The A Level Mindset

Revised Edition

40 activities for transforming student commitment, motivation and productivity

Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin

Praise for *The A Level Mindset*

Oakes and Griffin have produced a remarkable resource that offers a significant guide to enhancing teaching and learning at A level, but with implications beyond Years 12 and 13. The resource is firstly a very practical guide to support the 'how' of effective learning as well as the 'what'. As such it provides a necessary antidote to an approach based on managing information and develops a coherent strategy to empower students' understanding and help them become confident self-managing and self-aware learners. The second important point about this resource is that it provides a model that will stimulate professional dialogue around such approaches in primary schools and Years 7 to 11. The materials will also serve as a very powerful preparation for studying in higher education and employment.

Oakes and Griffin are to be congratulated and thanked for a highly practical, relevant and supportive resource.

John West-Burnham, Honorary Professor of Educational Leadership, University of Worcester

Anyone who has ever worked with young people recognises that helping them achieve success is a complicated affair – and simply telling them to study harder rarely has the desired effect. What is special about this book is that Oakes and Griffin haven't tried to reinvent the wheel but have searched through the work of some inspirational characters whose work has implications for coaching young people. They have gathered an impressive array of gems and then packaged them into a structure which is immensely useful. Their VESPA skeleton is powerful and offers an exciting array of practical tasks that can be used to help young people. This is not a one-size-fits-all book – not every activity suits every child – the authors recognise that this is a 'pick and mix' approach to coaching. If I were still head of a school that taught A levels I would immediately order a copy for all staff teaching in that area – if it didn't teach A levels, I would probably still buy the books: some of these activities are real gems and suitable for young people of a wide age range, so much so I think I might try some myself (and it is a long time since anyone has called me young!).

Dave Harris, Business Director, Independent Thinking Limited, author and consultant

At a time when too many of us lament the way A level teaching sometimes feels like a bit of a conveyor belt, here's a book designed to give responsibility for learning back to students. It's an ingenious compilation of techniques to manage our learning in these times of information overload and endless distractions. The book is more than a set of tips; it's an empowering and optimistic practical approach which will help students to become more reflective learners and better at managing their studies. I learnt a great deal from *The A Level Mindset* and would see it as an essential part of any sixth form programme.

Geoff Barton, General Secretary, UK Association of School and College Leaders

The A Level Mindset is a book that is steeped in hard won wisdom from school leaders who have clearly grappled with supporting students at this critical stage of their education. It is a book full of practical insights and it provides an excellent framework for teachers and school leaders to help students develop their working habits. This book provides ample solutions to support students' organisation, goal setting, and much more, helping to complement our development of their subject knowledge. The VESPA framework that informs the book is well supported by interesting scholarship and there are lots of real gems of teaching strategies that can deployed in the classroom. The book is accessible, enjoyable and really got me thinking about my A level teaching.

Alex Quigley, teacher, Huntington School, author of *Teach Now! English*

This book is very obviously written by those who have had the experience (and pleasure) of working with sixth form students and the challenges that supporting them to achieve their potential brings.

   The mindset approach, although based on research and theory, feels very real in the strategies and suggestions put forward. The practical and easy-to-follow strategies will support both the sixth form pastoral team, those involved in motivating the sometimes demotivated, with strategies such as the dashboard activity and 20 questions, and also the A level teacher looking for ways to strengthen resilience through practices such as The Three R's of Habit.

   I look forward to trying these techniques both in the classroom and also in more personal one-to-one intervention sessions. I strongly believe that this book will support the drive in any sixth form to raise achievement and also help develop a positive ethos which all staff can contribute to. A really positive and motivational tool for all heads of sixth form.

Caroline Lee, Head of Sixth Form and Assistant Head Teacher, Brighouse Sixth Form College

The awareness of attitude, mindset and mental toughness has risen to the top of the agenda in the world of education, particularly regarding their importance for student attainment and well-being. They make a crucial difference. However, the challenge for teachers and pastoral staff is how to apply this effectively with their students.

   Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin have created a first class and very practical guide to the application of these ideas in the classroom. Combining their practical experience (they have done it in the classroom themselves) and a good understanding of the theory behind their approaches, this book is a treasure trove of tools and techniques, easily adopted by teachers who want to make a difference.

Doug Strycharczyk, Managing Director, AQR

A thoroughly enjoyable book; *The A Level Mindset* has successfully integrated research and practice into an excellent user guide. It will be a valuable resource for students, teachers, parents and carers. The tools and techniques described are both workable and relevant.

