

UNITED WISDOM

A large task and the first observable result

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

clear standards of adequacy

Albert Bandura and Dale H. Schunk, “Cultivating Competence, Self-Efficacy, and Intrinsic Interest Through Proximal Self-Motivation,” 1981, p. 586. A short fragment from the theoretical discussion of goal properties, where the authors also cite previous research. It makes no claim that any small piece of work is adequate.

What this article is about

A large task can be something you truly want to do and still be difficult to begin. You understand its purpose, have gathered materials and found time, yet cannot identify a change that would show the work has actually advanced. Advice to take a small step can leave that central question unanswered. Opening a document, inventing a heading and producing a usable part of the result are different events. Each may have a place, but they cannot be assumed to be equivalent.

Here we consider a first observable result: something small that can be seen, checked and related to the chosen task. Through a hypothetical catalogue of family letters, we distinguish the amount of work, its usefulness and grounds for a subsequent decision. Bandura and Schunk's study concerned arithmetic learning by forty children, rather than any adult project. It helps us ask a limited question about nearby reference points and assessing completed work; our everyday examples do not become an experimental protocol. The article requires no reduction of important work to a symbolic gesture. Sometimes work cannot begin without missing permission, a skill or a required check, and the initial visible result is a precise account of that boundary.

I. The size of an action does not establish its significance

Imagine Denis, who has freely decided to catalogue surviving family letters. He wants to find letters by dates and names without rereading every envelope. Several evenings go into choosing software, arranging folders and discussing the future catalogue. All that can be useful. Yet it remains impossible to find even one letter differently than before. A distance remains between activities around the project and the change for which the project was chosen. Naming that distance does not mean declaring those evenings wasted.

Someone suggests that Denis start with two minutes. He opens an empty spreadsheet, closes it and marks his calendar. The action happened, and the mark accurately records opening the file. But the original difficulty may have concerned choosing fields or deciphering a date. Two minutes do not answer those questions by themselves. A small duration can sometimes make action more accessible without determining the result's content. What matters is understanding what became possible following this small piece of work.

Another boundary is available: describe one letter so that it can later be located through the entry. There is now something to check. Its storage place is recorded, the written date is distinguished from an inference about it, and a link to the original is maintained. Such an entry might take longer than two minutes and require returning to the envelope. Its value lies in creating a usable component of the future catalogue, rather than achieving the shortest duration. An unusable component can also become apparent before a hundred similar entries have been made.

This does not imply that preparation or simply opening a file is always meaningless. Accessing the software might be a real difficulty for someone else. In that case, an opened and saved test file answers a particular question. The distinction depends on the task and present obstacle, rather than how impressive the step appears. A first result should name the change that is actually checked. This language respects a small action without assigning it benefits for the larger plan that have not yet been obtained.

II. A result needs a clear user and purpose

A catalogue can serve different purposes. Denis wants to use it himself; a relative wants to pass some materials to an archive; another participant imagines an attractive publication. One spreadsheet row is not equally adequate for all three intentions. A personal finding aid can remain simple. A transfer requires agreed rules and checks on permissions. Publication concerns the contents of private correspondence. Before selecting the first result, it helps to name its immediate purpose, rather than combining every future possibility into one obligation.

Suppose a personal finding aid is needed now. A modest criterion becomes understandable: the entry identifies the original and where it is stored. It need not already establish the letter's literary value, reconstruct all family relationships or prepare a text for publication. These excluded tasks are not unimportant; they belong to another result. If the purpose later changes, the entry's adequacy must be reconsidered. Its initial limits do not remove new requirements, but neither do they make the earlier work false.

The user conducting the check could be Denis himself returning to the entry a day later. He puts the letter away and tries to find it through the spreadsheet. This is a simple editorial trial in our hypothetical situation. It neither measures motivation nor predicts completion of the

catalogue. It answers a narrower question: does the component perform its stated finding function? If fresh memory alone makes the entry recognisable, its description needs improvement. Identifying a user helps distinguish a result that has been used from the feeling of having had a productive evening.

Not every result needs to be shown to others. A personal entry can remain private, along with its check. A request to see the work creates no consent to disclose family contents. In a joint project, participants can agree what another person will see: a structure without names, an anonymised example or a permitted entry. Clarity of a result concerns its purpose; publicity concerns a separate decision about access. The first can improve without automatically expanding the second.

III. A nearby goal is not a universal promise

In their 1981 study, Bandura and Schunk examined arithmetic learning by children whose initial skills and interest in these tasks were low. Forty children participated, predominantly from middle-class backgrounds, aged 7.3 to 10.1. They were assigned to four conditions differing in proximal or distal goal setting and instructions for working. Learning involved particular materials and sessions. This was a specific educational setting with specified measures, rather than observation of arbitrary adult life projects.

