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Writing Self-Efficacy and Written Communication Skills

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Abstract

Writing is an essential professional skill. The goal of writing instruction in business communication classes is to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully meet future writing challenges. However, many writers struggle to transfer skills and knowledge from one context to another. The primary reason for this struggle is that despite years of writing instruction, most people are highly apprehensive about writing and do not consider themselves "writers." Writing instruction typically does little to lessen writing apprehension, but fostering writing self-efficacy can both diminish writing apprehension and further writing development.

Keywords

writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy, written communication

Academics and practitioners agree that good written communication skills are essential for students as well as professionals, because professional ability and performance are strongly linked with communication competence (Russ, 2009). All business professions, even those that many would expect to require little writing, place a high premium on written communication skills, and many employers "specifically identify communications skills as a job requirement"; even when not explicitly listed, there is a "strong assumption that the requirement is implicit" (Krapels & Davis, 2003, p. 90). Writing skills in general and business communication skills in particular are important for business and professional students (Russ, 2009), who will be expected to "spend a significant amount of time in written communication" (Faris, Golen, & Lynch, 1999, p. 9). Although business communication faculty understand the importance of these

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skills and business communication classes have become an important part of business school curricula, business education is often criticized for not effectively developing students' writing skills (Pittenger, Miller, & Allison, 2006).

Writing Anxiety

The fault for poor student writing skills cannot be placed entirely on the shoulders of college writing instructors, as more students are entering college with weak writing, reading, and reasoning abilities (Jameson, 2007). In addition, students do not know how or when to apply their prior writing instruction to college classes in general and business communication classes in particular, as they are frequently taught to write for specific academic contexts but not how to apply those skills to new and different contexts (Anson, 2008; Matoti & Shumba, 2011). This is why writing instruction is the responsibility of every college instructor, not just of those who teach English or business communication classes (Matoti & Shumba, 2011; Sommers, 2008). Instructors from each discipline are obligated to teach students the specific challenges and concerns of writers within that discipline; this knowledge cannot be addressed in one discipline-specific writing class any more than it can be addressed in one or two composition classes. This problem is compounded by an additional concern: writing apprehension. The term *writing apprehension* was coined by Daly and Miller (1975) while developing their groundbreaking instrument to measure writing apprehension after they found that communication apprehension seriously affects a large proportion of the population. Writing apprehension is "a collection of behaviors that include a writer's tendency to avoid situations that involve writing, to find writing unrewarding, to fear having one's writing evaluated, and to develop increased anxiety over having one's writing viewed in a public forum" (Mabrito, 2000, p. 41). Writing apprehension affects the "academic, career, and personal choices" that people make as highly apprehensive writers base their major and career choices on the "perceived writing requirements" in those fields (Faris et al., 1999).

The problem of "writing apprehension, or writing anxiety," affects more than career choice and, in fact, is a "significant barrier" (Faris et al., 1999, p. 10) to the development of written communication skills. Not only does writing apprehension interfere with the development of writing skills but highly apprehensive writers are also more likely to avoid writing (Faris et al., 1999; Matoti & Shumba, 2011). When highly apprehensive writers are unable to avoid writing, they will write less and do so more poorly than writers with low apprehension (Faris et al., 1999; Matoti & Shumba, 2011). Matoti and Shumba (2011) state that, in part, this interference occurs because highly apprehensive writers seldom freely engage in writing, which means that they have less practice than less apprehensive writers. This may also be attributed to the fact that most highly apprehensive writers do not view writing as a process or feel a sense of power and control over their writing. Not only do these writers write poorly, but they also do not expect they can ever improve their writing ability.

Students with poor writing skills are more likely to be highly apprehensive about writing and less likely to be equipped to address this deficiency, and more students

entering college with poor writing skills means that we are more likely to encounter highly apprehensive writers in our classrooms. This is a problem we must address as written communication continues to be essential to learning, working, and living in our 21st-century world. Business and technical communication faculty must help students understand the importance of writing and help them cope with writing apprehension (Faris et al., 1999) by developing "innovative approaches to help weaker students" (Jameson, 2007, p. 31). One such innovative strategy, supported by social cognitive theory, can help students not only cope with writing apprehension but also overcome it, so that they can grow and develop as writers as well as competent and successful professionals.

