RESILIENCE, HELPLESSNESS, CONTROL ORIENTATIONS AND SET

Lance King

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Resilience and Helplessness

In her book “Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality and Development” (1999), Carol Dweck describes the characteristics of ***resilience*** as being an orientation towards setting learning goals, adopting mastery behaviour and believing in the flexibility of intelligence and the primacy of effort; and the characteristics of ***helplessness*** as being an orientation towards setting performance goals, adopting challenge avoidance behaviour and a belief in the fixedness of intelligence and the primacy of ability. These personal orientations are most clearly demonstrated in reactions to failure situations where resilient individuals tend to attribute failure to a lack of effort and are prepared to take effective remedial action while more helpless individuals attribute failure to a lack of ability and tend to give up (Dweck, 1999).

This model is supported by many studies: Koestner and Zuckerman (1994) investigated the goal orientations of 60 college students and found that those who were performance oriented often exhibited classic helpless behaviours, including making self-defeating performance attributions and negative self-evaluations. Conversely those who were learning oriented tended to exhibit more adaptive behaviours and were more mastery oriented. In Australia support has come from a study of 893 college students where the learning oriented students showed a much more positive attitude towards their studies and were more likely to choose a difficult task to complete than their performance oriented colleagues who opted for more easy tasks (Archer, 1994). Burley, Turner & Vitulli (1999) studying US college students (ages 17-59) found that learning orientated students showed much more adaptive achievement-oriented behaviours than their performance oriented colleagues and found that the age of the student was

a good predictor of their orientation with the older students being much more likely to be learning oriented in comparison with the more performance oriented younger students.

To summarise the existing research with respect to student behaviour:

	RESILIENT STUDENTS	"HELPLESS" STUDENTS
goals	**set learning goals – learn in order to understand**	**set performance goals – learn in order to get "excellence" or an A pass**
tasks	**to test themselves, to work towards mastery**	**to gain approval or avoid disapproval**
challenge	**seek out new challenges**	**avoid new challenges**
to achieve success	**believe effort is more important than ability**	**believe ability is more important than effort**
reaction to failure	**focus on the process, find the problem, change the process, learn from their mistakes, put in more effort**	**blame themselves, repeat the same process or do even less, give up**
view of intelligence	**believe intelligence is flexible and can be developed and improved – "the more I learn, the smarter I get"**	**believe intelligence is fixed, unalterable with a definite limit – "I can learn new things but my intelligence stays the same"**

"Students who feel confident, have a sense of agency and perceive meaning in their academic work will pursue learning goals" (Seifert, 2004, p.145).

This dichotomy of behaviour and belief between the two extremes of personal orientations is very clear but the questions remain:

- can students learn to be resilient, and if so how?

And

- are there structures or systems that can be put in place in educational institutions to incline more students towards a resilient frame of mind?

Helplessness and Control

In looking at the research it is clear that parallels can be drawn between the helplessness/resiliency model and ideas about control:

> The learned helplessness paradigm (Seligman, 1975) suggests that when people believe they are powerless to control what happens to them, they become passive and restrictive in coping abilities. On the other hand, when individuals believe that events and outcomes are controllable, learned helplessness is avoided, and, instead, active attempts are made to overcome adversive situations (Luthar, 1991, p. 600).

The control that a person actually has or perceives that they have is cited often in the literature as the most significant determinant of helpless or resilient behaviour.

Gernigon, Fleurance & Reine showed that with junior high students learning a perceptual motor task "only a controllable situation ending in success contributes to the development of learned competence, and only an uncontrollable situation ending in failure induces learned helplessness" (2000, p.53).

"Experiences with uncontrollable events may lead to the expectation that future events will elude control, resulting in disruptions in motivation, emotion and learning – termed learned helplessness" (Peterson, 1995, p. 12).

“The expectation of non-contingency (between acts and outcomes) is the crucial determinant of the symptoms of learned helplessness”(Valas, 2001, p. 72)

Generalisation across these studies support the idea that the control the individual can exert or believes s/he can exert over any given situation is the critical pre-disposing factor for an orientation towards helplessness or resilience.

Expectation, Attribution and Control

Firmin, Hwang, Copella and Clark (2004) found that 1st year psychology students (from a private mid-western US university) who started an examination by attempting difficult questions first performed significantly poorer on the subsequent easy questions than their fellow students who started with the easy questions first; *even though the results showed that both groups had achieved as well as each other on the difficult questions*. This study highlights the point that it was the expectation of failure, not failure itself, that produced helplessness and the deterioration of academic performance.

