

Are you an entity theorist or an incrementalist?

Recently my boss handed me a book* – ‘You’ll find this interesting’ he said. And of course I did – really. It was about how people perceived themselves as learners. Or more accurately it was about the ‘self-theories’ of their own intelligence that people hold about themselves.

Here are a couple of statements to see what your ‘self-theory’ is – just give your personal response to each:

1. ‘You have a certain amount of intelligence and can’t do much to change it.’

Answer: Yes/No

2. ‘Success = X% intelligence + Y% effort’

Give values for X and Y.

Now I’m trying to boil a complete book down to two questions which is hardly fair. But if you answered:

1. Yes to 1 and your value of X was greater than Y then you are an ‘entity theorist’
2. And if you answered No to 1 and your value of X was less than Y then you are an ‘incremental theorist’.

[If you answered ‘what does he mean by ‘intelligence?’ then you’ve been reading too much D319 recently. And if X + Y didn’t equal one hundred then you need to read a little more of MU120...].

So what do these terms mean? Well if you’re an entity theorist it means that you believe that your intelligence is a fixed quantity and that you really can’t change it. If you’re an incremental theorist then you believe that your intelligence is not fixed and that you can change it by sheer effort. When it comes to learning entity theorists believe that either you’ve got it or you haven’t, whereas incremental theorists believe that if you make enough effort you have a chance of succeeding.

Often entity theorists tend to have high self-esteem and an ‘entitlement’ belief – that is, they think they are entitled to success because they have the basic intelligence. Or alternatively they don’t try because they don’t believe that making an effort will make a difference as they don’t have the basic intelligence. Incrementalists on the other hand may have lower self-esteem, but they believe that the struggle is everything and that if they try hard enough success will come.

Entity theorists and incrementalists have different attitudes towards set-backs. Entity theorists see a set back as meaning that they don’t have the basic intelligence so they are not going to succeed. Or alternatively they see their failure as the fault of the system in some way. Incrementalists just see failure as another experience, try to learn from the failure and try again.

Does any of this apply to learning at a distance? Well perhaps it might apply when you experience a setback such as failing an exam or not doing as well as you hoped. An entity theorist will see that as a comment on their intelligence and feel that they can't ever pass because they just haven't got it. An incremental theorist will see it as telling them that they've got to try a bit harder and that they can learn from this failure how to do better next time.

This all makes it sound as though we ought to be incrementalists. Although entity theorists do have some advantages – they don't take on things that are way out of their reach and they don't keep on banging their heads against a brick wall “A man” says Clint Eastwood “has to know his limitations”.

But on the whole in distance learning I suspect that incrementalists come off better. They are the students who shrug off a poor grade or a failed exam as merely an indication that they need to try harder, and who don't take it as a comment on their basic intelligence and ability to succeed. Certainly in my experience far more distance students drop out because the struggle becomes too great, rather than because they don't have the intelligence. Whether there's a link between success and being an incrementalist I don't know – I'll add it to the list of 1001 things I wish I knew about student success in distance learning. And even if there was a link can you change by force of will alone from being an entity theorist to an incrementalist – who knows?

Of course all of this was said more concisely by the author of the country's favourite poem who wrote:

“If you can treat with triumph and disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same...”

then

- “you'll be a man my son.”

Leaving aside whether this latter is a desirable outcome for about half of the world's distance students, it's still a message worth remembering the next time you get an assignment or exam result back. Whether it's a triumph or disaster incremental theorists will treat it just the same and (in yet another alternative formulation of the principle, this time by Winston Churchill) – they'll ‘Keep Buggering On’. Good luck to you!

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*Dweck, C.S. (2000) ‘Self-Theories – their role in Motivation, Personality, and Development’ Philadelphia, Psychology Press