

Teaching for Success:

By Raymond P. Perry **Assisting Helpless**



Photo courtesy of Health Canada

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On being asked that ubiquitous question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, my earliest recollections are unequivocally clear: to be a scientist. What exactly that means to a child of eight is uncertain, but for me it conjured up dusty rooms chock-a-block with multicoloured test tubes, beakers of bubbling fluids, and mysterious plant and animal specimens. Dutifully, I worked to master my courses, to get good grades, and to move inexorably towards the ultimate goal of attending university. As might be expected, I did very well in school, though perhaps too much time was spent with my books and not enough with my companions on the football field.

Imagine my surprise then, when in the middle of my first year at college, I was failing chemistry and physics, with little prospect for improvement by year’s end. How had this desperate situation come about? What did it mean for my dreams of becoming a scientist? All through school I had worked hard; my grades indicated that I was reasonably bright, and I enjoyed learning new things — so what happened? How does an intelligent, knowledgeable, motivated high school student become a college dropout? Was college too tough? Was I not properly prepared? Had I lost interest? Did I suddenly lose some of my vaunted IQ points, somehow become *less* intelligent? These and other questions haunt the failing student, and they certainly did me.

Understanding Mastery and Helplessness

In academic situations, students routinely seek to explain their successes and failures, to understand why they passed or failed their class assignments. For me, the explanation for why I was failing was abundantly clear: “I don’t have the ability to become a scientist,” “I’m not smart enough,” potentiating the inevitable withdrawal from the Faculty

of Science. Thus my answer for *why* I was failing, lack of ability, had direct consequences for my immediate future — dropping out. Fortunately, my quest to be a scientist did not end there, but rather continued in another forum, namely psychology. For many, however, the end of the story is not so positive — a 25% dropout rate for first-year college students!

For the past 25 years, Bernard Weiner and other scientists have explored what happens to students, and to people more generally, when they try to explain why they succeed and fail life’s challenges. These motivation researchers propose that people’s answers to these “why” questions can have dramatic effects on how they think, feel, and act in future situations. In essence, psychologists believe that we are constantly seeking to explain the world around us — Why did that happen? Why did she say that? Why did he do that? — and that the answers to these questions can impact our lives profoundly.

Attempts to answer these “why” questions are referred to as *causal search*, that is searching for a cause (explanation) for what took place. The significance of this causal search process

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Students in their Academic Development

lies at the heart of my own experience as a first-year college student, and more importantly, has much to say about the students we as teachers face in our classrooms. Consider for the moment two prototypic students that most of us have encountered in our classrooms at one time or another. Chris has been performing at a less than satisfactory level for several months and is now failing your course and others as well. In class, Chris shows little enthusiasm for the material and rarely asks a question, preferring to sit near the back of the class. Although class attendance has not been abysmal, Chris shows a tendency to “tune out” or “drift off” at times, and has been absent more than is normal. On the few occasions in which Chris has approached you after class, Chris has expressed serious doubts about not being able to understand the course material. When asked to explain the situation, Chris responds that, “I guess I just don’t have what it takes” and “I probably shouldn’t be here,” implying a lack of ability.

Now consider another student named Sandy who is also failing, but unlike Chris, believes “lack of effort” or “not trying” is the main reason. Sandy is performing about average in your course to date, but is very unhappy about the results. What is unusual about Sandy’s performance so far is the variability in marks on tests and assignments, ranging from D to B+. Sandy appears very interested in the course material, asks a lot of questions, not all of which are well-conceived, and attends class consistently. Periodic conversations have been punctuated by outbursts expressing serious frustration.

Obviously, Chris and Sandy are responding quite differently to their predicaments, and it is their inter-

pretations or explanations of failure that can be so important to us as teachers. These explanations are cognitive *markers* that have implications for how well we teach, and for what we might do to assist those who are failing. In short, they can help us diagnose the reasons for poor performance in some students and can point to useful techniques for assisting failure-prone students. They can also help us understand why other students do so well — despite insurmountable odds.