Expectations of success or failure are related directly to attributions – the messages we give ourselves about the causes of events that we are involved in. Attributions generally have three dimensions – locus (does the cause originate within the individual?), stability (is the cause stable or changeable?), and controllability (can the individual influence the cause?). Students who attribute success and failure to internal, controllable causes are more likely to take action to produce positive outcomes and develop an expectation of success whereas students who attribute both success and failure to causes outside themselves over which they have no control are likely to feel helpless and to develop expectations of failure (Seifert, 2004).

In a study of 1430 high school dropouts in the USA, Suh & Suh (2006) analysed the characteristics of those who went on to gain university degrees and found

that the three most prominent factors associated with degree attainment were academic aspiration, organisational skill and (internal) locus of control.

In research into distance education Morris and Wu (2005) found that the combined presence of the two factors of available financial aid and an internal locus of control enabled them to predict completion likelihood (and consequently the likelihood of "dropping out") for individuals with a 74.5% accuracy.

In the educational context, locus of control is revealed through the attributions we make for our successes and failures at school tasks. If someone believes they have some control over their task outcomes they are more likely to persevere, put in effort, learn from mistakes and take action to produce the result they want. But what are the factors that produce an internal locus of control?

Success, Failure and Control

Interestingly enough there is some research to suggest that (American students at least) believe that their lives are more and more controlled by outside forces. Twenge, Zhang & Im (2004) report that "the average college student in 2002 had a more external locus of control than 80% of college students in the early 1960s" (p. 308). And given the events of 11/9 2001, it is, I guess, not surprising that there have been generalisations in attributions made across the (USA) community which have resulted in increased belief that events are out of the control of the average person. Unfortunately, as Tweng et al. report, "the implications are uniformly negative, as externality is correlated with poor school achievement, helplessness, ineffective stress management, decreased self-control, and depression" (p. 309).

From the research presented here it would seem that the necessary conditions for increasing a student's internality would be for them to 1) have some experience of taking control of their own learning, 2) gain some success from doing so and 3) notice the connection. This would theoretically then lead to the

student building up more personal attributions of successful control, more expectation of academic success and would lead to more successful, and more effective learning.

A study of Chinese and Korean students bears this out – "…students with higher academic grades scored higher on internality and lower on externality" (Park & Kim, 1998, p. 191) and also honour students were found to be more likely to attribute their success to effort and were less likely to attribute any failure to a lack of ability than were the students on "academic probation" (p.191).

This idea is also supported by an USA study of first year university students which reported that those students "who entered university with lower scores on the locus of control scale (internals) obtained significantly higher GPAs than those who scored higher (externals) on the same scale" (Gifford, Briceno-Perriot & Mianzo, 2006, p. 19). *[GPA = students' grade point averages across all subjects at the end of their first year of university study]*

Also conversely if students are immersed in learning situations in which they have little or no control over their own learning one might expect to increase externality and decrease effectiveness as shown by Chaput De Saintongue & Dunn (1998) - "Learning environments where adverse events are perceived as being pervasive and inalterable will prevent the development of the autonomous learner and impair student achievement" (p. 583).

These differences in academic success may be attributable to the different reactions to stress between internally and externally oriented students - Wolk and Bloom (1978) reported that more internal students found high stress and time constraints facilitated their task performance but the same pressures were debilitating effects for the more external students, and a 1991 study of 144 high risk adolescents showed that in comparison to children with an internal locus of

control, those with an external orientation showed greater declines in functioning with increasing stress levels (Luther, 1991).

Teaching Strategies and Control

Helping students to become more internally control oriented would appear from the evidence here to be a high effect strategy for improving academic success.

In order to help students to gain a more internal locus of control the first requirement for the teacher/tutor/lecturer is to give more of the control of the teaching/learning interface to the students. One way to facilitate this process is for the teacher to adopt more "student centred" rather than traditional "teacher centred" approaches to learning. The keys to student centred learning according to Biggs (1999) are:

- reliance upon active rather than passive learning
- increased responsibility, accountability and autonomy of the learner
- interdependence between teacher and learner (as opposed to complete dependence or independence)
- mutual respect and a reflexive approach to teaching and learning
- and a commitment by both parties to consult about all aspects of the teaching learning process.

Such approaches which focus on supporting the autonomy of the student have long been shown to increase involvement and intrinsic motivation of the student. As Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon & Barch (2004), found in a study of 20 teachers from two mid-western high school in the USA where who were trained in "autonomy supportive" behaviours, the teachers "……were able to teach and motivate their students in more autonomy supportive ways. We also found that the more teachers used autonomy supportive instructional behaviours, the more engagement their students showed" (p.165). Also from the USA, Filak and Sheldon (2003) showed that "the autonomy supportiveness of teachers has been

shown to very important for maximal learning, growth and creativity of students" (p. 236).