Overcoming Writing Apprehension

Writing apprehension interferes with the practice and study of writing; to foster writing growth and development, we must attend to this apprehension (Faris et al., 1999; Matoti & Shumba, 2011). Research on writing development has shown that self-efficacy beliefs are a more consistent predictor of behavioral outcomes than are other self-beliefs. Writing self-efficacy can influence writing ability as well as diminish writing apprehension (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011; Matoti & Shumba, 2011; Pajares, 2007). However, increased attention to building writing confidence is necessary, as "it does not seem as though confidence in writing skills is nurtured as students progress through school, even in the face of the skills themselves being developed" (Pajares, 2003, p. 152). In fact, all too often, little or no attention is paid to writing apprehension, and writing instruction is instead directed toward error avoidance or the "doctrine of correctness," so many students become convinced that they cannot write and have nothing to say (Matoti & Shumba, 2011).

Even as students develop skills, their confidence does not increase—as the majority of feedback is focused on their mistakes, this is not surprising. Although correcting student mistakes is important and necessary so is our responsibility for nurturing the self-beliefs of our students (Pajares, 2003). If we can nurture the self-beliefs of our student writers and help them overcome this apprehension, then we can move on to the necessary process of attending to their growth and development as writers. Instructional practices that work to diminish apprehension about writing can have long-term positive effects on the writer, such as improving writing confidence.

Improving Writing Confidence

We can diminish writing apprehension and improve writing confidence by attending to the self-beliefs of our students. Addressing our students' self-beliefs, or writing self-efficacy, can affect their "level of motivation, aspiration, and academic achievement" (Martinez et al., 2011, p. 352). Personal self-efficacy—the individual judgment of the capability to organize and execute a particular course of action—is embedded within a broader social cognitive theory developed by Albert Bandura (2004) and

based on the idea that people set their own goals and regulate their actions to achieve the desired goals (Hidi & Boscolo, 2008; Pajares, 2003).

Research concerning applications of this theory to varied spheres of life, including physical, biological, medical, and psychosocial, has supported Bandura's theory that our self-beliefs influence the courses of action we choose to take as well as our resiliency when faced with difficulty (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003; Pajares & Valiente, 2008). Hidi and Boscolo (2008) argue that "self-efficacious individuals are more willing to participate, to work harder, and to persist longer in tasks" (p. 148). Research has verified the independent contribution that self-beliefs make to intellectual performance citing studies focused on math, reading, and writing (Bandura, 1997). For example, Bandura (1997) found that math students with stronger self-beliefs were more likely to work through challenging problems and did so more accurately than students with equal ability and lesser confidence. Bandura also claims that studies of swimmers, gymnasts, and other athletes have demonstrated the positive impact of self-beliefs on performance such as gymnasts' beliefs in their ability to execute specific gymnastic maneuvers proving to better predict their intercollegiate performance than a general measure of physical efficacy. Self-efficacy beliefs not only control what we do but also, as a result of this influence, our level of accomplishment and achievement (Hidi & Boscolo, 2008; Pajares, 2003). People's beliefs about their personal efficacy "constitute a major aspect of their self-knowledge" (Bandura, 1997, p. 79).

To possess high writing self-efficacy, a person must believe that she or he possesses the ability and knowledge to deliver effective writing. Research suggests that beliefs about writing processes and competence are instrumental for writing success (Bandura, 1997; Hidi & Boscolo, 2008; Pajares, 2003). Investigators have found positive associations between self-efficacy for writing and writing outcomes, reporting that "self-efficacy was highly predictive of both writing skill and strategy use" and that "self-efficacy for writing predicted their writing performance" in studies of school-aged children and adults (Hidi & Boscolo, 2008, p. 149).

Research further suggests that beliefs about writing processes and competence are instrumental to the writer's ultimate success (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003; Pajares & Valiente, 2008). Pajares and Valiante (2008) report that "academic accomplishments can often be better predicted by [students'] self-efficacy beliefs than by their previous attainments, knowledge, or skills" (p. 159). Therefore, the writer with high writing confidence is more likely to do what is necessary to properly perform the writing task and push to overcome challenges. Simply possessing high writing confidence then increases the writer's chances of performing well because the writer is ready, willing, and able to do the necessary work. Writers who possess low writing confidence are more likely to choose the path of least resistance, become discouraged so they are less likely to follow through with the necessary work, or just give up altogether (Pajares & Valiante, 2008).

Identifying the Sources of Writing Confidence

Diminishing writing apprehension and increasing writing self-efficacy begins with attending to the sources of writing self-efficacy (Matoti & Shumba, 2011; Pajares,

2003; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007; Pajares & Valiente, 2008; Usher & Pajares, 2008). According to Bandura (1997), an individual's belief in her or his capability to act, or self-efficacy, is influenced by four sources: performance or mastery experience—that is, actively engaging in the activity; vicarious experience, such as observations and social comparisons; social persuasions or feedback; and physical and emotional state. In turn, each of these influences has an impact on the overall level of accomplishment at the particular task. This means that we must provide our student writers with these sources of writing confidence as well as the agency necessary to act on them.