Professor Peter Clough, Chair of Applied Psychology, Manchester Metropolitan University

Contents

Introduction

When you enter a mindset, you enter a new world. In one world – the world of fixed traits – success is about proving you're smart or talented. Validating yourself. In the other – the world of changing qualities – it's about stretching yourself to learn something new. Developing yourself.   Dweck (2007), p. 14

Our story starts some years ago, in a basement office.

We were studying that summer's A level results – suffering the final stages of the journey all of us go through. It's the one that starts with sleepless nights and anxiety dreams in late July, escalates to full-blown catastrophisation by early August and ends with the anti-climax of results day which, instead of triumph or abject disaster, offers the usual mixed bag of successes and disappointments.

Picking over the grades and preparing our analysis for the head teacher that year, one fact stood out above all others. There didn't seem to be a direct link between success at the end of Year 11 and success at A level. Looking back, this sounds both a counterintuitive and, at the same time, an entirely logical observation. But at the time it seemed a significant revelation. Surely, we conjectured, those students who succeeded at the end of Year 11 continued this pathway of success and succeeded again at the end of Year 13.

Instead – and we're sure you will have experienced this – something else happened: some students made giant strides between 16 and 18, leaping up from pretty modest results in Year 11 to outstanding results in Year 13. Others went from great performance at 16 to modest grades at the end of their A level courses. There were external factors to be considered, of course, but even when we took out those young people who had fought through traumatic times, we still had vast numbers of students who seemed to hit ceilings and others who made sudden breakthroughs.

Introduction

Ceiling Students and Breakthrough Students

We began the following academic year with a plan. (By which we mean a bunch of scribbled notes and a spreadsheet. We didn't get precise until much later.)

That autumn term we began to study what it was about the 'ceiling students' that made them stop progressing, and what it was about the 'breakthrough students' that made them suddenly improve. We undertook a variety of research to determine these factors. First, we identified two sample groups: a breakthrough group of students who were exceeding their target grade in the first term – this lot were seriously doing the business and getting great grades; and a ceiling group who were significantly underperforming having made a really slow start. The students of both groups were then given questionnaires, observed during lessons, had their previous academic performance evaluated, took part in focus groups and had basic data analysed. We looked at their GCSE point scores, the school they had attended to take their GCSEs, the proportion of portfolio-based level 2 qualifications, grades achieved in what we thought might be key subjects (e.g. English, maths, science), punctuality and attendance.

Here's the first point that leapt out to us: after studying the data and completing a detailed content analysis, it became clear that there wasn't a link between GCSE performance and being a breakthrough student or, indeed, a ceiling student. *Past performance didn't seem to guarantee future performance.* One group wasn't full of high GCSE achievers with glittering trophy cabinets, the other with modest achievers. The ceiling group had its fair share of students who had done very well at GCSE. The breakthrough group was a mixed bag too. There were, in short, no specific cognitive weaknesses we could find that predetermined poor performance at A level. No issue with literacy or numeracy, for example; no pattern of poor performance in a particular subject.

This ran counter to what some of our teachers were telling us, and from the kind of explanations of student performance we had heard in staffrooms across seven combined institutions over the last few years. Teachers would often explain underperformance cognitively. For example, the student was 'weak'. The student 'didn't get it'. The student 'wasn't thinking like a scientist' (or geographer or sociologist – take your pick). All in all, a reading of the situation that amounted to a world view best summarised by one teacher who many years ago had told us, 'In my subject, you've either got it or you haven't.'

Analysing the ceiling and breakthrough groups, it was instead the qualitative data

we had collected that gave us a series of patterns – the information about students' habits, routines, attitudes and approaches to study. These seemed to be the factors which determined success. Paul Tough summarises it pretty neatly in the following observation: 'Economists refer to these as non-cognitive skills, psychologists call them personality traits, and the rest of us sometimes think of them as character' (Tough, 2013, p. 5).

At first, the specifics of character were hazy, at least to us. Detailed note taking seemed to be a factor, for example. Tidiness and organisation of learning resources seemed important too. Commitment to independent study was key, as was positivity, enthusiasm and having a goal. These all came through as characteristics and behaviours that breakthrough students had in spades and ceiling students didn't. All of this, remember, regardless of their previous performance.

