

## Attribution Theory and Locus of Control In Education

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Let's face it, when it comes to driving home and being cut up by some valued member of society on a Friday evening after a difficult week at work we are unlikely to give them the benefit of the doubt with the duress of their week. We are more likely to make considerable assumptions about their family lineage and possibly the size of their anatomy. Or am I alone in this?

This example underlines an aspect of our Western, individualistic psychology; that of fundamental attribution error. This is the tendency to explain other's actions as stemming from dispositions even in the presence of clear situational causes (Baron and Byrne, 2000). International studies of collectivist cultures show less of an inclination to think this way, (see Morris and Pang (1994) or Triandis (1990)). But in the West we take this cognitive short-cut often, otherwise we might find ourselves inundated with thoughts about everyone else's day and how that might explain their behaviour. It saves us time and energy.

It does however leave our views of other people as being static and broadly consistent over time with very little room for change and development. If behaviour is caused by their disposition what scope is there to change? What, almost therapeutic, approaches do we need to allow our above erratic driver to become an even more valued member of society?

We can observe such thinking in staffroom banter when colleagues discuss various groups of children. It may sound unprofessional, flying in the face of the Teachers' Standards (2012) , "Establish a safe and stimulating environment *rooted in mutual respect* ." [Italics added] or in expectation that we "demonstrate consistently the positive attitudes, values and behaviour

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which are expected of pupils.” (DfE, 2011 p.6) but in reality colleagues are aware that we should not allow such attitudes to stay with us beyond that doorway. Phrases describing Health and Social Care or Child Development students as “tarts with hearts” or bottom set year eight classes as being very kinaesthetic serve an efficacy and emotional need to allow colleagues to spleen-vent or share good practice with regards to behaviour for learning but are they in reality kept within those four walls?

In education we have been told at various points in the recent past that we should include various teaching strategies based on so-called academic research. Visual, auditory and kinaesthetic classifications of students is one example which though having produced the positive outcome of increasing variety of delivery and learning methodologies has also led to such short-cut thinking about our students. An oversimplification of the ideas has led Demos (2004) to note,

...it is sometimes claimed that learning styles are largely fixed and innate. This belief- which is curiously reminiscent of now largely abandoned notions of fixed and inherited intelligence- can lead teachers to label students as having a particular learning style and to provide materials that are appropriate to that style ( in Sharp, Bowker, Byrne, 2008 p.300-301).

Once this has been established the effects on students can include an internalisation of this category that can be used as a self-disabling approach to different learning strategies leading to lack of motivation and self-fulfilling prophecies (Demos, 2004, in Sharp, Bowker, Byrne, 2008). I have had one of my own students from a year 8 Citizenship lesson claim that the current part of the lesson was “too visual” for him.

And do not get me started on brain lateralisation and brain gym.

Now going back to our Friday evening drive home, it is equally unlikely that if we were to cut some other driver up we would chastise ourselves for being such a permanent numpty. We are probably going to attribute our lack of concentration and thus errant driving to the week we’ve just had, the meeting with the head being traumatising or the year eight class full of non-visual learners. Thus we stumble across the more flexible and transient attribution of situational / environmental factors. This is one half of the actor-observer effect. When we explain our behaviour we tend to attribute it to the situation we find ourselves in rather than

on our personality. The other half being that we tend to attribute dispositional explanations to other people's behaviour (as above).

It is the attributional errors or cognitive short-cuts that are challenged by reflective thinking required by the Government as part of the preamble to the new standards,

The new standards have been designed to set out a basic framework within which all teachers should operate from the point of initial qualification onwards. Appropriate self-evaluation, reflection and professional development activity is critical to improving teachers' practice at all career stages.(DfE, 2011 p.4)

When faced with reflecting on an unsuccessful lesson we are faced with the opposite way of thinking and attribution of cause. The students did not learn as well as expected, not because of their dispositions but, because of the situation they found themselves in, i.e. the lesson with its incumbent resources, delivery, assessment, entry, place in the timetable, demeanour of the teacher etc. Additionally the teacher is faced with the analysis of why he/ she created such an environment which then possibly raises questions of their own values, preconceptions and attitudes towards that particular group should the reflection go that far. These questions demand a reflection on their own disposition.

Reflection then raises questions of practice regarding what needs changing, what can be changed and how to make the change. It is the question of what can be changed that introduces the concept of my particular interest, that of Locus of Control (LoC) as described by Rotter (cited in 1975 p. 57)

When a reinforcement is perceived by the subject as following some action of his own but not being entirely contingent upon his action, then, in our culture, it is typically perceived as the result of luck, chance, fate, as under the control of powerful others, or as unpredictable because of the great complexity of the forces surrounding him. When the event is interpreted in this way by an individual, we have labelled this a belief in *external control*. If the person perceives that the event is contingent upon his own behaviour or his own relatively permanent characteristics, we have termed this a belief in *internal control* (Rotter, 1966).

As applied to reflective thinking in education teachers need to be aware of their own bias, be it intensely internal or excessively external. I have found in my experience that the latter is a cognitive approach to reflection that weak ITT trainees often display. One particular trainee had a tendency to attribute his lack of development in classroom practice to the school's

behaviour policy and implementation, the position of his classroom, the state of the corridor outside his room and the socio-economic status of the majority of his students. Rarely did he consider his own behaviour in class, planning and resources, use of praise or anything that might be within his control.

On the face of it an external locus of control in extremis lends itself to demotivation and slow progress. A poor lesson might be attributed to students' lack of ability / intelligence, lack of self-control and poor school systems. What targets could such reflective analysis realistically set? Where would the blame lie for such problems- everywhere but the trainee themselves. Given such external obstacles to development, realistic and personal target setting, motivation and self-esteem are all under threat.

On the other hand an internal LoC places the same lesson in a very different perspective. Reflection raises questions about: resources used and were they designed to be accessible to all; the entry into the classroom being appropriate to establish the best possible environment for learning; the behaviour for learning strategies and the effective use of praise over punishment. Targets set from these reflections allow for personal development and are within the control of the trainee. Motivation and self-esteem then are at least given the opportunity to prosper.

It could be argued that Locus of Control for the teaching profession has been becoming more external as Government and OFSTED expectations shape not only what we teach (the National Curriculum and / or the English Baccalaureate) but also how we teach with synthetic phonics and almost minute by minute assessment for learning.

Just a thought for your drive home.

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