ATTRIBUTION AND MOTIVATION

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Abstract:

Academic goals, motivation and learned helplessness are discussed in regard to predictive factor, i.e. attribution. The way students attribute the causes of their success and failure can affect their motivation. Attributing failure to internal, stable, and uncontrollable factors are not desirable in academic setting as it shows learned helplessness tendency. Based on previous studies, attribution retraining can be one of the solutions that can help students who have disadvantaging attributions.

Key words: attribution, academic motivation, learned helplessness, attribution retraining

There are many kinds of students in any academic setting. There are students who are motivated to learn, but on the other hand there are students who are not. Students' motivation is an important factor in learning process. Their motivation drives them to behave in a certain way (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) and affects the quality of behavior and thinking (Maehr, 2001). Previous studies have shown that students' motivation affected their academic performance (Elliot, 1999; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). There are a lot of factors that can affect student's motivation. This article discusses one of those factors i.e. attribution and its relation with motivation. Learned helplessness is also discussed in regards to students' academic condition.

Attribution

People tend to try to make sense of their surroundings. They tend to give reasons for their successes and failures. The same goes in academic setting. Students give reasons of their academic success and failure. A student who received a good grade for his/her test might attribute the good grade due to his/her studying hard or luck. Another student who received a bad grade for the same test might attribute the bad grade due to his/her lack of sleep, the mood of the lecturer, or his/her lack of studying. The way students think about what caused their outcomes is called attribution (Weiner, 1992).

Weiner (1985) defined three dimensions of attribution: locus of control, stability, and controllability. One can perceive the causes of one’s outcomes to be from oneself (internal) or someone/something else (external). This is what is called locus of control, which can be internal or external. One can perceive the causes of one’s outcomes to be permanent/stable or impermanent/unstable. One can also perceive the causes of one’s outcomes to be controllable or uncontrollable, to be personally controlled or externally controlled. A student who attribute the causes of his/her good grade to his/her studying hard would be making internal (locus of control), unstable, and controllable attributions. When s/he attribute the causes of his/her good grade to luck, that would make it external (locus of control), unstable, and uncontrollable attributions. By the same token, a student
who attribute the causes of his/her bad grade to lack of study would be making internal (locus of control), unstable, and controllable attributions. When s/he attribute the bad grade to the teacher’s mood that would be making external (locus of control), stable (as long as the teacher is teaching him/her), and uncontrollable attributions.

One’s attribution governs one’s behavior in predictable ways from one situation to another (McInerney & McInerney, 1998). It can even affect their willingness to help others when they perceive the causes of the need to be stable and uncontrollable such as an illness (Weiner, 1985). One’s attribution can also affect one’s emotions, for example, students who attribute their success to internal factors such as their ability will feel better about themselves than students who attribute their success to external factors such as luck (Weiner, 1985). When students feel better about themselves, they would be more likely to do another task.

How students attribute the causes of their success and failure will affect their motivation in undertaking further tasks (Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Maclellan, 2005). Imagine a student who always attributes the causes of his/her failure to his/her lack of intelligence and another student who attributes the causes of his/her failure to his lack of effort. Which of the two would be more likely to try again when facing with difficulties? Attributing failure to controllable factors is known to promote, not only approach behavior but also, motivational activation (Hoffman, 1982). Students who attributed failure to a temporary (unstable) lack of effort had been to have a positive view about their academic career (Curren & Harich, 1993).

Types of Motivation

Motivation affects the quality, timing, and appropriateness of cognitive strategies in learning (Covington, 2000). There are differences of motivation among students. There is a well-known type of motivation in academic setting, i.e. achievement goal orientation. Achievement goal orientation refers to the desire to develop or demonstrate competence at an activity (Dweck, 1986). There are two types of achievement goal motivation: the learning goal and the performance goal (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Students who have a learning goal orientation want to gain new knowledge, skills, understanding and strategies. They perceive negative outcomes as information to improve the learning process (Grant & Dweck, 2003). A learning goal orientation encourages continuing, high level engagement in learning (Wolters, 2004). It has been to be a positive predictor for deep processing, which involves integrating new information with prior knowledge and experience (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Wolters, 2004). It relates to positive affect and higher self-efficacy (Bandalos, Geske, & Finney, 2003; Smith, Sinclair, & Chapman, 2002).