To begin with we had very few ideas about what to do with this information. Because the qualitative stuff comprised observations about behaviours, it was difficult to quantify, group or categorise – and even harder to address. So we started searching for people who had discovered similar problems and worked out how to solve them.

It turned out there were plenty – and their work pointed in the same direction.

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

There had been a huge amount of fascinating research over the previous twenty years or so, but we hadn't spent an awful lot of time studying it. Any teacher or leader working long hours with limited opportunity to dig in to academic journals and papers can find it difficult to know where to begin.

If that's you, we've chosen three major contributors who both reassured and fascinated us when we first started reading. We've arranged them chronologically below. They each offer, in their own fields, a clear, persuasive and interesting place to start. It's worth outlining some of the key aspects of their theories as they underpin many different aspects of the A Level Mindset model and provided us with the evidence, confidence and motivation to develop our own intervention programme.

Clough et al. (2002)

Peter Clough and his team work only a few miles from us at Manchester Metropolitan University, so it's fitting that we should begin with him. Clough's research on mental toughness has been adapted primarily from the sporting world, but there is growing evidence to suggest that this model can be effectively applied to education (Clough and Strycharczyk, 2014). It's something we have

been lucky enough to discuss with him on a number of occasions in the recent past.

Clough makes a compelling case for mental toughness being at the heart of success and proposes a four factor model: challenge, commitment, confidence and control.

» Challenge describes an individual's view of any type of challenge. Do they see challenge as an opportunity for development or a threat?

» Commitment refers to stickability to a long-term goal.

» Confidence has two components: confidence in one's own abilities and interpersonal confidence.

» Control is also spilt into two components, life control and emotional control, and describes an individual's sense that they can regulate and influence the direction of their own life and govern their responses to intense emotion.

Clough argues that mental toughness is a malleable trait, and St Clair-Thompson et al. (2015) have shown that mentally tough students are more likely to achieve better grades and have better attendance and behaviours that demonstrate greater positivity.

In other words, it's the *study behaviours* that count. Of course, this struck a chord with us. Our own research from way back in those early days supported this view, and in the

intervening period it has gone on to support it over and again.

Dweck (2007)

Carol Dweck's name is regularly spoken of nowadays, so the chances are you will know something of her work. Back then, it was pretty new to us. If it is to you, here's the gist. Her research suggests that beliefs about ability and intelligence vary greatly, and that the beliefs adopted by a young person can have a significant impact on their achievement.

She argues that individuals hold a certain 'mindset' regarding their ability. At one end of the continuum are those who believe they have a 'fixed' mindset. These individuals suppose that their intelligence is fixed at a certain point and, as a result, avoid challenging situations because they fear failure. They withdraw effort during difficult tasks to protect their ego.

At the other end of the continuum are those with a 'growth' mindset. These individuals believe that intelligence is malleable and that if you work hard you can improve your level of ability. They put themselves in challenging situations and work their way through them, listening to feedback and acting on it. They view failure as an opportunity to grow and, as a result, behave in a very different way in a learning environment.

In other words, the two types of student operate differently, study differently and think differently. Dweck's findings supported those early studies we had conducted and began to fill in some of the thinking for us.

Duckworth et al. (2007)

The work of Angela Lee Duckworth has gained significant traction since her 2013 TED talk, 'The Key to Success? Grit'. The talk has now been viewed over six million times and has promoted some interesting discussions within schools. The US Department of Education defines grit as, 'perseverance to accomplish long-term or higher-order goals in the face of challenges and setbacks, engaging the student's psychological resources, such as their academic mindsets, effortful control, and strategies and tactics' (2013: vii).

Duckworth argues that this non-cognitive trait, grit, is key to success and achievement in a number of fields, and is a stronger predicator of success than intelligence. In other words, she, like countless others, had blazed a trail for us.

Theory Into Practice

We ended that first year convinced that it was behaviours, habits and attitudes to study that were the strongest determinant of student success. Pulling apart the following

year's results, we were using fresh eyes. Here were dedicated, motivated students with good study habits – and they were the ones with the really exciting outcomes. Here were others who, despite impressive performances in Year 11, had topped out – students who were demotivated, disorganised or too easily discouraged. The positive point was that all the research we had explored told us that these mindsets, habits and behaviours could be taught.

But we had a twofold problem:

1 Our studies had shown us that a very flexible, amorphous and shifting list of characteristics were linked with success: friendship groups, grit, positivity, organisation of notes, volume of exam papers completed under timed conditions, attitude. When we hit the books again and checked with the gurus, they also mentioned a range of different qualities, all described in different ways. The most often-cited ones seemed to be:

» Perseverance, resilience and grit.