Student autonomy can only occur if students gain some control over their own learning process.

According to Martin and Marsh of the University of Western Sydney:

> Students also develop a sense of control when they see that they are able to make choices and decisions in class that affect the way work is done. One way to do this is to provide students with choices over class objectives, assessment tasks, criteria for assessment, and due dates for work assigned (2003, p. 36).

SET and Control

Another way to give students more control in the classroom is to engage them with the process of SET – the student evaluation of teaching.

SET is an instrument designed to assess quality - the quality of teaching. As long as two preconditions are met:

- anonymity - the teacher cannot identify any individual student and
- confidentiality - the results are confidential to the teacher

then SET creates the perfect learning loop for both teachers and students. Students become empowered with the ability to have some influence over the teaching process and teachers become empowered with the ability to continually improve the effectiveness of their teaching which improves the effectiveness of the student's learning and so on.

The process of SET is in itself a process of providing for student influence and autonomy with the "students motivation to participate…impacted significantly by their expectation that they will be able to provide meaningful feedback" - Chen & Hoshower, (2003, p. 84). As long as students have evidence that their feedback

is being used to improve the course then the SET process itself will help students to become more internal in their control orientations by showing them that they can have influence over their own teaching/learning interface. One way cited in Chen & Hoshower to achieve this is to "require every instructor to cite on the course syllabus one recent example of how student evaluations have helped improve this particular course or have helped the instructor to improve his or her teaching" (p. 84). Following on from this it would come as no surprise that "students who believe that their feedback on evaluations will improve teaching, or the course, or both, should be highly motivated to provide such feedback" (p.84).

But is that motivation, and/or the grades or scores given to individual teachers dependent on the control orientation of the student? One would expect the more internally oriented students to be more willing to take part in SET and to be more thorough in their answers and maybe more constructive in their criticism of tutors but as most SETs do not offer an element of choice this is hard to gauge. In looking at the grades awarded by students to tutors, Rich and Bush (1978) looked for congruence between high and low faculty control style in teaching and internal and external student control style in orientation. They found that "…students identified as having an internal locus of control who experience low faculty control style will yield more favourable student evaluations of instruction, similarly, a high controlling instructional style will yield more favourable ratings from externally controlled students" (p. 196-7).

In a similar more recent study Grimes, Millea & Woodruff (2004) propose that "the degree to which students do not accept personal responsibility for their performance and grades significantly affects their overall evaluation of teaching effectiveness and course satisfaction" (p.130). In other words they are suggesting that more internally oriented students are more likely to use successful study strategies, cope better with stress and achieve higher grades and so award higher evaluations of teachers than externally oriented students who are more likely to study badly, cope poorly, receive low grades and blame

the whole problem on the teacher! This view was borne out by their study which showed that “more internally oriented students had a greater probability of assigning above average evaluation marks with respect to instructor performance whereas more externally oriented students had a greater probability of assigning average and below average instructor evaluation marks” (p. 129).

So is this anything new? Internally oriented students take responsibility for their own learning, earn better grades and give good SETs to teachers. But are SETs themselves a good mechanism for increasing the internal control orientation of students? Filak and Sheldon (2003) in a study of 1,269 undergraduates concluded that “students’ feelings of competence and autonomy were significant predictors of both teacher and course evaluations” (p. 244) which would seem to suggest that the teachers who allowed more for the development of control by students scored consistently higher than other teachers, independent of the control orientation of the student.

Conclusion

Establishing some control over ones own learning would appear to be a critical factor in both avoiding helplessness in an academically challenging situation and achieving consistent success. The development of an internal locus of control with respect to learning is predicated upon the student experiencing control or autonomy with respect to some of the parameters of learning. One area that teachers/tutors/lecturers can allow students to have influence over is in delivery methods in the classroom. One mechanism to achieve this is through the Student Evaluation of Teaching. By using SET on a regular basis, and being willing to change teaching method to suit the learning of the student, teachers can demonstrate to students the efficacy of good quality feedback in improving teaching and learning and on the success of that learning for the student. This mechanism will also demonstrate to the student the advantages of using influence and taking control of some of the parameters of learning. This should in turn increase the internality of the student’s locus of control which will lead to

more successful learning. The consequences for the teacher will be more efficient delivery methods, more academic success for their students and better evaluations.
A win-win situation.

Future Directions

The author was not able to locate any papers which seek to explore the influence of the use of SET on the development of control orientations in students. This indicates a good area for future study.

Lance King

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