NjP *Journal of International Business Education 19.*

Promo 1st Version

Improving International Business Practicum Education: Entrepreneurial Experiential Goal Setting, Weekly Goal Tracking, and Environmental Sustainability Focus

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Abstract. An alarm has been raised that university students are now more disengaged, disinterested, and dispassionate due to digital distractions. Goal setting and experiential practicum classes have each been argued to be a part of a solution. But existing results are mixed. We propose that combining masterly-focused student entrepreneurial experiential project goal setting with weekly goal-tracking reports results in a greater likelihood of student goal attainment. We also propose that this result is more likely when the project is related to environmental sustainability. We test these hypotheses using a practicum class in a business school at a four-year university located in the Pacific Isles that has students enrolled from many countries. Analysis indicates the tracking percentage significantly increases goal achievement probability. The results do not support gains due to SMART goal aspects of being measurable, attainable, and relevant. However, a focus on sustainability-related goals does have a statistically significant effect.

Keywords: environmental sustainability business education, mastery goal setting, goal tracking, student entrepreneurship, experiential learning, growth mindset, digital distraction, quality education.

1. Introduction

Educators are seeking methods to improve student environmental sustainability education at institutions of higher education (Fraser, Gupta & Krasny 2015), which is particularly of value for business students (Edwards *et al.* 2020),

especially in internationally acclaimed higher education institutions (Glassman & Opengart 2016; Nemetz 2004; Rondinelli 2004); this interest is consistent with the aims of JIBE (JIBE 2024). Not surprisingly, over the last several years, many business schools across countries have added practicum classes and/or degree capstone classes that permit experiential learning of environmental sustainability topics. While these experiential learning classes are intended to be more engaging, there is however simultaneous growing concern regarding digital distraction among students at universities making these experiential learning experiences less effective (e.g., Flanigan & Babchuk 2022). Digital distraction refers to the diversion of attention away from a primary task and towards smartphones, tables, laptops, and similar "digital" technologies. Common examples of digital distractions would include checking social media, texting, browsing websites and videos, and gaming. Digital distraction can also include attempts at work-related multitasking: checking emails and messaging systems/ chats, working on documents, slides, or spreadsheets, or reading/preparing for later meetings, classes, or projects instead of just focusing on the primary task. As stated by Liu (2022, p. 1201), "The extent of digital distraction among college students it found is alarming." Flanigan and Babchuk (2022, p. 352) observe that "instructors regularly encounter student digital distraction during class." Multiple reasons, such as "impulsiveness, Internet addiction, and habitual technology use" exist for students engaging in digital distraction (Chen, Nath, & Tang 2020, p. 1). Many other research studies call attention to this widespread, growing problem of digital distraction (e.g., Batch *et al.* 2021; Gingerich & Lineweaver 2014; Jamet *et al.* 2020; Parry & le Roux 2018; Ravizza *et al.* 2017; Wammes *et al.* 2019). Flanigan *et al.* (2023) note that while most instructors are aware of the problem, "many college level instructors are hesitant to address of-task device use in the classroom because they are worried that doing so will alienate students." Flanigan *et al.* (2023) outline how when instructors attempt to restrict student usage of mobile devices (digital distraction prevention) the students often perceive the restrictions as a threat to their need for autonomy. This should not be surprising, given that Gen Z is particularly, as a group, more interested in feeling empowered and having autonomy in their lives, including in their learning (Averbook 2023; Cooper & Frey 2021; Ernst & Young 2023; Kim *et al.* 2022; Peterson 2023; Pradhan *et al.* 2023; Schroth 2019). Autonomy is one of the five significant emotional factors of human motivation according to neuroscience research (Rock, 2008; Rock & Cox, 2012). And autonomy's importance has been shown to hold true in both workplace (Hansen *et al.* 2022) and educational (Tennakoon *et al.* 2023) settings. Thus, what is needed, perhaps, are interventions that preserve or even enhance a sense of student autonomy and empowerment.

