

# Destination Series Rationale

## Real, Long-Term Benefits to Students

Over the past two decades, the need for an emphasis on Social Emotional Learning has been recognized by an ever greater number of educators. Sometimes called Non-Cognitive Skills, Soft Skills, or Hard Skills (as we like to call them), they may be responsible for as much 75% of a person's success in adult life.

So, what are these Soft Skills? Teamwork, leadership, and even self-regulation are all examples of concepts that may be found on long-lists of Soft Skills. But chief among these skills are the two specific concepts that are referred to most frequently, Growth Mindsets and Grit.

Growth Mindset is based on the science of Neuroplasticity that shows that human beings can improve in almost any endeavor given enough focus on that endeavor. Grit, sometimes called resilience or tenacity, is well summed up by the phrase, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going." It's the idea of working even harder when faced with the obstacles that life will undoubtedly throw at each of us.

These two models are paramount in the world of Social Emotional Learning because they apply to a broad range of skills. To be a great team member it is imperative to have a Growth Mindset, to be open to input from your team. To be a great leader it is imperative to have Grit, to be willing to find a way through the challenges your team may face.

Because these two concepts transcend other soft-skills, because they are useful across an extremely wide-range of applications, mastery of these skills can have a monumental impact in a student's life. But, there is a challenge in teaching these skills. Research has shown that efforts to teach these skills can be very effective in the short-term: if I teach you about Grit, you might be very "gritty" for the next few weeks. However, that Grit is not likely to stick around in the long-run unless I keep reminding you about Grit.

This got us asking, "why don't these skills tend to stick?"

Psychology has some answers.

These skills seem to be deeply tied to personality. After years of research, an overwhelming majority of psychologists have come to believe in a model of personality that is valid, reliable, and predictive of long-term outcomes. This Five Factor Personality Model measures individuals on, you guessed it, five factors: extroversion, openness to experience, emotional stability (neuroticism), conscientiousness, and agreeableness.

Grit, it turns out, is likely a sub-trait of conscientiousness. As a sub-category, it may be hard to simply adjust someone's level of Grit without developing their personality on a grander level. So many habits and behaviors flow from a person's disposition for conscientiousness. These habits and behaviors likely all need to be aligned for the person to consistently express "grittiness."

This trait, conscientiousness, happens to be one of the absolute best predictors of success in life. Improving this trait might make a person "grittier." It may also have many other long-term, positive outcomes.

So if that is true, then the next logical question is, "can a human develop his or her personality?"

Once again, psychology has some answers.

In general, the answer is yes. Your personality does change gradually over the course of your life. Big events in your life may cause it to change more rapidly. Most importantly, you can choose to develop your personality (Volitional Personality Change). Developing your personality is not fast, or easy, but it is possible, and it is very powerful in that even slight modifications can create powerful long-term results.

This is where our approach to SEL is different. We focus not only on the "smaller" non-cognitive skills but also on "big-picture" transformation designed to produce long-term impacts that stick.

Our Flagship SEL program, The Destination Series, integrates a research-based approach to goal achievement with a highly-engaging course that keeps students wanting to come back. In it, they develop an understanding of neuroplasticity, personality science, and their own personality disposition. They explore the science of Positive Psychology to create a system of meaning and values that will motivate them toward positive goal directed behavior. They develop life long skills for self-regulation toward goal directed behavior. They develop the communication and leadership skills necessary to enroll others in supporting them in attaining their goals. They learn to use their strengths to benefit their community and create real value in the world. They learn who they are, what they are good at, what is important to them, and what to do about it.

## Course Design

### Introduction to Neuroplasticity and Personality

The course begins with an ice-breaker activity, expressly designed to begin creating a "team ethos" amongst the students. Though it is not realistic to expect deep camaraderie to develop instantly, we want to start moving the students in that direction. Simultaneously we are

developing a “safe space” where students will eventually feel more comfortable being open, honest, and ultimately vulnerable with each other.

We then set the ground rules for the course. Chief among these rules is respect, an indispensable value we must insist on as we strive to make this a truly productive experience for the students.

We then delve into neuroplasticity, or more specifically Growth Mindsets. We broach this topic first as it is a valuable perspective in and of itself, that also introduces the realm of neuroscience which will come back later in the course, but more importantly because we want the value of openness to rise to primacy, so the students will be primed for the challenging topics that we will soon be delving into.

At the end of session one we introduce the Goal Setting Activity. This evidence-based approach to changing habits through setting and achieving goals will be a weekly activity in class. During this first day students will set a goal that they would like to achieve, something that is modest enough to be achievable by the end of the course but just big enough to be worth working toward.