» Confidence and optimism.

» Motivation, drive and ambition.

» Tolerance and respect.

» Honesty, integrity and dignity.

» Conscientiousness, curiosity and focus.

And with these lists came extensive research to show these traits have considerable links

to academic success; Snyder et al. (2012) and Weber and Ruch (2012) are good places to start if you're interested, but what we were missing was consistency. We had to make a decision about what we wanted our students to be and do, and we had to find a quick and memorable way to express it – conscious as we were that we needed a solution that was significantly simpler than the problem.

2 Having established our list, we wanted to teach these skills and behaviours in a quick, engaging and easy way. We needed to get in among the students and change their ways of thinking, behaving and working. But we couldn't find any off-the-peg, easy-to-use learning resources we could hit them with. Nothing that helpfully made a student less critical of their weaknesses, for example; nothing that made students respond to challenge more positively. If it existed at all, no one was sharing.
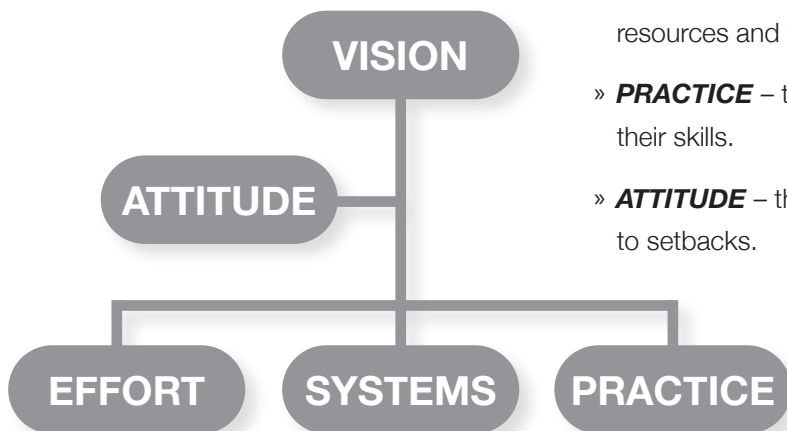
The Solution: VESPA

It was in attacking these problems over the next few years that the VESPA system emerged. It wasn't the first system we developed (to begin with we had a really simple model that required three things of each learner, until we realised that it lacked subtlety), but it is the best we've come up with following years of working closely with students, trying and retrying to develop a clear model. We've cut through the noise surrounding character development and suggested five behaviours and characteristics that all students need to be successful.

Our work suggests that students who are successful score highly in the following qualities:

» *VISION* – they know what they want to achieve.

» *EFFORT* – they put in many hours of proactive independent study.

» *SYSTEMS* – they organise their learning resources and their time.

» *PRACTICE* – they practise and develop their skills.

» *ATTITUDE* – they respond constructively to setbacks.

These characteristics beat cognition hands down. We've found that ceiling students have significant gaps in one or more of these characteristics. And regardless of their academic success at 16, our studies show that these learners will hit the ceiling at A level if they don't address and strengthen those weaknesses. Conversely, students who score highly for the qualities above can and do make significant breakthroughs at A level, unlocking performance that far outstrips their target grades.

> **Students who are success seekers are not bluffed by setback, poor performance, failure or academic adversity. They take the lesson to be learnt and move on.** Martin (2010), p. 22

The VESPA Activities

In the absence of anything else out there, we've spent a number of years working on a whole series of activities that help students to develop these five qualities in themselves. Huge numbers of people have contributed their thoughts, ideas, criticisms and reflections. There are too many to name here, but we would like to thank each and every one of them for their help. This model wouldn't be what it is without them.

The first five chapters of the book cover each element of the VESPA model, giving you a series of resources to deliver under each of the headings.

The activities are designed to:

» Raise awareness about the impact a quality/characteristic can have on potential success.

» Encourage some personal reflection on the presence or absence of that quality in the student.

» Engage the student in a task that develops their practice – a reflection, discussion, coaching conversation or experiment.

Each session is designed to take fifteen to twenty minutes to complete. Many of them are flexible; they can be delivered to an individual, small groups of students, a tutor group or a whole cohort. The tasks themselves are written with a student audience in mind, so take a less formal and looser approach to referencing studies and academic journals, but we give you the details in the introduction to each section or in the teacher's notes, where we also explain how we've used the activities and what impact they've had. We've included eight tasks under each heading, giving you a total of forty to start experimenting with.