Helping writers increase writing confidence means providing actual writing experience, models for study and comparison, feedback from a variety of sources, and mitigation of mental and physical stress (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003; Pajares et al., 2007). This process begins with offering writers many varied opportunities to write so that they can develop their skills and strategies. This writing should also be meaningful and purposeful within a specific context. The would-be writers must also be exposed to the work of other writers in this same context, and this writing must include comparable peers engaged in the process of developing a piece from conception to polished final draft. The writers must also have real and meaningful feedback from multiple sources at various stages of the work, which provides guidance as well as appraisal. Finally, the writers must be made to feel ready—physically, mentally, and emotionally—to write. All of these sources combine to increase writing self-efficacy as well as mitigate the emotional and physical reactions to writing apprehension (Bandura, 1997).

Mastery Experience

Perhaps the most important source of writing self-efficacy is performance or mastery experience—that is, active engagement in the act of writing (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003; Pajares et al., 2007). Writing classes have long offered this experience, but the key is not in simply offering writing practice and feedback for the purpose of assessment—meaningful writing experience intended to support the development of writing confidence is best created within a supportive classroom environment that offers a community to write in as well as an audience beyond the instructor. Writing instructors focused on relieving writing apprehension should focus on coaching and mentoring the writers in their classrooms by providing "guided mastery" experience that provides "authentic evidence" of the writer's capability (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). Another important aspect of this experience should include writing with value and purpose beyond assessment. In other words, writing experience should focus on the students' growth and development as writers and not simply on the errors they make in their writing.

Mastery experience is the most influential and most authentic foundation for self-beliefs as successes build confidence and failures undermine it (Bandura, 1997). However, simply experiencing success is not enough to build a "resilient sense of efficacy," as people also need experience in "overcoming obstacles through perseverant

effort" (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). In addition, some difficulties and setbacks serve the beneficial purpose of "teaching that success usually requires sustained effort," whereas difficulties in general provide opportunities to learn "how to turn failure into success" (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). To experience both failure and success, Bandura claims writers must have many opportunities to practice their skill. This experience should be carefully structured so that the activities bring enough success to bolster self-assurance while also providing enough challenge to force writers to work while not experiencing repeated failure (Bandura, 1997).

Providing the meaningful mastery opportunities necessary to foster writing confidence can be a challenge for instructors already faced with a number of assignments to work through on a tight semester schedule. However, with careful planning, instructors can structure more meaningful writing assignments without adding to their workloads or those of their students. This can be done through scaffolding assignments to offer opportunity for success and support when students encounter challenges. For example, a common assignment is writing an email inquiry. The challenges that my students face with this assignment include understanding the needs of their audience and keeping a tight focus on their purpose. In groups, the class begins work on this assignment by discussing ways to approach their intended email recipient. Students then write a short, focused description of their project in class, making these descriptions as concise as possible. From then on, when students work on their individual email inquiry assignments on their own, they have more confidence in their ability to complete it because they have already worked through some of the biggest hurdles to their success.

Vicarious Experience

The vicarious experience of comparing written work with that of models and comparable peers is another source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). It is imperative to provide many models for students to learn from, as well as many opportunities for vicarious experience, such as observations and social comparisons. This means access to professional publications as well as actual workplace writing in addition to student work. These experiences play an important role in the development of writing confidence, as they allow writers to compare their work with the work of others and provide models for their own skill and strategy development.

Vicarious experience is especially important for "activities with no absolute measures of adequacy" such as writing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, p. 86). Without these "absolute measures," it is necessary to measure accomplishments and skill by comparison with others who serve as an ideal or standard of achievement as well as with comparable peers also striving to achieve this ideal. Bandura (1997) says that "competent models transmit knowledge and teach observers effective skills and strategies" (p. 88).

Textbook and workplace models can only take students so far when developing confidence. Incorporating a writing workshop into classes where students share drafts

in progress and offer feedback can provide valuable information to help students complete assignments and assess their own strengths and weaknesses as writers. This is also useful for redirecting students who may be heading in the wrong direction with an assignment.

Social Persuasion

Feedback, or social persuasion, is another way to increase writing confidence and competence (Pajares & Valiente, 2008). Effective social persuasion requires more feedback than teacher response and more genuine feedback than typically offered by peer review. Skilled efficacy builders don't just give "pep talks" or praise but also cultivate people's beliefs in their capabilities and structure activities that bring success and avoid situations that will bring repeated failure (Bandura, 1997).