Each week students will set small, “baby steps” goals intended to move them toward their final goal. For example, if my goal is to have only A’s and B’s in my classes by the end of this program, I might set myself the goal of sticking to a standard 3:00 to 5:00 pm homework time, each day of the week. I might commit that my phone will be put away and all notifications turned off during that time. I might plan to ask my friends and family not bother me during that time, as it is my homework time.

All of the goal setting and reflection will be contained in a journaling activity that will happen at the beginning and end of each of their class sessions. At the beginning of each session students will reflect on how they did during the past week. Perhaps they achieved their goal, in which case they should set a larger goal for themselves the coming week. Perhaps they failed to achieve their goal, in which case they should consider how they can modify their goal for the coming week to increase their odds of success. At the end of each session they will set their goals for the following week.

By committing their reflections and plans to paper in this journaling activity, students have a significantly greater chance of achieving their goals. The act of writing these thoughts down transforms them from abstractions to concrete tangibles represented on the page, giving them more weight, more likely to elicit a dutiful approach from the students.

The second session begins an exploration into the science of personality, one of the most rigorously grounded realms in the science of psychology. Using a dynamic group activity,

students experience, in a visceral way, the differences in perception they have with each other. This impactful approach seems shocking and counterintuitive at first. Students realize that their view of reality is filtered through the lens of their personality and that people are unique, “very unique.”

We then introduce students to the Five Factor Personality Model and the theory that undergirds it. Where did this model come from? Why do we think humans have evolved these extremely diverse personalities? What are the five factors, and what are their implications?

Once students understand the validity, reliability, predictiveness, and meaning of this model, they have a context. They are hungry to learn what their own personality disposition is. This leads perfectly into a personality assessment.

Each student takes a Five Factor Personality Assessment that has been norm-referenced for teenagers. They get a report on the results of that assessment, which leads into a lively discussion. What seems right? Does anything seem wrong? Is anything surprising? Understanding more about their personality, do they now understand anything more about themselves? Why do they make the choices they make? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses?

Now that they understand more about their personality, some students may wish to adjust their goals. We lead the students through an exercise where they look at how their goals might line up with factors in the Five Factor Personality Model. Based on previous research, our expectation is that the majority of goals will line up with Trait Conscientiousness, as that is the personality trait most directly correlated with success in school and career. Goals to complete homework on time, perform well on tests or quizzes, etc. stem from the industriousness and organizational components of Trait Conscientiousness. We may also see goals associated with Trait Extroversion, which is also correlated with long term success in many domains. Students may want to get better at making friends, being less shy, etc.

Understanding their personalities more deeply will allow them to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. In the Goal Setting Activity they will be able to modify their goals and make new plans for the coming week in accordance with those goals.

## Value Directed Goals

This second portion of the course begins with a reflection on happiness: “what is happiness?” We ask this to get students thinking about the things in life that make them happy. The field of Positive Psychology has identified three versions of happiness: pleasure, flow, and meaning.

Happiness derived from pleasure can be great, but it is also the most short-term, least sustaining form of happiness. Martin Seligman, father of Positive Psychology and former

President of the American Psychological Association, described happiness derived from pleasure as being like vanilla ice-cream. The first taste is wonderful, but by the eighth spoonful it has become boring. Our bodies become quickly accustomed to pleasure, so pleasurable experiences tend to have diminishing impacts upon us.

Flow is the second version of happiness. Another way of saying “being in the zone,” flow happens when a person is immersed in his or her work. Distractions and time fade a way when a person gets into this state of deep focus. Though we might not think of this as happiness, from a neurological standpoint it certainly is. People whose lives include some regular experience of flow tend to have more long-term satisfaction, or happiness.

Meaning is the third and ultimate version of happiness, because it is the most long-term sustaining form of happiness. A deep sense of meaning is so powerful that it can keep someone “happy” even during tough times. Meaning, also thought of as a values oriented life, is the idea that your life has some deeper meaning. You serve some purpose that is greater than yourself. This is some high-minded virtue, value, or principal after which you strive. This is ultimately sustaining because even in times of trouble, you can always orient yourself toward this principal, and even if things aren’t going well for you, you can rest assured in the belief that your mission is more important than the suffering you may be going through at the moment.

Once students understand that a life of meaning is the most satisfying life, the natural question is “what can give my life meaning?” From this we enter into a conversation about values. Using a powerful, multi-session activity, students work to identify their values. What is most important to them in their lives? What values are worth effort they may require?

