Adaptive Student Attributions

OSU Motivation in Classrooms Lab – Motivation Minute. October 2021.

How can I support students' internal motivations?

Attribution Theory:

Describes how the student's interpretation of events impacts their motivation for future tasks. Attributions are comprised of three causal dimensions:

- **Locus** refers to the source of causes in relation to the self (internal vs. external).
  - Internal causes originate within oneself ("I should have tried harder")
  - External causes originate outside oneself ("The task was too difficult").
- **Stability** refers to how consistent the causes are over time (unstable vs. stable).
  - Unstable causes are viewed as something that can be changed ("I will try harder next time")
  - Stable causes are viewed as unchanging ("I'm just not good at school").
- **Controllability** refers to how much control over the situation one perceives oneself as having (controllable vs. uncontrollable).
  - Controllable causes are viewed as something one has control over ("Next time, I will ask for help")
  - Uncontrollable causes are viewed as something one has no control over ("I have bad luck with tests").
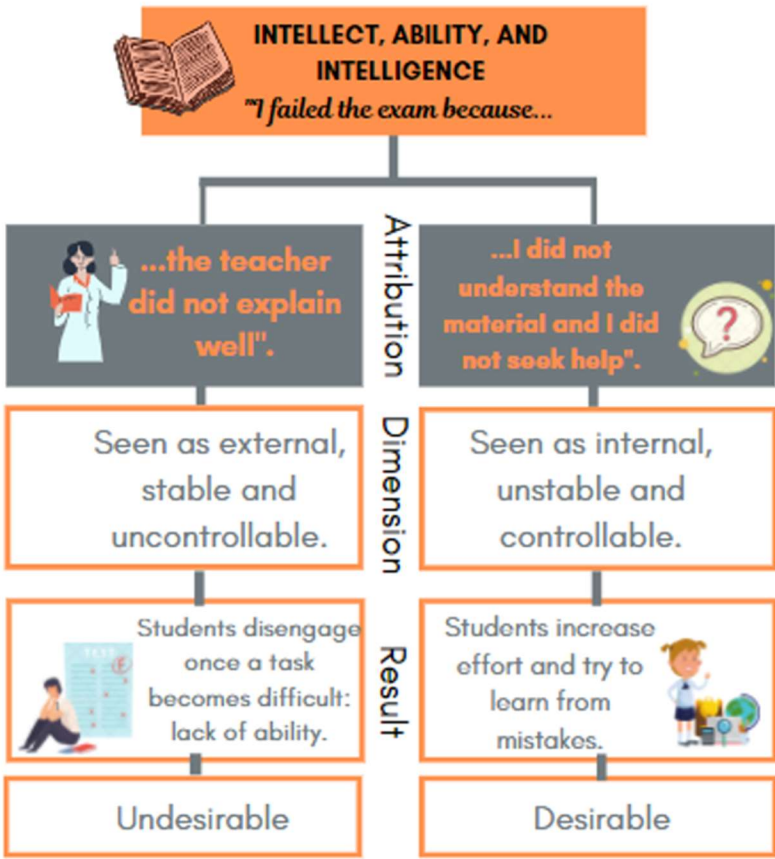
Using attribution theory to support adaptive forms of motivation: striving for internal, unstable, and controllable attributes.

Example situation: A student fails an exam then reflects on what caused the poor grade.

Locus	
Internal: "I had a low grade because I did not understand the topic, did not ask for help, and did not study long enough."	*External*: "I had a low grade because the teacher did not explain the material well enough."
Stability	
Unstable: "I failed because I did not understand the material. Next time, I am going to ask my teacher for help to better understand the information so that I will be more prepared."	*Stable:* "I failed the exam because I am not good at school, and I am not smart enough; that will never change"
Controllability	
Controllable: "I failed because I spent my afternoon playing video games instead of reviewing my notes. I will get a better grade if I try harder and spend more time studying."	*Uncontrollable:* "I failed because the test was poorly designed, and my neighbors are always noisy when I try to study."

Recommendations:

- **Encourage students to see their own role in their successes and failures.**
- **Teach students that intelligence and ability are unstable and can be developed.**

References:

Weiner, B. (2010). Attribution theory. International Encyclopedia of Education, 6, 559–563. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0098

Yough, M. & Cho, H. (2015). Attribution theory. In H. G. Scarlett (Ed.), *Classroom management: An a-to-z guide* (pp. 71-74). Sage. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346243

OSU Motivation in Classrooms Lab – Motivation Minute

Compiled by Tiffiney Winchester, Lina Barrero-Molina, and Kody Long