

GOAL = 15 minutes

## ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM OF WRITING ASSESSMENT AND TRANSFER WITH WRITING SELF-EFFICACY THEORY

My study of transfer began with the rather existential question: “**Why are we here?**”

After years of reading and reflection and discussion with everyone from my senior peers to my students, I concluded that we are here – in our writing classrooms – **to make writers.**

Of course the problem is that this goal is at odds with the expectations of many of our stakeholders. Often our peers as well as administrators, students (and their parents and future employers) expect that we are here to **teach writing.** This wouldn’t be so much of a problem if their concept of writing (and the way it should be taught) wasn’t so limiting and, as my colleagues have already pointed out, so problematic.

When I first began trying to understand **what we should teach our students** to help them with the writing tasks they will face after they leave our classrooms, I was quickly overwhelmed. My students come from every college in my university and will go into a wide variety of fields – many of which they are not decided upon when they are in my classroom. That was when I decided to **focus on the writer** rather than the writing. Of course, that presented some challenges as the research studying the transformation to writer is scant. As a field we know a lot about learning to write and teaching writing, but we do not yet understand **what makes some people become writers while others do not.**

My **longitudinal, mixed methods study** focusing on the making of writers began in 2009 and continues today. What I have learned from studying more than 200 undergraduate and graduate writers is that we can have a long-term impact on our students in only one semester. **We can make writers** –or at least start on them on the path to becoming writers –and we can teach writing skills that transfer. However, we are not going to achieve that transfer by focusing on skills-based learning. We obviously cannot abandon it but we need to place our **focus on teaching the writer** – not the writing. This means helping our students develop meta-awareness as Misty described, genre-awareness as Heather pointed out, and writing self-efficacy.

**Writing apprehension is the primary obstacle to becoming a writer.** The term “writing apprehension” was coined by Daly and Miller while developing their ground-breaking instrument to measure writing apprehension. Writing apprehension is a collection of behaviors that include a writer’s tendency to **avoid** situations that involve writing, to find writing **unrewarding**, and to **fear** having one’s writing evaluated and shared with others. Daly and Miller found that this **apprehension seriously affects a large proportion of the population** which in turn impacts the “academic, career, and personal choices” that people make.

More importantly for us, **writing apprehension is a significant barrier** to the development of written communication skills and is linked to writing performance and quality. Writing apprehension interferes with the development of writing skills, because highly apprehensive writers are more likely to **avoid writing** when they can and when they cannot

avoid it will **write less and more poorly** than writers with low apprehension. In part this interference occurs because highly apprehensive writers seldom freely engage in writing which means they have less practice, but it also results from 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. So, not only do they write poorly now, **they do not expect they can ever improve** their writing ability.

If students do not think it is possible that they can ever improve their writing ability and become writers, is it any wonder we face problems with transfer? Every year, every semester, students sit in our classes and learn new skills but they do not believe they will ever be good writers and so I believe that is where we need to begin – not with skills acquisition but breaking that cycle and proving to them that they can become writers. **Key to helping students believe they can become writers is writing self-efficacy.**

### **Writing Self-Efficacy**

Writing apprehension is caused by a lack of writing self-efficacy. In order to foster the growth and development of writers, we must reduce writing apprehension and increase writing self-efficacy. Not only will increasing writing self-efficacy decrease writing apprehension, but it will have a positive effect on writing development. Decades of research in diverse fields has shown that **writing self-efficacy can influence writing ability as well as diminish writing apprehension.** Little or no attention is paid to writing apprehension in most

writing classrooms which means that even as students are taught and develop skills, they do not increase in confidence and without confidence there is no reason for students to change their belief that they cannot write and will never be writers. However, instructional practices which work to diminish apprehension about writing and increase writing self-efficacy can have a long-term positive effect on the writer and diminish writing apprehension.

In order to understand self-efficacy theory, we should begin with the social cognitive theory developed by Albert Bandura. Bandura's social cognitive theory is based on the idea that **humans have a hand in shaping their lives and social systems**. This idea that human functioning is the product of a dynamic interplay among personal, behavioral, and environmental influences was introduced in the mid-1960s. Ultimately, this new theory focused on the idea that human agency, rather than underlying pathologies, was the primary motivation for human behavior and recognized that people set their own goals, anticipate what can happen as a result of their actions, and adjust their actions accordingly. By the 1980s, social cognitivists were actively arguing the notion of individuals as proactive and self-regulating and in turn educators knew that their intervention could make a difference in their students' abilities and achievements – but decades later students still aren't getting the message. They do not believe what they learn in class can change the way they write and they do not believe they can change the way they write.