At this point in the course, students will re-examine the goals they have set for themselves in the Goal Setting Activity. Do these goals align with their values? Do they want to adjust their goals or create new goals?

In the conversation about values we finally come to the idea that not all values are equal. Adherence to some values will not produce positive, long-term results. Comfort and convenience may be very important to me, but it may prevent me from putting in the hard work needed to improve my situation. Some values are better than others.

We then delve into the concept that the values that deliver the most sustaining, long-term impacts on us tend to be ultimately unattainable values. This counterintuitive idea speaks to the concept that “life is about the journey, not the destination.” Positive Psychology would tend to agree with this assessment. As goal oriented humans, we get our satisfaction from the knowledge that we are progressing towards our goals. Once we have attained a goal it no longer has power to inspire us, and our minds are immediately looking for the next goal. As a result, transcendent values that we can never actually accomplish can keep us on “the journey” our entire lives, giving us a long term satisfaction that can endure through good times and bad.

For example, if my goal is to end all hunger globally, I am unlikely to ever achieve that goal, but I can continue to create and strive toward smaller goals that may contribute to that ultimate goal.

Students will then look at their values and ask themselves, “which of my values are more important?” “Less important?” “Could any of them be negative for me in the long-run?” “Are any of them transcendent?” “Will they continue to inspire me?”

In the Goal Setting Activity they once again look at the goals they have set, with the option to modify or change their goals.

Now that students are thinking about their values and how to set goals that align with those values, we also want to give them the tools to achieve those goals. There are two key ideas that we want to focus on: baby steps and situation modification. Ideally they will have already been practicing these concepts weekly in their Goal Setting Activity, but we now want to give them a more concrete understanding of these ideas.

Baby steps is the simple, maybe obvious idea, that people in general have significantly more luck changing a habit or achieving a goal if they do so in small increments. Up to this point students have been practicing this in the Goal Setting Activity. Giving themselves small weekly goals. Creating larger weekly goals as they succeed. Modifying goals when they fail. In most cases people are not successful when trying to dramatically change their lives in one fell swoop. I may commit to eating healthily, exercising daily, and completing all of my homework. I may even be successful at it for a few weeks, but it will take a massive amount of willpower to stick to these behaviors, if I hadn’t been practicing any of them previously. If I instead choose to focus on one small piece at a time, I will be much more successful.

Situation Modification refers to the idea of changing your surroundings to create an environment more conducive to achieving your goals. It is in contrast to the idea of Response Modification, which most of us would think of as having the willpower to stick to our goals and persevere through temptations that might cause us to fail. It is the notion that we are modifying our innate responses to the world. I see a tasty donut, but I have committed to the value of eating healthily. I employ willpower to resist the urge to eat the donut, and I leave it on the table. Will power is important, and we may often need to modify our responses to the world to achieve our goals, but it is very mentally taxing to continue to do so for extended periods of time.

Instead of changing our responses, Response Modification, it may be more effective to change our environment, Situation Modification. We will likely be more successful at sticking to our goal of eating healthily if we make sure we aren’t surrounded by donuts. I should mention that Tried & True has nothing against donuts. They can be quite delicious. Research shows that the most

successful people tend to be very good at creating an environment in which they will be successful.

As we revisit the Goal Setting Activity we will ask students to add more specificity to their goals, details about the modifications they will make to their environments to ensure their success. Informing their family and friends that 3 to 5 is homework time is a modification to the environment. It creates a condition in which they are less likely to be interrupted while doing their homework.

## Self-Authoring

As we approach the climax of the course, students now have a much better sense of who they are, what are their values, how to set goals aligned with their values, and how to be successful at achieving those goals. To conclude this course we now want students to envision how they might extend this new understanding into their futures.

We take students through a journaling activity in which they envisions two versions of the future. In one version, they will imagine what their lives may look like in three years if they are able to live in alignment with their values. In another version, they will imagine what their lives may look like in three years if they make poor choices, not in accordance with their values.

This exercise very intentionally examines the positive and the negative. By only looking at the positive, students have no context against which to judge their position. If I fail to stick to my values I might not reach my goal, but if I also see the negative version of the future, I will understand that falling far short of my goal could in fact be painful, a future I want to avoid. Humans are far more motivated to avoid pain than to seek pleasure, so it is important that students look at and are realistic about what a negative version of the future might look like.

Students will take a final look at the Goal Setting Activity. Have they achieved their goals? If so, what new goal do they now want to achieve? If not, why not? Was it the wrong goal? How might they create a new, better goal? The students will create new goals to pursue once the course has ended.

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