

Attribution Theory—or Thinking about Success

“Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can’t lose.” --Bill Gates

Decisions, decisions! How do we decide what to provide in our feedback on students’ work? Do we note what needs correcting, so the next draft is less painful to read? (“Get to the point.” “Use spell check.” “Please use the tutors at the Writing Center.”) Or do we nurture and encourage? (“Awesome introduction, now make the other nine pages look as good.”) As important as specific suggestions about content and format can be, work in the area of attribution theory suggests that in the long run we serve our students better if we provide feedback to address their effort and ability to change rather than to justify a grade to a “product.”

Let's be clear. This approach doesn't involve grading on effort. Instead, it means that we design assignments and feedback in ways that help students see the role of their own efforts in success or failure. Recent research by Carol Dweck from Stanford University suggests that we help students conceptualize failures or errors as temporary setbacks that can be overcome with effort. Dweck contrasts two mindsets—fixed and growth. People with the fixed mindset (“I’m no good at math.” “I just can’t write.”) rarely persist in the face of difficulties because they attribute their performance to unchangeable personal traits. In contrast, people with a growth mindset are more likely to persist and succeed because they focus on something changeable—the role of their own effort.

Here are three ways to help students develop a growth mindset.

1. Design some assignments where students can learn from their mistakes. This might be a scaffolded approach to a major paper with feedback concentrated on an early draft, or perhaps a series of similar assignments over the semester.
2. Provide feedback that supports improvement—be specific about what could lead to a better performance next time.
3. Build “metacognitive moments” into a course by asking students to describe what they did to complete an assignment and how much that helped them succeed. Dweck provides evidence that changing students’ focus to “mastered” vs. “not yet mastered” helps them improve their level of effort.

Unlike intelligence, which students may see as fixed and beyond their control, persistence is a flexible and controllable factor—and far more useful as a motivating force in our students’ lives.

--Lisa Lockhart (psychology)

Want to learn more?

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Random House. (Available in the CTL library.)

The Brainwaves Video Anthology. (2015, January 21). *Carol Dweck - Mindset: The new psychology of success* [Video File]. Retrieved from URL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQ0VQjKU8og>