This collection isn't exhaustive. We've chosen these activities because they are among the easiest to lead and have had the biggest impact.

Using This Book

In the opening five chapters of the book, we take you through each element of the VESPA model. Each chapter follows a similar pattern: we'll introduce the element of the model and discuss some basic principles that we have discovered as we've worked with students. Many of these principles may seem self-evident but they took some time (and plenty of mistakes!) to become clear for us. Hopefully they can provide you with a shortcut to better intervention. After the basic principles, we provide teacher notes on the activities which follow. These emphasise, we hope, the flexibility of the resources but also describe the ways in which we have successfully used them. Feel free to adhere to these or ignore them – they're not precise recipes. You know your own students best.

Chapter 6 looks at how to use the VESPA model to coach students individually. One of the happy consequences of developing the VESPA model is that diagnosing student problems becomes a much speedier process. Conversations we may have found complex, challenging or circular in the past have become much easier to lead. Outcomes for individual students experiencing difficulties have become much more specific and measurable. We take you through how to use the model to interrogate issues with individual students and generate solutions.

Chapter 7 looks at the process of embedding the system across your organisation. In this chapter, we suggest some ways in which you might manage the cultural and systemic change necessary to get a team of tutors or teachers to embrace the ethos, the approach and the materials and resources associated with the A Level Mindset. The content of this chapter is drawn largely from our own practices and approaches. It is not fail-safe, of course – more an account of how you might raise awareness of the need for better character development systems and curricula, and begin the process of designing and embedding it with a team of staff.

Finally, we share ten thoughts that try to summarise the A Level Mindset. We hope these work equally well as a primer, a reminder of what it is we're collectively trying to achieve and how we can go about empowering our learners.

A Word About Our School

Context will be at the forefront of your mind as you read this, so here's the info: these tools have been developed at a comprehensive school sixth form of about 400 students. The entry requirements are five A*–C. We look for four B's – a B in each of the subjects the student wants to study. We have some students with hugely impressive GCSE results – for example, ten or eleven A* grades. We have others who come to us with some B's,

C's, D's and the odd E. All students begin four courses, and all students experience some version of the VESPA model.

At the time of writing, our Year 12 students have (as a year group) reached an ALPS grade 1 for five years on the trot. Our Year 13 students collectively score grade 2 and have done for five years (with one exception – a grade 1 a few years back. It's proved elusive since!). At the same time, we've seen rises, year on year, in high grades, A* grades, attendance and retention.

Not all of these things can be explained by the VESPA model, of course. Our students are relatively lucky: they have a hugely dedicated teaching staff, accomplished middle leaders and an impressive senior leadership team – all of these things count very much in their favour. Like any organisation, there are areas for improvement but, generally, the climate and culture is positive and aspirational.

But we did see a big jump in performance that has been consolidated since we introduced VESPA. It's quick, clear, easy to implement and we hope it could do the same for you.

1. Vision

When goal pursuit is fueled by personal endorsement and valuing of the goal, commitment and persistence will be high.
Ntoumanis et al. (2014), p. 226

What is Vision?

We've all had those frustrating conversations that begin, 'What do you want to do with your life?' It's a difficult question to answer; indeed, some students might not be able to answer this question for many years. We don't believe that vision always has to be linked to having a clear career path. On the simplest level, it's about knowing the outcomes you want to achieve.

Our research found that students without a goal or vision hit a ceiling and underperform by about one grade. Students who don't have a clear outcome, who don't know why they're doing A levels, are usually the first to show decreased levels of effort when the going gets tough. Studies support this view: some researchers argue that setting a goal which is specific and challenging leads to increases in productivity (Locke and Latham, 1984).

We believe there are three parts to vision. First, it's about having a clear goal that you want to achieve. Goal setting has been used in just about every field of life – from sport to business – to improve human productivity and potential.

Second, it's about making an actionable plan. Arguably, the aspect of goal setting that is

most often neglected is making a specific action plan. By breaking the goals down into subcomponents and then identifying actions needed to achieve these, students are more likely to maintain motivation.

Finally, vision is about the voluntary continuation of goal-directed action. This means sticking to the goal despite any obstacles or difficulties that arise. As mentioned in the introduction, this is what Duckworth et al. (2007) call 'grit'.

Are Target Grades Goals?