Performance goals can be classified into performance approach and performance avoidance goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot, 1999). Students with performance approach goals want to perform well in order to show their competence, whereas students with performance avoidance goals want to protect themselves from the perception that they are not competent. Though performance approach goals have been found to predict surface processing (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999), it can help students to achieve (Meece & Holt, 1993). Students with performance approach goals invest
considerable effort in their effort to outperform others (Wolters, Yu, & Pintrich, 1996) which can explain why it can help students to perform well.

Performance avoidance goals are associated with the use of self-handicapping strategies (Urdan, 2004) e.g. cheating, unattainable goals, or having minor weaknesses to protect themselves from being perceived to have greater imagined weaknesses (academic wooden leg), which involve purposely creating impediments to undermine one's performance (Martin, 1998). Students with performance avoidance goals commonly employ self-handicapping strategies to protect their ego. Protecting one's ego ensures that failure, if it occurred, would not be ascribed by themselves or others to low ability (Weiner, 2010). Performance avoidance goals were found to negatively predict deep processing and exam performance (Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999).

Another type of motivation is known as work avoidance. Students with work avoidance motivation deliberately avoid engaging in academic tasks or attempt to minimize the effort to complete them (Archer, 1994). They are different from students with performance avoidance goals in the way that they are not concerned to look incompetent. They may adopt a work avoidance goal orientation as a way of expressing their negative attitudes toward schoolwork, avoiding failure, or coping with the constraints and demands of the learning situation (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988).

Learned Helplessness

In academic setting, there are also students who seem to have given up. They seem to believe that whatever they do will not help them. Learned helplessness is a condition where students expect their actions to be futile in affecting future outcomes (Alderman, 2004). Learned helpless students are in contrast from learning goal students. These students tend to avoid challenges and to be lacking in persistence (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). They do not see the connection between their actions and performance, and that failure is something insurmountable (Dweck, Davidson, Nelson, & Enna, 1978; Dweck & Goetz, 1978). Learned helpless students tend to attribute failure to stable and uncontrollable factors such as a lack of ability, which shows a belief in the powerlessness to control the outcomes (Dweck et al., 1978). Perhaps, that is why, unlike learning goals students, they spend little time searching for ways to overcome failure (Diener & Dweck, 1978). It is sad to know that helplessness beliefs can cause amotivation (Pelletier, Dion, Tuson, & Green-Demers, 1999).

Attribution Pattern for Motivation

There are differences in the way students attributed the causes of their success and failures, which relate to their motivation. Students with learning goals were found to attribute the causes of their failures to the faulty of the learning strategies employed (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996), in contrast to learned helpless students who tend to attribute their failure to lack of ability (Dweck et al., 1978). Not employing the right strategies refers to effort, which implies internal, unstable, and controllable attributions; while lack of ability implies internal, stable, and uncontrollable attributions. The nature of performance approach goals lies in the demonstration of one's competence. Students with performance approach goals want to show how competent they are compared to other students. As such, perhaps when facing failure, they will try to overcome that to show that they are competent. They might employ different strategies or put in more effort to
help them to show their competence, which implies to internal, unstable, and controllable attributions. Students with performance avoidance goals try their best to avoid looking bad in front of others. They often employ self-handicapping strategies in order to have an explanation handy for their failure. Thus, they might be more likely to attribute the causes of their failure to external and uncontrollable attributions. Students with work avoidance goals avoid engaging in academic tasks. They do not concern with the notion of looking incompetent. It just their interests lie in areas other than the classroom. As such, when faced with failure they would likely to attribute the causes to be internal, unstable, and controllable attributions as it depends on themselves to want or not want to do any tasks.