Diagnosis

Chris is clearly in trouble academically and, of several possible explanations, the one preferred here is the perspective provided by Weiner’s attribution theory. Simply put, the more in control we feel, the more motivated we are; conversely, the less control, the less motivated. More specifically, our explanations, or causal attributions, for why we succeed and fail directly affect our motivation because they imply that our academic performance is either controllable or uncontrollable. Thus, “lack of ability (intelligence),” or “poor instruction” are not controllable by us, and when we believe they are the cause of our failure, we feel unmotivated which, in turn, leads to poor performance. In contrast, “lack of effort,” “bad strategy,” or “poor note-taking” are controllable causes of failure; they can be changed by trying harder, using a better strategy, or taking clearer notes, thereby strengthening motivation and improving performance. Controllable attributions give us a sense of more personal control over our academic performance, and in turn, more motivation to achieve. Uncontrollable attributions engender less personal control and less motivation to succeed.

Cela fait longtemps que les psychologues essaient d’expliquer pourquoi certaines personnes réussissent et que d’autres échouent. Leurs explications de l’échec sont très pertinentes dans le milieu de l’éducation. Si les enseignantes et enseignants comprennent les causes de l’échec, ils pourront aider les élèves qui ont tendance à échouer et mieux comprendre les élèves qui réussissent. L’auteur examine la « théorie de l’attribution » de Bernard Weiner. Si les élèves sentent qu’ils ont un certain contrôle sur leur vie, ils se sentiront plus motivés. L’intervention d’enseignants qui se base sur ce principe peut donner des résultats positifs pour l’élève.

Because Chris believes “lack of ability” or “being dumb” is the reason for poor performance, both of which are uncontrollable causes of failure, some or all of the following can result: low self-esteem, low expectations, shame, hopelessness, weak effort, and failure. In some cases, only a few may occur and simply be seen as low motivation, but in extreme cases all may co-exist, giving rise to *learned helplessness*, an extremely serious motivation deficit. In fact, researchers studying this debilitating condition have found several indicators which describe helpless students: a lack of concentration and focus on tasks, negative emotions towards tasks, physical and psychological withdrawal from failure situations, little interest in the positive aspects of achievement situations, ineffective problem-solving strategies, forgetting prior successes and/or viewing them as irrelevant to future success, and believing lack of ability is responsible for academic failures.



Conversely, Sandy's beliefs that *controllable* causes were responsible for failure will have dramatically different consequences than Chris's beliefs that failure resulted from *uncontrollable* causes. For Sandy, self-esteem is apt to be unaffected by such attributions; expectations that performance can be improved are likely to be high. Guilt may arise for not having tried harder. Hope should be manifest, given that the causes of failure can be changed, all of which, in turn, should lead to increased persistence and improved performance. This achievement profile is referred to as a *mastery* orientation and is believed to be the impetus for successful academic development. Simply put, controllable attributions for failure produce expectations, emotions, and behaviours that lead to scholastic success.

Accordingly, the ways students explain their failures through causal search are seen by motivation researchers as the basis for future academic development. Attributing failure to uncontrollable causes can result in helplessness, as reflected in diminished self-esteem, expectations, and hope, coupled with reduced persistence and performance. In contrast, attributing failure to controllable causes can lead to mastery, evidenced by elevated expectations, hope, persistence, and performance. Note that mastery students are not immune to failure — indeed they do fail, and not infrequently! It is their response to failure that differentiates them from helpless students; their attributions to controllable causes, their willingness to try, all of which produce such different results.

Attribution Therapy: Assisting Students At Risk

If causal attributions are the difference between helpless and mastery students, then why not change the attributions of helpless students to make them more mastery oriented? This simple premise is the basis for attribution therapy in which psychologists seek to change uncontrollable causes for failure to controllable ones. Based on Weiner's theory, the procedure is a highly structured, cognitive intervention designed to change faulty

thought patterns, specifically causal attributions. Its goal is to alter undesirable attributions of success and failure to ones having positive academic outcomes. Attributing success to luck or attributing failure to lack of ability can have dire consequences for motivation and achievement striving because they are uncontrollable causes of student failure. In each case, the attribution creates the impression that achieving the goal is beyond the student's control.

