

SLAIHEE Newsletter

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How to facilitate academic motivation in Students *Prof. Marie Perera, Faculty of Education, University of Colombo*

Introduction

This article discusses two very significant concepts in social psychology which have great implications for academic motivation. That is attribution theory and learned helplessness.

Attribution Theory

The extent to which a person wishes to succeed influences his/her activities and consequently the degree of success in a wide range of circumstances. When people succeed or fail at a task they think about whom or what was responsible for their performance. That is, they make attributions about whom or what was responsible for their performance. These attributions are related to subsequent behaviour as well as feelings both positive and negative.

Weiner's (1984, 1986, 1990, 1992) work in attribution theory suggests that the four most commonly cited reasons students use to

explain why they did or did not do well on a task tend to include one or more of four possibilities:

- Ability
- Effort
- Task difficulty
- Luck

Students also attribute different reasons as causes of not doing well. Weiner (1986) classifies attributes along three dimensions that is, the *locus (source) of control, stability and controllability*. The concept of *locus of control* refers to a person's general expectancy for events that affect the individual to be controlled by internal or external factors. If a student claims that s/he did well on a test because s/he is good in that subject s/he is attributing her/his success to ability which is an internal characteristic. On the other hand, if the student believes that s/he did well because the test was easy or the teacher was lenient she is attributing

the success to external factors – test or the teacher.

Another characteristic of attribution is *stability* or lack of it. That is, some attributions refer to a temporary factor, relating only to a specific task. For example, a student might say that s/he did not score well at the test as s/he was not well that day. On the other hand another student might say that s/he always gets low marks as s/he can never master grammatical competence. While the first student attributes failure to a temporary or unstable factor the second student's attribution is stable.

Attributions also vary along a dimension known as *controllability*. If a student feels that s/he did not do well in some activity as it was too difficult then s/he is attributing her/his failure to factors beyond her/his control. On the other hand if s/he considers failure due to her/him not making enough effort the attribution is within that person's control.

The way a person assigns attributions can affect her/his performance or future tasks. If one believes that a failure is controllable s/he may be encouraged by the failure to do better the next time. On the other hand, if one believes that the failure cannot be controlled s/he may not even try to improve performance.

As the above discussion indicates due to a variety of reasons there are individual differences in students' experiences of control over their lives. Extreme instances of lack of such control are found in what Seligman (1975) terms as *learned helplessness*.

Theory of Learned Helplessness

According to Learned Helplessness theory (Seligman, 1994, Gordon & Gordon, 1996) aversive uncontrollable events creates three basic deficits in people – motivational, cognitive and emotional – that destroys the person's desire to learn.

The *motivational deficit* stops learning by aborting the person's initiation of voluntary responses. The learned helpless student believes s/he has no control over the learning process and, after many failures, gives up trying.

It is a cognitive deficit as it is a learned conditioned response. Mere exposure to uncontrollability is not sufficient to make the student helpless but the student must come to expect that outcomes are inevitable. In addition, there is cognitive debilitation and a failure of logical perception and thinking.

The emotional deficit leads to depression and lowered self esteem. Depressed students may have problem behaviour, which they express through anger, aggression, and other rebellious acts.

It is the perception the student makes of the failure that leads to the expectancies and the subsequent deficits. It is not just the failure but the way the student sees the failure that is important. The causal perception is in other words what Weiner (1986) refers to as attribution. The many attributions a person makes develop into her/his explanatory style. Seligman (1990) defines explanatory style as the manner in which a person habitually explains why events happen. A continuous negative, pessimistic style is inherited from the parents, but is also shaped by the home, school and community environment. It is also formed from negative life crises, such as death, divorce and

separation from loved ones (Gordon & Gordon, 1996).

Whether or not a student learns is a direct consequence of his/her explanatory style or the attributions s/he makes. The student who believes that failure to learn the second language is based on lack of ability (an internal factor) is convinced that s/he will have similar failure and, therefore, is unlikely to make an effort to change that expectancy. If the student sees his failure as due to lack of effort (an unstable and changeable condition) then he may see the possibility of changing this behaviour).

An important assumption of attribution theory is that people will interpret their environment in such a way as to maintain a positive self-image. That is, they will attribute their successes or failures to factors that will enable them to feel as good as possible about themselves.

Although in the past Seligman and his associates were more interested in explaining learned helplessness currently as claimed by Pagares (2000) they like other Positive psychologists are trying to shift the focus to the study of “learned optimism and perseverance” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000a b; Gilham & Seligman, 1997). Researchers have found that possessing an *optimistic explanatory style* is related to adaptive academic benefits, including academic achievement, positive goal orientation, and use of learning strategies, whereas pessimistic explanatory style is associated with negative outcomes and with learned helplessness (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Peterson, 1990; Seligman, 1991).

The above explanation indicates that there is a relationship between attributions, learned helplessness and motivation to learn. As

Seligman (1990, p.56) states when a student is doing poorly at school, it is all too easy for his/her teachers, parents, and others to conclude falsely that he is untalented or even stupid. The student may be depressed and have learned helplessness and this learned behaviour may be preventing him from fulfilling his potential”.