Previous Studies on Attribution Retraining

As students’ attribution of the causes of their success and failure affect their subsequent motivation, whether they want to take further tasks or not, then it is important to help them to have reasonable attribution for their success and failure. By helping them to put things into perspectives, so they would not perceive failures as something permanent and uncontrollable. Also to help them to perceive success as something that is attainable. Perceiving one’s success to be uncontrollable by oneself is also something that should be taken into consideration. It is possible to retrain one’s attributions (see Dweck 1975; Perry & Penner, 1990). This section describes three previous studies on attribution retraining. One study dealt with attribution retraining with children participants, and the other two studies had university students as attribution retraining participants. 

Dweck (1975) did an Attribution Retraining Treatment with children as participants. Children who were trained to attribute failure to a lack of effort rather than lack of ability, showed superior performance failure following nature. Children with learned helplessness profile were trained to attribute failure to insufficient effort. This caused them to persist after failure. The study (Dweck, 1975) also showed that children who were trained to attribute success to effort, but were not trained to attribute failure to effort, did not show an improvement in their response to failure. It seems that retraining one’s attribution regarding one’s failure is more important as it helps them to gain perspective on how to deal with failures and thus would encourage their future expectation.

Another retraining attribution with university student participants showed that attribution retraining helped external-locus control students to learn more during lectures and to use study materials better, which improved their performance on lecture and homework material, though internal-locus students did not show the same results (Perry & Penner, 1990). It seems as external locus students were used to attribute things to external causes, the retraining was beneficial to them as it helped them to think that they were instrumental in their learning process, and as internal-locus students already made this attribution, the retraining did not change a thing for them.

Another attribution retraining (Menec, Perry, Struthers, Schonwetter, Hechter, & Eichholz, 1994) with at-risk college students showed that attribution retraining did help improving achievement for external locus-students. The retraining also helped them to take more responsibility for their performance, attributing their performance to factors such as effort and ability. As internal-locus is thought to be better than external-locus, the study seems to show that attribution retraining is a good way to induce internal-locus attribution.
Implications and Conclusions

Perceiving the causes of one's failure wrongly can affect one's motivation. Thus, it is important to have the right way of perceiving the causes of one's failure in any academic setting. Previous studies have shown that one's attribution can be retrained. Attribution retraining will help students who have disadvantaging attributions. It should be noted that it is important to use errors as vehicles to teach students to handle failure (Dweck, 1975) in retraining students' attribution. Attribution retraining can also help students to feel that they are responsible for their performance instead of external causes as shown by Perry and Penner's study (1990) and Menec et al.'s study (1994).

Based on the discussion about students' motivation, it seems that there are students who can benefit from attribution retraining, i.e. learned helpless students, who hold a performance avoidance goal orientation, and students who have a work avoidance goal orientation. Training students to attribute their failure to lack of effort instead of lack of ability would be beneficial for learned helpless students. Focusing that the more effort they put, the more likely they will have a better result would encourage them to be persistent. For performance avoidance students, training them to perceive that failure i.e. looking incompetent, is not due to their lack of ability would also help. It might increase their wanting to do tasks without thinking of looking incompetent. As students with work avoidance goals, perhaps it is not retraining their attribution toward failure that would be helpful. But, arousing their interest of things related to classroom would. One of the things that can do that is by making the lessons relevant to them. Reframing or retraining the way they perceive the advantage of to be motivated in academic things would be appropriate.

Students' motivation is an important concept in academic setting. It differs from one student to another but it is necessary in order to have a conducive learning process. The way students perceive the causes of their success and failure is important as it can determine their motivation and emotion. Some students might have inadequate ways to perceive the causes of their success and failure which affect their motivation. Training students to perceive the causes of their success and failures to internal, unstable, and controllable attributions would help them to put things into perspective and help them to feel better about themselves, and subsequently promote their motivation.

References


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