Our initial observations on vision were straightforward: students with clear goals tended to outperform those without, we saw, year after year. Our response was understandably pragmatic – let's ensure all students have a goal. So we asked them each to write down the grades that represented success for them. Following a meeting with us they could adjust the target grade against which their progress was monitored (although not downwards). Soon, we removed low target grades from our tracking systems. The past didn't equal the future, and, anyway, it became clear that nobody wanted an E grade. We ensured that target grades didn't change during the course of the two years, unless the student wanted them to. We introduced A* targets in Year 12, rather than springing them on students later. All of this helped, but we were missing

the bigger picture: the answer to the question 'Why are these grades important to you?'

Ownership and Finding the Why

We knew the ownership piece of the puzzle was crucial, but that was where the journey became much tougher. There are some uncomfortable truths living here. Target-setting and relentless intervention with our 'underperformers', not because they wanted it but because we did, was problematic. Sure, there was a cultural component, we debated – we needed to have ambition for them even if they didn't – but we knew there was more to it. The locus of control must lie as much with the individual as it does with the teacher's hopes and expectations. Otherwise we risk creating passive consumers of learning who wait for support rather than seek it, then blame the institution for their poor grades. They might physically be there in the classroom, but they are not yet psychologically enrolled in the process of learning. People are all the same in this regard – we need to create and express our why.

So there's a balance to be struck between relentless intervention and intrinsic motivation: a space in which students are challenged, supported and encouraged to explore their why and learn how to set effective and inspiring goals.

Be/Have Goals and Do Goals

Our initial forays into encouraging A level students to explore their whys yielded confusing results. Whereas some would say 'I plan on studying criminal law' or 'I really want to work in teaching', others opted for (and these are all true) 'I want to be famous', 'I'm going to be a professional footballer', 'I just want to be rich', 'I'm going to be a lifestyle influencer' or 'I want a Lexus.'

We struggled to deal with these kinds of goals until we discovered the work of three academic researchers working across two universities. Beattie, Laliberté and Oreopoulos's 2016 paper Thrivers and Divers made manifest a number of issues we were seeing with these types of goal. In brief, they took a representative sample of first-year undergraduate students doing economics at the University of Toronto and asked them to fill in questionnaires about how hard they worked, the number of hours' part-time work they did per week, and crucially, the sorts of goals they had for the year ahead. The entry requirements are rigorous, and so the students on the course were all sparky high achievers. At the end of the year, the researchers compared the questionnaires of the students in the bottom 10% for academic performance (the 'divers') with those in the top 10% (the 'thrivers'). There were some interesting outcomes regarding effort, but it was the goal setting that stood out for us.

Here are some of the goals set by the divers: 'be rich', 'get rich quickly', 'being successful', 'having so many successful businesses', 'have my own company', 'have my own house and car', 'receive a high level of education'.

And here is a selection of thriver goals: 'build something', '… contribute to the human advancement of …', 'fix people's problems', '[be] an independent person who can deal with problems', 'working in the field of computer science', 'build a strong foundation to succeed' (Beattie et al., 2016, p. 46, p. 49, p. 50 and p. 51).

It was the active nature of the latter that struck us. These thriver goals are what we refer to as 'do goals'; they place emphasis on an active verb – building, contributing, working – and focus the mind on the process, not the outcome. The diver goals, on the other hand, were ones – as our own examples show – that emphasise an outcome. We refer to them as 'be' or 'have' goals: they're about money, security, power or fame as the product of some unspecified process. Be and have goals are strongly correlated with poor academic performance. Correlation, as we know, is not causation; however, in the study, goals were set before the course began. It strikes us as extremely unlikely that the students who were in the process of diving went back to their goals and changed them.

Dream vs. Goal – or the Last-Taken Action

Entrepreneur and writer Derek Sivers has an interesting idea about setting goals and taking subsequent action. He argues that goals aren't about changing the future; they're about changing the present. 'If a goal doesn't change your actions in the present moment … then it's not a good goal, no matter how impressive it seems,' he said in a recent interview (Martin, 2019).

One thing that seemed to help us distinguish between successful and unsuccessful goals was exploring a student's last-taken action; 'Describe something you have just done that makes attaining this goal more likely.' This question allowed us to make a distinction between dreams and goals. Students who took no action were enjoying the safety of dreaming. There's nothing wrong with this, of course. We all have pipe dreams; they're compelling fantasies that we might enjoy discussing, safe because we know we're never going to do anything about them. But dreams don't compel action. In fact, they often do exactly the opposite (see Mental Contrasting, page 29).

