



Pursuing their own learning agenda: How mastery-oriented students jeopardize their class performance[☆]

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Abstract

This study explored why mastery-based achievement goals often are unrelated to class grades despite promoting deep learning strategies and high course interest. We hypothesized that mastery-oriented students jeopardize their exam performance by allowing their individual interests to dictate their study efforts such that they neglect boring topics in favor of preferred ones. General Psychology students ($N = 260$) reported their achievement goals, interest in the course material, and usage of various study strategies. Supporting the hypothesis, path analysis showed that mastery-oriented students allocated their study efforts disproportionately to the personally interesting material, and this in turn predicted low grades in the class. Performance-oriented students did not show this pattern. Theoretical implications and new research directions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Suppose you have two students in your Educational Psychology class, Gloria and Katie. Gloria, a future teacher, finds the material fascinating and is genuinely motivated

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to learn it. She often finds herself identifying personal examples or connecting course topics to concepts from other classes, simply out of intellectual curiosity. Katie, by contrast, is neither strongly interested nor disinterested in the material. She instead is motivated primarily by a desire to do better than her classmates, and is therefore keenly attuned to her class standing. Which student would perform better in the class? Though we might root for Gloria, whose motivation seems somehow more noble, the available research suggests that Katie would have better odds of performing well. In this paper, we review this research and then propose and test a new explanation for why students like Gloria might not earn the highest grades. We begin below with an overview of achievement goal theory, the theoretical framework guiding this research question.

Achievement goal theory posits that students often pursue one of two broad goals in a class: mastery goals or performance goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Nicholls, 1984). Both goals concern the pursuit of competence and the assessment of one's own skill level, but they do so in different ways. When pursuing a mastery goal, much like Gloria in the example above, students strive foremost to develop their ability and knowledge base in a content area. When pursuing a performance goal, like Katie in the example, students instead try to outperform peers. Consequently, mastery-oriented students evaluate their performance with self-referential standards, focusing on how much they feel they have "learned" or developed a skill, whereas performance-oriented students evaluate their performance with normative standards. Additionally, Elliot (e.g., Elliot & Church, 1997) has proposed that performance goals can be framed in either an approach manner (i.e., desire to outperform others) or an avoidant manner (i.e., desire to avoid doing worse than others).¹ Because the mastery goal and the two performance goals represent different ways of defining competence, theorists have posited that they should promote distinct thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in achievement situations.² In particular, it has traditionally been hypothesized that mastery goals are more beneficial, and certainly never less beneficial, than the two performance goals (Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001; Nicholls, 1984).

A large body of research has tested this general hypothesis in the classroom, most of it focusing on goal effects on achievement in the class (e.g., exam or course grades) and interest in the course material, as well as several other processes that may facilitate or hinder these two educational outcomes, such as anxiety, study strategies, and help-seeking behaviors. The research typically links performance-avoidance goals to maladaptive outcomes: for example, anxiety, poor study habits, help-avoidance, self-handicapping, and often poor grades and low interest as well (e.g., Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Skaalvik, 1997; Urdan, 2004; Urdan & Midgley, 2001; Wolters, 2004). By contrast, it links mastery goals and performance-approach goals to distinct benefits. For instance, students who pursue mastery goals tend to find the

¹ Theorists are beginning to explore mastery-avoidance goals (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2000), and the effects appear to be largely negative at this point. We did not assess them in this study because our interest concerns why the mastery-approach and performance-approach goals appear to yield distinct educational benefits.

² Mastery and performance goals were initially theorized as opposing motivational orientations, but we now know that the two are independent, making it possible to pursue both goals (e.g., Barron & Harackiewicz, 2001). Nevertheless, the goals appear to promote largely different outcomes, evidently in large part because of their opposing goal definitions. It is therefore customary for the sake of simplicity to describe them in comparison to one another, as in the current paper.

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