Attributional Retraining: Rethinking Academic Failure to Promote Success

The NCTN Research to Practice Briefs are designed to disseminate emerging college transition research from a variety of sources in a user-friendly format.

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Why is Attributional Retraining important for college transition students?

One of the biggest concerns for teachers and counselors is how to encourage college-transition students to continue down the exciting but long academic road that lies ahead of them. Current research finds that for academically unprepared or underprepared students, traits in the so-called "affective domain," such as degree of motivation or level of anxiety, are more important predictors of student performance than traits in the "cognitive domain" such as academic ability (Hill, 2004). Attributional Retraining (AR) is designed to enhance motivation and encourage achievement by changing how students think about their academic successes and failures so that their beliefs work for, rather than against, their chances for academic success.

Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom’s Taxonomy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>feelings, attitudes, beliefs, preferences, values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychomotor</td>
<td>perception, physical skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Classification framework begun by Benjamin Bloom and colleagues in 1948 (Bloom’s Taxonomy); domains now considered to overlap. See tip.psychology.org/taxonomy.html

What is Attributional Retraining (AR)?

AR comes from attributional theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985), a theory of motivation. According to attributional theory, people look for causes to explain outcomes and events in their environment, especially ones that are unexpected, important or negative. In an academic setting, according to the theory, students will look for causes for their academic successes and failures, and the causes they identify will shape the way they view their own academic competence. Attributional Retraining is designed to replace a student’s unhelpful explanations about his or her academic performance with explanations that will sustain motivation.

For example, a student may attribute a bad test grade to inherent lack of ability. If the student believes she simply does not have "what it takes" to succeed academically, the student will naturally be less motivated to continue striving for success. In this example, a teacher might point out that the test was more difficult than the student expected, and go on to discuss test preparation strategies to use next time. In general, those students who feel they have some control over their academic success are more likely to recover from academic setbacks. (See tip.psychology.org/weiner.html)

What does current research say about Attributional Retraining?

Most studies on AR in academic settings involve one-time interventions. For example, in several studies "at risk" college freshmen viewed a videotape of college seniors talking about how changing the way they thought about initial academic failures improved their performance. The seniors stressed that they originally attributed their academic problems to low ability but eventually realized that using the college support system and changing their study habits led to success. The AR videotape interventions in the studies correlated with increased final course grade, increased grade point average and/or reduction in withdrawals from college at the end of the semester (see a comprehensive review of the studies in Perry, Hechter, Menec & Weinberg, 1993).

While it is difficult to find AR research studies that focus specifically on GED and Adult Diploma Program (ADP) graduates, most of the studies focus on incoming college students who require developmental education, and this group often includes adults with non-traditional diplomas. The studies showed that AR works best under the following circumstances:

- when "at risk" students are below but close to the college academic standard
- when coupled with high quality teaching, including teaching of study skills and note-taking
- as part of opportunities to experience success
- with coursework that does not have a "myth of innate ability" – for example, the assumption that some people are just better at math
- when successful learning is thought of as mastery over time rather than hinging on one specific test or activity
What might AR look like in practice?

**Discussion.** To what does a student attribute his or her academic success or failure? Is it something over which the student has control? Does the attribution take into consideration the whole picture? Faced with statements like, "I'm not smart enough to pass," respond by exploring the many reasons why students fail. Have students reflect on and discuss their perceptions. Explain the importance of their perceptions.

**Role-play.** Use role-play scenarios to introduce students to different ways of thinking about poor performance.

**Teacher modeling.** As part of your routine interaction with students, share how you have been able to change your own thinking about your successes and failures. For example: "When I was a new teacher and had trouble coming up with activities that worked well in the classroom, at first I thought it was because I wasn't really cut out to be a teacher, but later I came to understand that by asking for help from other, more experienced teachers, I was able to improve my lesson planning skills."

**Student modeling.** Invite graduates of your program who are now attending college to come back and give a short presentation to your current students. Ask them to talk about what they thought about their academic abilities at the beginning of college and how that understanding has changed over time.

**Analyzing success.** Although most students focus on their failures, it is also important to examine the causes of success. Which strategies are helpful and why and for whom?

**Teaching strategies that enhance student control.** This could include case study readings, affirmations, encouraging students to strive for mastery rather than simply passing, and helping students anticipate and prepare for what will be difficult in college by talking about and simulating the college environment.

A **caveat.** Attributing causes, especially to failure, can serve a self-protective purpose. While teachers and counselors may be reluctant to hear a student attribute a failure to events beyond the student's control, such as a bad teacher or bad luck, it may be "safer" than voicing concerns about low ability. And, sometimes a student's academic performance is compromised by bad teaching, and it is important to acknowledge that. Rather than denying legitimate external factors, AR is about helping students identify ways in which they can improve their academic performance in spite of external factors.

**References**


