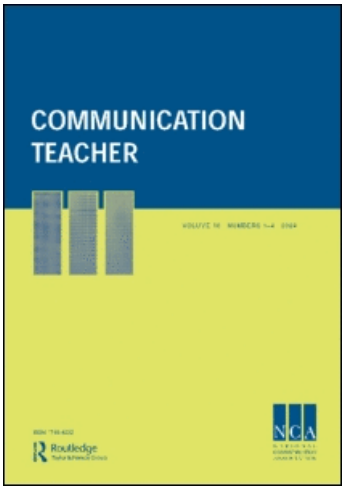

Communication Teacher
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713695733

"What Happened?" Teaching Attribution Theory Through Ambiguous Prompts

John McArthur

Online publication date: 13 January 2011

To cite this Article McArthur, John(2011) '"What Happened?" Teaching Attribution Theory Through Ambiguous Prompts', Communication Teacher, 25: 1, 32 — 36
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17404622.2010.528001
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2010.528001

Communication Teacher
Vol. 25, No. 1, January 2011, pp. 32–36

"What Happened?" Teaching Attribution Theory Through Ambiguous Prompts

John McArthur

Objective: *This activity is designed to accomplish three learning outcomes: students should be able to (1) explain the internal process of making attributions (deciding/explaining why something happens); (2) reflect upon and evaluate their own attribution-making processes and biases; and (3) apply creativity and critical thinking skills to an understanding of communication contexts*
Course(s): *Introduction to Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Group Communication, Communication Theory*

Rationale

The concept of attribution, "the act of explaining why something happens or why a person acts a particular way" (Wood, 2008, p. 51), is typically an abstract concept. An extensive search for classroom examples of attribution making, to work alongside a chapter on "Perceiving and Understanding" (Wood, 2008) in an Introduction to Communication course, produced activities that showed various attributions but did not address the process by which we attribute behaviors to specific causes. This 35–50-minute activity explores the process of attribution and invites students to make a series of attributions by asking them "What happened?" in ambiguous scenes presented in class. Then, students retrospectively identify what decisions they made internally that led to their chosen attributions.

Description and Explanation

First, give a mini-lecture describing attribution and the four dimensions of attribution making (Wood, 2008, p. 51). If the students have not read about

John McArthur, Knight School of Communication, Queens University of Charlotte, Charlotte, NC, 28274, USA.
Email: mcarthurj@queens.edu

ISSN 1740-4622 (print)/ISSN 1740-4630 (online)
DOI: 10.1080/17404622.2010.528001

attribution before the lecture, be sure to discuss the theory and process. A good example to clarify the process of attribution for students is a roommate situation: "If you walk into your room and your roommate is crying on his/her bed, why would you think this behavior is happening?" Depending on students' roommate experiences, the answers always range from "She's depressed," to "He was dumped by his girlfriend," to "She failed a test." We then discuss that, even though these are natural first impressions (attributions), they may or may not be true. She may have hit her head on the doorframe or he may have been cutting a very strong onion. Attributions result from our perceptions and interpretations of the person and the environment (see Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985; Wood, 2008).

When deciding why something is happening, we make decisions that are usually, unconsciously based on four dimensions of attributions. Modified from Weiner (1985), the dimensions of attribution include: locus (is the event internal or external?), stability (is the event permanent or temporary?), specificity (is the event specific to an individual or global?), and responsibility (is the event within the personal control of the subject or outside of his/her control?). Choices made about these dimensions result in attributions (Wood, 2008).

Following the mini-lecture, tell the students that you want to test their ability to consider these dimensions through an activity called, "What happened?" This activity usually works well if the instructor makes a big scene, acting as a game show host or emcee. Explain the game: Students will see an image and they will have one minute to write a brief narrative explaining "What Happened?" Show them an ambiguous prompt (for an example, see Figure 1, image one) and ask them to each write a short narrative. The writing portion of the activity is crucial for its success. Having each student write before any student presents allows each student to develop an idea that is uninfluenced by the ideas of others. This process ensures the presence of multiple interpretations.

Then, begin discussion by having one person read his/her narrative. Have the class identify the dimensions of attribution that led to this narrative. Was the locus of this action internal or external? Is this action stable or unstable? Is this action specific to the individual or would it be global to all people? Is the action within or outside the control of the individual? These questions should be asked with each shared narrative to prompt students to consider the decisions about the pictured action that led to the attribution in the narrative. Ask if other students wrote a different narrative, and continue until a variety of narratives have been shared and questioned. If student attributions are highly homogenous on the first photograph (as they often are), then the instructor should be prepared with at least two wild attributions about what might be happening. For image one (see Figure 1), the instructor might ask how the dimensions of attribution change if this woman is trying to catch dinner, or if she is being attacked by birds, or if she is a wax statue.