Based on the above discussion a few guidelines for lecturers are:

1. To encourage students to persist at academic tasks, help them establish a sincere belief that they are competent and that occasional imperfections or failures are the result of external factors that need not be present on future occasions.

2. However, it is not beneficial for students to attribute their successes entirely to ability. If they think they already have all the ability they need, they may feel that additional effort is superfluous. The ideal attribution for success is, “I succeeded because I am a competent person and worked hard”

3. Organize academic tasks which are challenging but not too challenging for the students who work hard. It is very demotivating for students to fail repeatedly after a making a serious effort at academic tasks. This will lead to either students believing that they are not competent or stop attributing their failure to lack of effort.

4. Students should be made to understand the concept of effort correctly. Trying harder or doing ineffective activities does not constitute effort. They should realize that effort means devoting effective academic learning time to a task.

5. Competition will encourage students to persist. However excessive competitive grading and evaluation systems are likely to impair the learning of many students. In many instances, success in competition is completely beyond the learner’s control – no matter how hard a learner works.

6. In general, it is best for students to have an internal locus of control and believe that it is their own behavior rather than external factors that leads to success or failure.

7. Teachers should help the students to develop learned optimism and perseverance.

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Supporting Educational Development in Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
Prof. Nelun de Silva, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ruhuna

One of the aims and values of the SLAIHEE is to support existing as well as emerging aspects of *educational development* in the Sri Lankan universities so as to make it relevant and applicable to the Sri Lankan development. In this context the executive committee of the SLAIHEE organized a half day workshop on "Effective Teaching and Learning through Constructive Alignment" in Faculty of Medicine and Allied Sciences, Rajarata University on 2nd December 2009, from 8.45 am to 1 pm.

The resource persons were *Dr. Enoka Corea*, Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Microbiology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, *Nelun de Silva*, Prof. of Microbiology, Faculty of Medicine, Galle. University of Ruhuna, *Dr K. Shriganeshan*, Senior Lecturer in English, English Language Teaching Unit, Faculty of Business Studies, Vavuniya Campus, Jaffna University and *Mr. Hasitha Pathirana*, Lecturer, English Language Teaching Unit, University of Kelaniya.

The aims of the Workshop were to make participants aware of the principles of constructive alignment and the use of constructive alignment in teaching and learning. We hoped that by the end of the Workshop the participants would be able to describe the principles of constructive alignment, apply constructive alignment in teaching and learning and formulate objectives and design teaching learning methods and assessments to constructively align teaching and learning.

The pre-workshop preparations included communicating with the Director, SDC of Rajarata University for funds and for dissemination of information regarding the Workshop to all the faculties of the University.

The majority of the participants were from the Faculty of Medicine and Allied Sciences while four teachers from the Faculty of Agriculture and four from the Faculty of Applied Sciences made up the group of 20. The participants were informed to bring with them a component of their own curriculum for group work.

The Workshop commenced at 9 am following the registration of participants and they were welcomed by the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Allied Sciences. This was followed by the aims and objectives of the Workshop and a plenary on 'levels of thinking about teaching' and 'Constructive alignment and its components'.

The inputs in the Workshop were on general and specific objectives, Blooms taxonomy, teaching learning methods and assessments and how each component had to be constructively aligned to each other for effective learning to take place. The final plenary was on the role of the institutional climate in teaching and learning where the different perspectives of university teachers and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs were examined and the importance of climate conducive to learning and the importance of mentoring were identified. The participants reflected on the importance of learner friendly environment, the importance of mentoring and discussed the applicability of Maslow's hierarchy of needs with our system.

The participants were grouped according to their subject specialties. Following each plenary the groups were involved in activities to prepare the general and specific objectives, identify the appropriate teaching and learning methods to encourage deep learning and design relevant assessments for

the module or section of curriculum they had brought with them. The final activity was to put it all together on an overhead transparency and prepare a presentation.

Each group then presented their constructively aligned section of the curriculum and effective feedback and comments were given by the participants and resource persons.

The evaluation of the Workshop by the participants was done on a standard questionnaire and the workshop concluded around 2 pm.

Many of the participants appreciated the Workshop inputs and most had enjoyed the group activities. Some had indicated that it was possible to put into practice what they had learned on constructive alignment in the near future. Few of the participants expressed their disappointment on the medical orientation of the Workshop inputs. The majority were of the opinion that the Workshop was a little bit rushed and suggested a full day Workshop with lunch.

The executive committee of SLAIHEE would like to thank the following persons whose contributions were invaluable for the success of this Workshop:

Director, SDC Rajarata University for providing funds and dissemination of information to the faculties.

Dean, Faculty of Medicine and Allied Sciences for permission to conduct the Workshop in this Faculty and for her encouragement and facilitation from the onset.

Dean, Faculty of Agriculture, Rajarata University, for sending participants

Dean, Faculty of Applied Sciences, Rajarata University, for sending participants

Academic staff of the Department of Microbiology for pre-workshop preparation and compiling the files.

Previous Workshops conducted by SLAIHEE

1. Workshop on “Diversifying Assessments in Teaching Languages and Literature in Higher Education”
2. Workshop on “5S”
3. Workshop on “Reflective Practice” for University of Ruhuna

Upcoming Workshop: “Effective Teaching and Learning through Constructive Alignment” for the University of Jaffna – Vavuniya campus