In the proximal-subgoal condition, the reference point was six pages of material per session; the distal goal covered forty-two pages across the programme. There were seven half-hour sessions, with an intermediate assessment after four. In the reported sample, nearby goals produced more favourable results on several measures of learning and perceived capability. That cannot become a rule that dividing any adult task necessarily improves confidence, interest or quality. Neither a letter catalogue nor our voluntary trial was tested in the study.

The theoretical discussion raises a more limited question for this article: what signs does a person use to assess work already done? If the only endpoint is a complete catalogue, one usable entry can be nearly invisible against hundreds remaining. A nearby finding criterion provides grounds for assessing the particular work. This is an editorial analogy that readers can consider or reject. It gives no right to infer psychological changes in Denis from one completed component, and it does not replace checking the entry's actual quality.

Perceived self-efficacy is also different from a skill. Someone can believe they can perform an action and still make errors; another can doubt themselves and perform it correctly. An observable result allows discussion of its particular fit with a requirement, without deriving a general personality description. We make no promise that small work will transform a person's relationship with themselves. A more modest achievement remains meaningful: one suitable approach has become visible for one case, together with what it still lacks.

IV. A criterion should distinguish completion from its appearance

Denis produces his first row: “Grandmother's letter, old.” It occupies space in the spreadsheet but contributes little to finding the letter. When several letters have the same author, the entry cannot be linked unambiguously to an original. A row counter reports filled cells, rather than their usability. Distinguishable features can be named in advance: an envelope number, storage location, author details with uncertainty marked, and the date in whatever form has been established. The list depends on the chosen personal purpose, rather than a compulsory standard for every archive.

A criterion need not be complex or final. Denis can check one entry against a few available features while leaving other questions open. What matters is that the result permits an honest answer that something is not present yet. If every action automatically counts as success, the check stops distinguishing states of work. If the first entry must resolve the whole family history, the nearby boundary disappears. Between these extremes, a small but real part of the function can be selected without being presented as a complete system.

Errors can reveal a limitation in the criterion itself. Denis realises that an envelope number is insufficient because envelopes move, so he adds a reference to a separate identifier for the original. This does not prove that his initial choice was bad in every respect. Checking one component exposed a particular limitation before widespread repetition. However, the new rule must actually be applicable. An entry cannot point to an image that does not exist or assign a definite date when only some digits are visible.

Such precision requires no punishment for imperfection. The state “draft entry, date unestablished” can be retained alongside an account of its usefulness. It helps find the envelope but does not confirm the sending year. Partial usefulness and an absent property can coexist. Once named, they support a specific next step: clarify the date, keep the uncertainty or select another letter. Hidden beneath the word “done,” they force a new participant to discover again what can be relied on.

V. The first result can reveal a missing skill

Denis's second difficulty concerns searching the spreadsheet. He enters names correctly but cannot filter rows by a field. Calling this a lack of determination would be inaccurate. The task requires a method he has not mastered. A small amount of work does not create the skill automatically. Instead of repeating a general promise, he can identify the operation needed for the chosen result. A separate learning trial then has a function: check whether a filter can be applied to two fictional entries.

The practice example need not contain personal letters. Two neutral rows separate the technical action from family information. If the operation is performed, a local skill can honestly be named. This is not yet a finished catalogue or an ability to handle every kind of data. If it is not performed, a specific question remains for documentation or a helper. The boundary reduces the request's size, without assuming that help must be available or that every skill is acquired on the first attempt.

Sometimes independent learning is not the appropriate next decision. Denis might choose a simpler paper finding aid or arrange technical assistance. The choice depends on purpose, time and available conditions. Insisting on mastering the most powerful software can expand a project originally intended to make finding letters easier. Giving up a complex tool need not mean giving up the plan. If learning the software is what interests him, that is a separate chosen goal and does not need to be disguised as serving the catalogue.

The first result distinguishes these directions when each has its own description. Being able to filter practice rows concerns a skill; finding an original through an entry concerns the personal finding aid. They can support each other without replacing each other in a report. Two rows cannot establish mastery of the whole programme, just as mastering a filter cannot establish that the letters have been described. Precision protects both the person and the expectations of those who use their work.

VI. A small scale does not remove dependencies and permissions

Some letters belong to another relative who has not decided whether they can be included. Denis could open one envelope faster than he could compile the whole catalogue. But a small action does not become permissible merely through being small. Access rights and agreements concern the action's content. If permission is required, he can select other material or first obtain consent. Reducing the scale should not become a means of bypassing a boundary that the larger project makes apparent.

The same distinction matters in tasks involving required professional checks. Our personal catalogue has limited risks, but general advice about a first result does not transfer unconditionally to treatment, construction or handling another person's funds. An agreed sequence, qualifications and preliminary verification may be required there. The first observable result may be a necessary clarification obtained, rather than a direct intervention. This article does not suggest trying a dangerous action on a small scale to prove an ability to begin.