Feedback is important to sustaining a sense of writing confidence; it is easier to maintain a self-belief if "significant others express faith in one's capabilities" (Bandura, 1997, p. 101). However, verbal persuasion has limited power by itself. According to Bandura (1997), "people do not always believe what they are told," in part because they are fully aware that others are frequently not completely honest with their evaluations, so their personal experiences "often run counter to what one has been told" (p. 104). When it comes to building writing confidence, social persuasion serves as a "useful adjunct," but other influences tend to be more powerful (p. 106).

A writing workshop not only makes the work of comparable peers available for study, but it also opens up the opportunity for valuable feedback. Instructors can design a feedback structure by providing guidelines or specific questions to answer that help students improve their assignments while providing natural opportunities for more subjective responses. In my classes, I guide students through three levels of feedback. Early work is focused on responding to the idea or concept (e.g., making comments such as, "This is interesting," or asking questions that begin with "I wonder about"). As early drafts are assembled, we then focus on the purpose and goals of the assignment using a checklist derived from the assignment sheet. Only then do we focus our final round on style and form. This moves the emphasis away from correctness and directs the students through the writing process while providing meaningful feedback at each step.

Physiological or Affective State

When people evaluate their capabilities, they also rely on information received from their physical and emotional states. People do not usually anticipate success when they are "tense or agitated" (Bandura, 1997, p. 107). Many times, these stress reactions become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as "stress reactions to inefficacious control generate further stress" (Bandura, 1997, p. 106). Mood also affects judgments of personal competence. One method for addressing apprehension is "to enhance physical status, reduce stress levels, and negative emotional proclivities" (Bandura, 1997, p. 106). It

is important, according to Bandura, for efficacy builders to reduce the stress of writers and correct the misinterpretations that lead to stress reactions. Simply raising the issue of writing apprehension to make writers aware that it is a widespread concern as well as describing what they can do to improve their skills can help reduce stress—especially if these conversations continue over time.

In my classes, we work to address the physical and emotional responses to stress through discussion and reflection. I use reflection journals throughout the semester to help students work through ideas for projects and assignments, and to foster their growth and development as writers. We use those reflections to fuel class discussions about writing. For many students, just learning that they are not the only ones who fear and dread writing at times can be comforting; many students can work through some of their fear and stress simply through the act of sharing. The class discussion also includes ways to manage and reduce stress by continuing to use some of the strategies we use during the semester.

Giving Writers Agency

Although each of the four sources of self-efficacy affects the overall level of accomplishment at a particular task, Bandura emphasizes the fact that agency and self-efficacy are interdependent. To make the decision to act, people must believe that they have the power as well as the capability to act, which means granting them that power and opportunity for choice. For writers to grow, they must be actively "engaged" and not simply go through the motions of writing, and this type of engagement is more likely to occur when writers are given autonomy in their writing choices and goals (Pajares et al., 2007; Pajares & Valiente, 2008). It is also essential for writers to set their own goals—that is, goals focused on progress and not products (Bandura, 1997). This idea is in line with current writing theory, which stresses that instruction focused on creating error-free products simply convinces writers that they cannot write (Anson, 2008).

Perhaps one of the most important messages for those working to improve writing confidence as well as the performance of their students is that there needs to be less "teaching" and more "learning." Many of the activities that foster the four sources of writing self-efficacy do not require heavy teacher involvement but instead require active student engagement. Although providing support and scaffolding is important as student writers develop their own writing process, it is just as important for instructors to gradually relinquish control and grant students the agency to determine their own course as writers. We must treat students like writers, or they will never feel like writers or think like writers. Instead of direct instruction, teachers must manage classroom experiences that foster the types of conversations and activities that writers engage in, such as reflecting on their own work and setting their own goals. Social cognitive theory gives us the tools for understanding and alleviating writing apprehension, but it requires writing instructors willing to change their classroom practices in order to change their students' beliefs about their writing. Using class activities such

as writing workshops and reflection journals can contribute to students' writing self-efficacy as well as their agency. In my classes, reflection journals are shared, and students are required to comment on the journals of their classmates. We use tools such as the Writing Self-Efficacy Scale (Pajares, 2007) to conduct self-assessments that then lead to setting individual learning goals. The writing workshop allows students to take control of their own writing development rather than focusing solely on the instructor's assessment, which is also an important part of improving student writing confidence.

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Bio

Deanna DeBrine Mascle is a writing instructor at Morehead State University and director of the Morehead Writing Project. She earned her PhD in technical communication and rhetoric from Texas Tech with a dissertation on writing self-efficacy and agency. She has also published articles in *Computers and Composition* and *Academic Exchange Quarterly*.

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