It's worth pointing out that you're not killing dreams by trying to turn them into goals, but we've found that something interesting happens when we have these conversations – often there will be real resistance. You might hear, 'Well, actually, I don't want to do it anyway' or 'What are you hassling me for? I'm not that bothered.' Why do some students fold so easily? We think it's because that dream is what they've been telling teachers and parents and friends about for a while; it's the answer they give to get someone off their case, without actually taking steps to pursue it. The fact that you're taking their dream seriously is uncomfortable for them. They retreat into denial – that understandable desire to protect the ego by claiming the dream isn't important to them.

Teacher Guidance for Vision Activities

1. Twenty Questions

Twenty Questions is a simple, informal questionnaire, designed to stimulate discussion and reflection. The questions have been tested on hundreds of students and have been enormously successful in helping them to develop their vision. Don't think of it as a traditional questionnaire, though – this is a pick-and-choose activity where questions can be discussed, discarded, replaced, and generally monkeyed around with.

You will find that some of the questions work really well and some don't; it depends on the student you are working with. You don't have to restrict this to a one-to-one coaching session – we've had a lot of success using

The questions have been tested on hundreds of students and have been enormously successful in helping them to develop their vision.

it on a larger scale. Below are some delivery suggestions:

» Students respond well to these questions when working with a friend. Sit them in pairs and ask one student to be the coach (i.e. the one who asks the questions and listens carefully to their partner's response) and the other the coachee. Give both students the opportunity to be the coach. Coaches have this clear remit: they must ask the question and then remain silent. Only when their partner's answer has totally petered out can they say, 'Is there anything else you'd like to add on that?' This really helps them to develop their listening skills.

» We've also used these questions as a 'getting to know you' activity. Give students the questions and ask them to pick five that they like. Then run a speed dating type activity where students sit with different people, taking turns to ask and answer the questions.

» When coaching a student one to one it can be useful to give them the twenty questions. Ask them to take the questions home and pick five they would like to discuss the next day. Give them responsibility and control over the framing of the conversation.

» We've shared these questions with parents at information evenings. Parents often say to us how hard they find these discussions, and the twenty questions have provided a useful starting point for them as well as us.

It's worth pointing out that you won't get a career decision within minutes of using this activity. Instead, you're going to open up the students' thinking and give them more confidence, stir the beginnings of some awareness in them and, if it goes well, see some themes developing that might flourish when a second or third vision activity is used.

2. Getting Dreams Done

This is a quiet, reflective activity where students fill out a table with three columns, sorting and organising their hopes, dreams and aspirations into three distinct groups, depending on how much action they have taken on them.

This activity is perfect if you are working with a student who is spending too long in passive daydreaming. Give them twenty-four hours to think about their responses; they can fill out the table privately at home. You don't need to see it – it's very much their property – but you will raise awareness, and then hopefully you can plan some action points into your coaching conversation. The message to the students is simple: dreams stay as dreams unless you begin to do.

3. Your 21st Birthday

This is a visioning tool where students imagine a positive point in their near future – their 21st birthday – and make notes/discuss/share what they might want to have achieved by then.

There are lots of different ways to lead this with groups of students. Some tutors might choose to start by sharing their 21st birthday experience, maybe showing some photos or talking through where they were in their lives, what they had achieved and what their hopes and dreams were at the time.

Then the students get their chance. If you're working with a confident group who are cohering well, then get them to share their hopes and ambitions with a friend. From a coaching perspective, you might want to give this activity to a student the day before you're due to meet them so they can bring some notes to the discussion. You don't need to see those notes – they are the property of the students – but ask them to discuss where they see themselves using their reflections from the evening before.

4. Fix Your Dashboard

This activity recognises the power of visual reminders and encourages students to create a collage of pictures, quotes and other visual stimuli that can be regularly revisited when times are tough – a vision board, in essence.

Our director of learning for Year 13 has used this activity to help fire up students who are struggling with motivation. She gets them to create a Word document or PowerPoint (one page/slide limit) and drop pictures of the university from which they have an offer onto the page: a photo of the campus, the halls of residence, the sports facilities/gym, the learning resource centre – whatever inspires them. She then gets them to print out the page and place it at the front of their file. Every day when they open their file they see their dashboard and are reminded why they are working so hard.