A dependency can also be entirely ordinary: the original is held by someone presently unavailable. Denis prepares questions and marks entries that cannot yet be checked. This is a

limited result if its purpose is to prepare a later enquiry. It is not a verified description of the absent original. Useful preparation must remain distinct from the part still unavailable. A pause then becomes neither an accusation against the person nor a false appearance that the entire project is ready.

Once a dependency is named, work independent of it can be chosen, the goal reduced or the project paused. No option has to be best in every case. An observable result serves orientation, rather than keeping activity going indefinitely. Sometimes an accurate note that a material cannot be included without consent is more useful than many additional rows. It does not measure personal productivity; it preserves a condition under which the result can be acceptable to its participants at all.

VII. Feedback should concern what was made

Denis asks his sister to examine the catalogue's structure without disclosing letter contents. She notices that the “to” field combines the addressee with a supposed recipient in the family's version of the story. Her comment concerns a particular entry and its labels. It does not establish that Denis is incapable of archive work or that the whole idea has failed. The conversation can preserve this distinction: which property was checked, what was noticed and which correction is proposed. A general judgment of the author is no compulsory part of feedback.

The limits of another person's check can also be clarified. His sister can assess structural clarity but cannot confirm handwriting or a letter's origin. Denis need not turn every attentive reader into an expert on all questions. A precise request supports an honest account of what has been checked and what remains an inference. Advice conflicting with the personal finding aid's purpose can be discussed and declined. Agreeing to receive comments does not give someone else authority to set all the project's goals.

One result provides a small amount of material for that conversation. It can be corrected, compared with the initial version and used to assess whether a new criterion is necessary. However, checking one letter does not cover every kind of letter. A subsequent component may involve another spelling of a name, an unknown date or several addressees. The method should be transferred with a qualification about the cases tested. A successful first sample supports further investigation of suitability, rather than proving that a final method for the whole collection has been found.

An unpleasant response does not replace the content of the comment. Denis might be upset by a correction while the field still needs clarification. He might enjoy praise while the link to the original remains unclear. A feeling and a checkable property of the result concern different questions. He need not suppress his experience to examine the entry. He can pause and return

later to the particular suggestion. This conversation promises no ease, but permits correcting work without a compulsory conclusion about a person's worth.

VIII. A nearby outcome should remain connected to the larger plan

After several entries, Denis enjoys designing the spreadsheet. He invents colours, icons and an attractive cover. That can be an interesting activity in its own right. If finding letters remains the catalogue's purpose, it is helpful periodically to check whether decoration supports that function. Small finished components can multiply around a project without increasing its usability. Visibility alone is insufficient: both a new cover and a located original can be seen, but their relationships to the chosen purpose differ.

A simple question is available: what will this work make possible at the next use? If a colour distinguishes checked from unchecked entries, it helps show the catalogue's state. If it was selected solely for enjoyment, that is permissible too, but the result concerns appearance. Enjoyment need not be prohibited or labelled wasted time. One purpose should simply not be presented as another, especially when others expect concrete help from the project. An honest change of goal is preferable to continually displaying indirect busyness.

Sometimes the larger plan changes after the first sample. Denis realises he does not need a detailed catalogue: a list of envelopes by box will suffice. Reducing the goal can fit actual use. Yet difficulty does not automatically establish that conclusion, and every reduction need not be presumed wise. What is retained and lost can be compared. If relatives already expected detailed information, the change needs discussion. Personal choice and existing agreements do not disappear through adopting a convenient new format.

Connecting the small and large also permits delaying expansion. Before describing all the letters, several different cases can be checked and rules refined. This is a subsequent stage with its own scope, rather than a hidden obligation incurred by the first row. A sample does not compel completion of the entire collection. It provides grounds to choose continuation, revision or stopping. Such a result remains meaningful precisely because several honest decisions can follow it, rather than only a demand to do more.

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IX. Visible progress need not match another person's counter

Another participant asks how many letters have been described. A number can be useful if everyone understands what counts as a description. Otherwise, twenty rows can include entries of differing readiness. Denis can report entries usable for finding separately from drafts and materials awaiting permission. This is no attempt to evade a result. It is a more accurate account of the work's state, allowing another person to decide what can already be used and what cannot yet be relied on.

In a shared agreement, criteria should be settled beforehand to the extent possible. One person expects only a date and name, another a transcription. The difference is not resolved by the same number, ten. A first small result can support agreement on expectations if showing it is voluntary and safe. Participants see what an entry includes, what remains open and who decides on expansion. This conversation concerns how work is organised, rather than assessing personal diligence.