We propose in this research that one autonomy improvement for business students could be the implementation in practicum, capstone, and other classes of student entrepreneurial experiential goal setting combined with weekly goal tracking reports across the semester. There is great interest in understanding the

role of experiential learning in business classes (Crosina *et al.* 2023; Glassman & Opengart 2016). We believe that when students in business classes (1) identify self-chosen experiential learning goals for (2) new business ideas/ventures of their choice, the students can gain greater sense of control, autonomy, self-awareness, self-regulation, resilience, and purpose, which translates into gaining greater personal responsibility for their own learning, becoming more aware of their own academic performance, and thus decreasing the problems associated with digital distraction noted in the introduction. However, we believe that stating goals alone are not enough; we posit that (3) required weekly tracking reports of progress toward the goal could result in metacognitive skills that help them better tackle the challenges associated with the set goal and with other goals and be able to better manage how much time and other resources are needed so waste of time and resources is minimized. And we believe the effects are stronger when (4) the students self-select goals relate to environmental sustainability over regular business metrics or personal growth goals. This last idea is very important given that "despite the importance of the strong sustainability paradigm to address or solve global sustainability challenges, the concept has not been widely incorporated into human actions and educational processes" (Quintero-Angel, Duque-Nivia, & Molina-Gómez 2023, p. 1).

This paper contributes examination of the research hypothesis that the combination of experiential, mastery-oriented goal setting and regularly occurring goal tracking within classes over a semester increases student engagement resulting in a greater likelihood of project goal attainment. We also hypothesize that likelihood of goal attainment due to goal setting and tracking is amplified even more when the project is related to sustainability topics. In the next sections, we first briefly review the concepts of goal orientation theory, outlining the distinction between goal setting and goal tracking activities. We then describe an experiment involving the combination of student experiential related goal setting and goal tracking for a semester long project in a business practicum course to improve student engagement. We interpret the results of binary regression analyses focused on the outcome of project goal attainment. The regression results do support the two proposed effects. Last, we outline several ways in which instructors can improve the sustainability (improving quality while conserving time/resources) of goal-tracking class exercises for *both* students and the instructors, as well as implications for future research and educational practice.

2. Literature

The systematic set of ideas that make up 'goal orientation theory' (Ames 1992a, 1992b; Dweck 1986; Maehr 1984; Nicholls 1984) are that, first, there are two main categories of goal orientations: (a) mastery goals and (b) performance goals.

Mastery goals are focused on learning and improvement in personal development and growth related to competence, skills, and understanding (e.g., Ames 1992a, 1992b; Dweck 1986). Performance goals, in contrast, are focused on achievement, success, and/or judgement relative to others (e.g., Dweck 1986; Nicholls 1984). While both goal orientations might seem beneficial at first glance, research finds that, commonly, individuals pursuing a mastery goal orientation often find success related to motivation, persistence, challenge-seeking and effective learning strategies. However, individuals pursuing a performance goal orientation often find vulnerability, less persistence, and poorer learning outcomes as failure is perceived as threatening. See, e.g., Ames (1992a), Dweck and Leggett (1988), Elliot (1999), Kaplan *et al.* (2002), Midgley (2002), Pintrich (2000), and Urdan (1997). Kaplan and Maehr (2007, p. 141) summarize that "In the last two decades, goal orientation theory has become an important perspective in the field of achievement motivation, and particularly in academic motivation." They go on to point out, though, that "However, as research in the theory has proliferated, the use of multiple methods to assess goal orientations seems to have contributed to theoretical vagueness, especially with regard to the origin, development, and stability of these orientations" (Kaplan & Maehr 2007, p. 141). For example, Senko (2019) and Senko and Dawson (2017) find that the prior research on performance goal orientation has inconsistently operationalized the performance goals; they argue that the effects are different for "competence demonstration element" vs. for "peer comparison element". We draw on goal orientation theory to establish that goal motivation is important in establishing/ setting goals.

Locke and Latham (1990, 2019) propose a "goal setting theory", which has a few differences from goal orientation theory. While goal orientation theory is focused more on the mastery vs. performance orientation of the person (often in an educational learning environment), goal setting theory is more applied, usually used in managerial practice, and focused more on whether or not the goals are achieved (and less on why they are pursued). The "SMART Goal" traces back to Doran (1981). SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. This approach is essential in goal setting theory because it provides a framework for setting effective goals based on the principles of the theory. By using the SMART criteria to set goals, individuals can ensure that their goals are aligned with the principles of the theory and are more likely to succeed in reaching those goals. Additionally, tracking progress toward these goals facilitates the provision of feedback, which is a key component of goal setting theory (Locke & Latham 2019). By receiving feedback, individuals can adjust their approach as needed and continue working toward the success of their goals. Written documentation is a common technique for goal feedback. Although this method has been recommended for enhancing the effectiveness of goal setting, there is limited empirical evidence to support this claim (Weinberg *et al.* 2019). Nevertheless, the principle of feedback in goal setting theory and the SMART

goal framework remains a powerful tool for improving performance and facilitating goal attainment. We introduce goal setting theory to argue that goal tracking and feedback is important for sustainability.