These maladaptive attributions, however, can be changed to desirable ones. A "luck" attribution can be replaced with a "high ability" one, "lack of ability" with a "poor strategy" attribution, thereby producing positive changes in motivation. Under normal circumstances, attributional retraining is provided by trained therapists during several therapy sessions. The therapist communicates the desired attributions, while the client is engaged in structured cognitive exercises. Through repeated exchanges and analysis, the client eventually incorporates the desired attributions.

Similar dynamics occur between faculty and students, as students attempt to make sense of their academic performance. During and after class, faculty often hear students claim: "I don't have the smarts to do well," "I was lucky this time," or "This course is too difficult." Hearing these maladaptive (uncontrollable) attributions, the instructor is ideally situated to engage in some rudimentary attributional retraining. The instructor can encourage the student to think differently about the test or course by suggesting a more desirable (controllable) attribution: "If you didn't have the smarts, you wouldn't be here"; "Forget luck, what about your effort?" or "Difficult courses get easier with enough effort." These informal, often spontaneous, exchanges provide opportunities for the instructor to apply

some basic elements of attributional retraining. Essential to this exchange is to have students come to believe that their performance is modifiable and under their control. The successful student already understands this for the most part — it is the helpless student who needs to realize this and it is the teacher who is ideally placed to promote it.

Now consider the impact of these desirable attributions in contrast to comments faculty can and do sometimes make: "Only those who have the 'right stuff' will pass this course"; "The next exam will separate the wheat from the chaff"; "You'll be lucky to get through this course." The impact of such attributional statements on student motivation and self-worth can be devastating, because they imply that performance is the product of uncontrollable factors (e.g., intelligence) beyond the students' capacity to change. In some instances, these admonitions are seemingly well-intentioned though misdirected (to motivate students by challenging them); in others they are inspired by more sinister motives of power or dominance.

In other instances, low motivation and, in extreme cases, helplessness can result even if the instructor is attempting to be supportive. Comments such as "This material is very straightforward" and "It's as easy as falling off a log" are often heard in class. One interpretation of such statements is that the instructor intended to convey that the material was quite easy, so easy in fact that anyone could learn it. But how would a student who does not understand the material interpret this statement? The implication seems to be "I must be even more stupid than I thought," or "I'll look really stupid if I ask the teacher to explain this." Either way, the consequences of this comment can be detrimental, particularly for students who lack self-confidence, because it causes them to doubt their abilities and effectively prevents them from asking questions.

While the above example is undoubtedly an extreme one, a milder version might be a professor saying, "Now this is very easy to understand."

For the at-risk student who questions his or her ability to succeed in a particular course, this apparently innocuous comment may be equally devastating. Just as professors' comments can have negative consequences for students' motivation and achievement, they can also assist students. The statement "You all have the ability to do well in this course" not only motivates low-risk students, but it also benefits those who doubt their abilities. Thus, faculty are well advised to carefully consider the methods they use to motivate students and ask themselves what consequences the methods might have for at-risk students. Similarly, they should be sensitive to any comments that may cast doubt on students' abilities, even inadvertently.

Teaching for Success

So what does all this have to offer teachers in their struggles to deal with failure-prone students? Most notably, it provides a powerful approach to understanding and managing the classroom. It does this by allowing teachers to pinpoint an important cognitive difference between students, namely helplessness and mastery — important because it can have pronounced academic consequences. It also underscores the significance of how students perceive their educational experiences, particularly how they explain their successes and failures. As well, it highlights the impact of teachers' seemingly innocuous comments in class. Finally, it provides a direct opportunity to intervene personally to do something about the problems students are having. The assiduous application of attributional retraining offers the potential to make a difference — for helpless students by increasing their motivation, and for faculty by reducing the motivational complexity of their classrooms. ■



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He was the 1998 recipient of the CEA-Whitworth Award for Educational Research, an annual award by the Canadian Education Association to honour a person who has made a noteworthy contribution to educational research in our country. Dr. Perry has been a pioneer in the study of the educational development of college students, notably in the identification of markers which determine helplessness

and mastery in students and in teaching techniques which can contribute to these tendencies in students. His work has led to the development of practical, classroom-based teaching methods designed to assist high-risk, failure-prone students and has enabled a clearer understanding of achievement-striving in success-oriented students.

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