If an external report is required, a convenient personal boundary does not remove its requirements. A test component cannot be called fulfilment of a promised transfer of the entire collection. An honest intermediate status can be given and the deadline or scope renegotiated if possible. Under coercion and threats, the article's voluntary trial is no suitable way to prove a right to respect. The right to stop it remains; safety and necessary external decisions are not replaced by a count of completed small steps.

A personal project can also have limits on monitoring. Denis is not obliged to keep a calendar of every movement or compare himself with others' speed. The record of a result need only help him choose further action. If recordkeeping becomes a new endless project, it can be reduced or removed. A clear result aims to clarify work, rather than produce constant self-inspection. One corrected entry may provide more needed information than a detailed count of minutes unrelated to the finding aid's quality.

X. The first result leaves a right to choose what follows

Denis has saved and checked the first usable entry: the letter was found, the uncertain date marked and access to its contents left unexpanded. This is a limited achievement. It does not confirm that the catalogue will be completed, that the next entry will be equally simple or that interest will endure. Nor must it be devalued because the large task remains unfinished. A particular part of the function and some knowledge of the method have been obtained. Exactly that can be named without extra promises.

The next decision depends on new information and conditions. Denis could repeat the method with another letter, clarify a field, seek help or pause. If the task proves inconsistent with his

current goal, he could leave it while honouring real agreements. A first result is not a subscription to further effort. Sometimes it helps reveal that the chosen project is too detailed or requires resources unavailable now. Such information does not make the trial a failure solely because no continuation follows.

The basis of the conclusion can be kept too. Denis checked finding through one entry, so he can describe this component's suitability in this case. He has not checked every storage situation or obtained publication consent. When a result's limits are recorded alongside it, later changes become easier to identify. A new difficulty does not cancel an earlier check, and an earlier successful sample does not resolve a new difficulty. Work can accumulate without requiring a display of final certainty at every stage.

A first observable result makes discussion of a large task more precise. Instead of a general declaration of finally starting, there is an action, its purpose, a checked property and a remaining question. Sometimes that is enough for the next choice; sometimes more serious preparation is needed. Neither the children's study nor the editorial example supplies a universal sequence. They leave a concrete reference point: seek a small change that honestly shows the chosen work's state while preserving the right to assistance, revision and ending a voluntary project.

What this means in practice

If you have a safe task chosen voluntarily, you can name its immediate purpose and one small result serving that purpose. For a personal finding aid, that could be an entry through which one original permitted for use can be found. Separately record what should be visible after the work and which available sign could check it. Do not choose an action requiring absent permission, qualifications or mandatory professional verification. This question may itself reveal that beginning with direct action is currently inappropriate.

After the trial, distinguish what was done from its presumed benefit. What actually appeared? What is it usable for? Which property remains unchecked? If the selected criterion proved unclear, it can be changed while the entry remains a draft. You need not achieve a feeling of success or conclude anything about self-confidence. A short note about the result can prevent an initial assumption from becoming an established fact when you return. The trial is not a scientifically validated method for changing motivation.

This invitation can be declined, reduced or stopped, especially under threat or coercion. Personal materials need not be shown to others. If the task is imposed, unsafe or concerns decisions requiring external specialists, the trial does not replace the relevant decision and verification. Completing a small result creates no obligation to continue a large project. You

may choose assistance, a pause, revision of the goal or withdrawal in light of real agreements; the article sets no compulsory pace or report.

Key quotation

> *clear markers of progress*

Bandura and Schunk, 1981, p. 587, a fragment discussing distal goals and assessing progress. These words identify a question about available reference points, rather than promising that dividing any task will create lasting motivation in an adult.

Connections between traditions

The article compares a limited research discussion of nearby goals with an editorial distinction between a usable result, preparation and permissions. Research assessment of children's arithmetic learning and an adult's choice of purpose for a family finding aid retain different conditions and grounds. This is a working analogy for a question about criteria of completed work, rather than a unified psychological theory of all tasks or a religious doctrine of action.

Sources

• Albert Bandura; Dale H. Schunk. Cultivating Competence, Self-Efficacy, and Intrinsic Interest Through Proximal Self-Motivation (1981). Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 41(3), 586–598; DOI 10.1037/0022-3514.41.3.586. Specified introductory, method and result passages and selected discussion were read; no complete reading of every page or cited study is claimed. This is a reproduction of the primary journal article on a third-party host; copyright APA, 1981, no open licence established. The children's educational study does not validate our adult practice.

Tags

large task, first result, observable action, adequacy criterion, nearby goal, subgoal, preparation, skill, learning, checking, quality, family catalogue, personal project, consent, permission, privacy, feedback, draft, uncertainty, finding, assistance, conditions, limits, voluntary participation, right to decline, revision, Bandura, Schunk, arithmetic, editorial analogy

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