For example, goal setting normally focuses efforts on the highest value activities tied to the person's or organization's objectives, thus reducing wasted time and/or resources. Goal setting generally encourages identification of projects and processes in which quality improvements are most needed or most helpful. Goal setting can drive innovation of more efficient procedures and technologies. Regular, repeated goal tracking, in contrast, highlights areas of over or under utilization of resources. Goal tracking quantifies the accumulated impact happening thus far, which can enable targeted reduction strategies. Goal tracking results in more accurate demand planning or forecasting, which lowers waste of time or resources. Menzies (2012, p. 125) proposes that "experiential learning must utilise the whole learning wheel, from goal setting, to experimenting and observing, to reviewing, and finally action planning." We build on Menzies proposal in this research. To summarize, goal setting concentrates resources into purposeful objectives while goal tracking creates improved visibility so resources are adjusted in real time toward accomplishing the goal setting objectives without excess time or resource waste. Thus goal setting and goal tracking topics are very appropriate for sustainability.

2.1. Entrepreneurship Education and Experiential Learning in Higher Education

Entrepreneurship education has gained significant importance in higher education institutions worldwide. Modern society's dynamic and constantly evolving nature has necessitated universities and colleges to enhance entrepreneurship education efforts to supply students with the essential competencies required to thrive in this field (Lans & Wesselink 2014). Nevertheless, a narrow definition of success in entrepreneurship as starting and running a successful business overlooks the diverse range of skills and experiences that entrepreneurship education can impart to students in their everyday lives (De Carolis & Litzky 2019).

Teaching the pervasive entrepreneurial life requires more than theoretical knowledge to develop the mindset to succeed. Experiential learning has emerged to address this problem and furnishes a viable alternative to traditional classroom-based entrepreneurship education (Karia, Bathula, & Abbott 2015). This approach is comprehensive and flexible, allowing students to test their entrepreneurial hypotheses in the laboratory of real life. In entrepreneurship education, experiential learning can take various forms, such as business simulations, internships, cooperative education, or service learning projects. Such activities can provide students with opportunities to develop entrepreneurial skills, including, but not limited to, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, leadership, and communication (Schmitz 2021). Moreover, they can nurture the

development of an entrepreneurial mindset characterized by a willingness to take risks, resilience, persistence, and adaptability (Cooper *et al.* 2004). As some experts have noted (Austin & Rust, 2015), effectively integrating experiential learning into entrepreneurship education is challenging. A multifaceted and adaptable approach is needed, one that closely aligns the learning objectives, activities, and assessment methods with the principles of experiential learning. In regards to assessment methods for experiential learning, the learning style inventory (LSI) that focuses on Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation was one of the first models of experiential learning (e.g., Kolb 1984; Kolb 2007). Scholars have proposed that "Experiential learning activities facilitate the use of reflective learning strategies which in turn encourage active learning" (Chiang *et al.* 2021, p. 3). Additionally, many other models have been proposed since then; Coffield *et al.* (2004) review Kolb and a dozen other different experiential learning models. Coffield *et al.* (2004, p. 29) conclude that "Overall, the CSI [of Allison and Hayes] has the best evidence for reliability and validity of the 13 models studied" and they report that some of the earlier models have disputed problems with reliability, validity, and their learning cycle elements.

However, it requires more than the educational institution to take responsibility for this learning. It's also crucial to involve stakeholders from the wider entrepreneurship ecosystem, such as successful entrepreneurs, savvy investors, seasoned mentors, and experienced incubators. By doing so, students can access a wealth of practical insights, networking opportunities, valuable feedback, and one-on-one mentoring. This approach can help bridge the gap between theory and practice and give students a more holistic understanding of what it takes to succeed in entrepreneurship.

Hypothesis 1: The combination of experiential, mastery-oriented goal setting and regularly occurring goal tracking within classes over a semester increases student engagement resulting in a greater likelihood of project goal attainment.

2.2. Environmental Goals in Entrepreneurship

It has become increasingly evident that goal setting plays an important role in shaping not only the success of entrepreneurs but also in the larger implications of personal growth. By combining the insights of De Carolis and Litzky (2019) on the entrepreneurial nature of life with the ideas outlined in Lock & Latham (2019) and Doran (1981) on effective goal setting, along with Mirabella's (2014) research on the physiological impact of microscopic actions on the inherent nature of goal pursuit, we can gain a better understanding of the significance of goal setting in entrepreneurship and life. One of the fundamental aspects of entrepreneurship is setting goals and developing strategies to achieve those goals. As such, entrepreneurship courses at universities provide a rich environment for students to experience personal growth while learning how to set and achieve goals. In recent years, researchers have examined the role of entrepreneurship in