Repeat the activity with a second prompt (see Figure 1, image two), then a third (see Figure 1, image three). Student attributions for the second prompt are usually widely varied; but, if the class is still struggling to produce multiple attributions, the

Images 1 : Mantas Ruzveltas/FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Images 2 : FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Images 3 : federicostevanin FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Figure 1. All photographs are from www.freedigitalphotos.net and used in compliance with their Terms and Guidelines available on their website. http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/images/terms.php

instructor might challenge the class to a contest for the third photograph to see which student writes the most creative narrative.

When preparing for the activity, the instructor should choose photos with increasing ambiguity (see Figure 1). For the first prompt, use a photo in which some context is present for the students. The second and third prompts should become progressively more ambiguous with less contextual information. By the third prompt, the students have shifted their thinking from considering their interpretation first. Rather, they begin with attributions to create creative and funny interpretations of the image.

The examples in Table 1 are actual responses from students during class, which led to quality discussions about how we make attributions. Students generally want to

Table 1

Sample attributions	Locus (internal or external)	Stability (permanent or temporary)	Specificity (individual or global)	Control (within control or beyond control)
Image 1:				
She's feeding the birds	Internal	Temporary	Individual	Within control
A bird is attacking her	External	Permanent	Global	Beyond control
She's a statue	Internal	Permanent	Individual	Beyond control
Image 2:				
He received a promotion at work	External	Temporary	Individual	Beyond control
The phone is hot	External	Temporary	Global	Beyond control
He is teaching an anger management class	Internal	Temporary	Individual	Within control
Image 3:				
He's acting in a toothpaste commercial	Internal	Temporary	Individual	Within control
He is mentally unstable	Internal	Permanent	Individual	Beyond control
He is frozen in ice	External	Permanent	Global	Beyond control

share their processes of attribution, and they want to debate the emotion being shown in the picture. Image two can be viewed as happiness, anger, or excitement; and image three can be viewed as either real or fake happiness or heartache. Use Table 1 as a guide for discussion, and, if an attribution (like internal locus) was overlooked, point out these valid attributions to the class and discuss them before moving to subsequent photographs.

Debrief

Because the activity itself is discussion based, the debrief can be relatively short. The most important point during debriefing comes in a discussion of how the process of attribution making affects students on a daily basis. The instructor might return to the original example: "If you walk into your room and your roommate is crying, what is your initial reaction?" The discussion can then continue with questions like:

- How might our initial attributions be flawed?
- How do biases and stereotypes influence attributions?
- What are strategies for us to ensure that we make accurate attributions?

The goal of the debrief is to demonstrate that people should seek to refrain from making quick interpretations, stereotypes, and attributions based on our past experiences. Rather, part of the educational process is learning techniques for assessing our own attribution making so that we can make informed decisions. Some instructors may find benefits from having students engage in a personal debrief in

journal form. Before the next class session, students could write about three attributions that either correctly or falsely interpreted the actions of others, and explore the consequences of those attributions.

Appraisal

This activity began as an attempt to illustrate the abstract process of attribution making to students. The students embraced this activity and it spurred conversation for an entire hour about attributions, stereotypes, interpretations, and personal/cultural differences. One student indicated that she had previously learned about attributions in other classes, but she did not understand how they worked or how she actually used them in her life until she completed this activity.

Limitations of this activity include photo selection and class demographics. At the beginning of the activity, the student narratives will likely be fairly similar. Therefore, the photo choice needs to be truly ambiguous so that students will arrive at multiple interpretations. Likewise, class demographics can play a role in the variety of interpretations developed.

Possible alternate ways to conduct this activity depend upon class size. The writing portion of the assignment can be expanded to have individuals share their narratives in a group setting before sharing with the overall class. In the case of large classes, the class could be broken into small groups. Each group could develop a narrative that the group thinks might actually have happened, as well as a narrative that is wildly improbable. The juxtaposition of these two narratives might aptly illustrate the attribution-making process for students.

Additionally, the journal debrief allows this activity to serve various courses. In a nonverbal communication course, the journal could focus on the influence of nonverbals in attribution. In an interpersonal or group communication course, the journal might emphasize misperceptions of others in romantic or work settings. In addition, Bazarova and Walther (2009) successfully apply attribution to digital environments, opening this activity to discussions on attributions made in digital settings.

In sum, this activity (1) illustrates the process of attribution; (2) invites students to reflect on the way they make attributions about events and people; and (3) think critically about their own biases and the impacts of context and experience on their attributions. The benefit for students is one of internal value: the understanding that the attributions they make may be more related to their own past experiences than they are to the actual truth.

References and Suggested Readings

Bazarova, N. N., & Walther, J. B. (2009). Attributions in virtual groups: Distances and behavioral variations in computer-mediated discussions. *Small Group Research*, *40*(2), 138–162.

Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.

Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review*, *92*(4), 548–573.

Wood, J. T. (2008). *Communication mosaics* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thompson-Wadsworth.