

On Goal-Oriented Education

By Drew Underwood – LEARN, or DIE

A brief comment on goals:

*Goals are good,
Goals are nice,
The means themselves just don't suffice.*

The goal of the introduction is to catch your attention. Every good writer knows this. One method (or means) of creating an effective introduction might be to write a nice poem. Poems are great, if you're into that sort of thing. But what happens if I focus my attention on making my introduction rhyme? Certainly, 'nice' and 'suffice' do rhyme, so I did complete that task. However, the original goal was to create a catchy introduction. If I had kept this in mind and focused my actions on that objective, perhaps I could have done so; however, by focusing my intentions on the means of getting to the goal, I have limited my scope, lowered my standards, and lost my path--I have, in short, failed to reach the desired outcome.

This is essentially what we are doing in today's world with regard to education. What is the goal of education? To educate the students. To give them knowledge. To do that, we thought, "Hey, here's an idea--let's give them problems they can practice on to get better at the material!" Indeed, it was a good idea, but not all of the students did the practice problems we provided. This upset us, so we then decided to change the 'can' into 'must,' as in, "Hey, here's an idea--let's give them problems they *must* practice on to get better at the material." We have now shifted our focus to the means we provided as an option for reaching the goal, and in doing so, we have forgotten what it is we are actually trying to do. Are we trying to educate our students--or are we trying to make them work?

The argument for homework today goes, "Students need to learn to do this work so that they will learn the material." But again, as LEARN, or DIE continues to point out, (a) we are still holding them accountable for not working to learn material if they don't learn it, (b) the goal of education is to teach the students, so as long as they learn the material, we have completed the actual goal and have no reason to punish students, and (c) every student learns differently; it makes no sense to claim that every student will learn equally from a single, standardized model.

Goal-Oriented Education means focusing on achieving the overall goal rather than worshipping a specific set of means. Worshipping the means will ultimately block our view of the course to take and hinder our ability to fulfill our objective. It doesn't work for introductions--you end up with dumb poems--and it doesn't work for education--you end up with dumb students.