overcoming Procrastination

At the end of the module, I can...
— Reflect on my own procrastination and its reasons
— Classify my procrastination behavior in the Rubicon model
— Develop my own motivating goal
— Draw up realistic work plans
— Develop strategies for dealing with disruptions