One school we worked with created A3 dashboards using images. They then had the posters printed in colour and created a display in the students' form room, so they got that everyday visual hit when tutors asked them to spend a moment looking again at their vision boards. Ask learners to include quotes, pictures of heroes, photos of siblings or parents, company or job images, material goods – anything that pulls them forward.

5. The Perfect Day

This is a free writing task where students are given a set amount of time in a safe and secure environment to record their dream day at work. This activity works well with a group.

Students are first asked to think back to their primary school days and try to remember

what their dream job was back then. This can be good fun to share with the group and usually gets some interesting discussions going. The students are then given ten minutes to write their thoughts down to the questions on the activity sheet. Again, these could be shared with the group or in one-to-one discussions.

This is an activity that works well in conjunction with others – if students have a record of their responses to Twenty Questions, for example, and the following week they have a go at the Perfect Day, then some evident themes might emerge.

Days full of idle leisure aren't as unhelpful as you might think. With some probing, there are often motifs to be examined and discussed around travel, being outdoors, working in teams, celebrating successes, helping others, playing challenging games, creating fictional worlds, responding artistically to a stimulus, exercise and physical activity, companionship, leadership and many more.

If you are feeling brave, the teacher could share their perfect day. Be warned – it might have nothing to do with what you are doing now!

6. SMART Goals

This is a reflective planning activity that requires some note taking, discussion and thinking, either in a coaching situation or with a whole group of students. It works best once learners have established an overall goal because it allows you to clearly illustrate the importance of chunking steps towards a goal, building in sub-goals with deadlines, interrogating the viability of those sub-goals and refining a series of actions.

Start small. If we have an overall sense of why we're here and where we want to go, what do we need to achieve in the next fortnight? One goal per subject works well or the top five achievements that would make the fortnight great. You will find some students take to this and others might need coaching through it.

Research shows that goal setting does relate to achievement (Crust et al., 2014), but the students who are generally low on vision are, unfortunately, the ones least likely to set SMART goals, so bear that in mind and pair students so they can help each other.

7. Mental Contrasting

This tool takes the form of a grid in which students record the results of some self-analysis and reflection. It encourages learners to explore their capacity for self-sabotage by considering aspects of their habitual behaviour and elements of their own personality that are most likely to hamstring their attempts to reach a goal. It's a personal, introspective task that develops self-knowledge.

Mental contrasting is a relatively new method of goal setting, developed by Professor of Psychology at New York University, Gabriele Oettingen. She has published extensively in this area and we recommend you read her work if you would like to develop your knowledge of this technique (see Oettingen, 2014). The argument goes like this: with goal setting, the goal needs to be both desirable and feasible. Mental contrasting differs from traditional methods of goal setting in that it also requires you to consider the feasibility of the goal you've set, particularly in relation to your own weaknesses. Oettingen argues that goal commitment is strengthened by the fact that you have considered the feasibility of the goal. There is some academic evidence to suggest that this method works with school children (Gollwitzer et al., 2011).

We've found that this session also works well when it's packaged as an effort activity. It can be very powerful for a student to write down the obstacles that are stopping them achieving their goal and then design an 'if … then' plan (see The Power of If … Then Thinking on page 52).

8. Fake It

Fake It is an experiment in thinking which allows a student with two competing goals to measure up both and choose between them. It requires them to block out a week of time and record their experiences in a journal, learning log or planner, then return to you for a coaching conversation.

It's an intensive activity that works best with individuals or small groups. It's not a quick fix, but it does get results, and is particularly effective with Year 13 students trapped in choosing between two possible courses at university, for example. For every goal that a student has, they should capture and highlight action steps.

During their combined 40 plus years of teaching and coaching, Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin have discovered something important. Those students who make real and sustained progress at A level aren't necessarily the ones with superb GCSEs. Some students leap from average results in Year 11 to outstanding results in Year 13. Others seem to hit a ceiling. But why?

It was while they were trying to answer this question that the **VESPA** system emerged. Steve and Martin have cut through the noise surrounding character development and identified five key behaviours and characteristics that all students need in order to be successful.

VISION — EFFORT — SYSTEMS — PRACTICE — ATTITUDE

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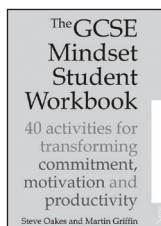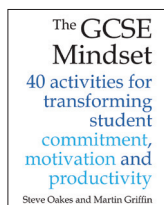
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