Bandura tells us that **our self-beliefs control how we shape our lives** by influencing our thoughts, feelings, and actions. At the core of these self-beliefs is personal self-efficacy -- our

judgment of our capability to organize and execute a particular course of action. Decades of research in various fields have supported Bandura's theory that personal self-efficacy influences the actions we take including how we react to challenges and physical and emotional stress. Self-efficacy beliefs not only control what we do but also our level of accomplishment and achievement.

Self-efficacy beliefs are our belief in our capability to produce the desired effect through deliberate action. In order to possess high writing self-efficacy, you must believe you have the ability and knowledge to deliver effective writing. **We have been giving our students the knowledge but they do not believe they have the ability to use it – and I believe that is why all too often transfer does not take place.** Increasing writing self-efficacy can help close that gap.

### **Increasing Writing Self-Efficacy**

Research suggests that writing apprehension interferes with the development of writing skills. For more than two decades, investigators have found positive associations between writing self-efficacy and writing outcomes. The writer with high writing self-efficacy is more likely to do what is necessary to properly perform the writing task, work through difficulties, and push to overcome challenges while the writer with low writing self-efficacy is 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.

Diminishing writing apprehension and increasing writing self-efficacy begins with attending to the sources of writing self-efficacy. Belief in our capability to act, or self-efficacy, is influenced by four sources: performance or **mastery experience**, actively engaging in the activity; **vicarious experience**, observations and comparisons; social persuasions or **feedback**; and **physical and emotional responses** to the activity. Helping writers develop writing self-efficacy means attending to the four sources of writing self-efficacy by providing real purposeful writing experience, models for study and comparison, feedback, and mitigation of mental and physical stresses they face.

### **Mastery Experience**

Mastery experience is the most influential source of efficacy information and provides the most **authentic evidence**. Successes build your personal efficacy while failures undermine it. However, experiencing success is not enough to build a resilient sense of efficacy. You also need experience overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort. Bandura points out that some difficulties and setbacks serve the beneficial purpose of teaching that success usually requires sustained effort while difficulties provide opportunities to learn how to turn failure into success. In order to experience both failure and success, you must have many opportunities to practice the particular skill.

### **Vicarious Experience**

Vicarious experience offers writers both role models and comparable peers so they can compare their work to that of others as well as study models for skill and strategy development. Vicarious experience is especially important for activities with no absolute measures of adequacy such as writing. 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 comparable peers also striving to achieve this ideal. Competent models transmit knowledge and teach observers effective skills and strategies.

### **Social Persuasion**

Feedback, or social persuasion, also plays an important role in the development of writing self-efficacy. This means more feedback than teacher response and more genuine feedback than that typically offered by peer review. As teachers this requires us not to simply give pep talks or praise, but to cultivate our student's beliefs in their capabilities and structure activities that bring success and avoid situations which will bring repeated failure. Regular feedback from a variety of sources is one way to increase self-efficacy and writing competence. Sustaining a sense of efficacy is easier if significant mentors and peers express faith in one's capabilities than if they convey doubts. However, verbal persuasion has limited power by itself as people do not always believe what they are told and skepticism develops from personal experiences that often run counter to what one has been told. **Social persuasion serves as a useful adjunct** but other influences tend to be more powerful.

## Physiological or Affective State

When judging our capabilities, we also rely on information received from physical and emotional states. For example, people do not usually anticipate success when they are tense or agitated. Of course, many times these stress reactions become a **self-fulfilling prophecy** as stress reactions to inefficacious control generate further stress. Mood also affects judgments of personal efficacy. A major way of altering efficacy beliefs is to enhance physical status, reduce stress levels, and negative emotional proclivities. Stress reactions typically generate further stress. It is important 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 and of what they can do to improve their skills can help reduce stress—especially if those conversations continue over time.

## Making writers

Perhaps one of the most important messages for those working with writers 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. What is important is some form of supportive classroom experience that makes it possible for the writer to have access to the four sources of writing

self-efficacy, but also grants the writer the agency to explore, experiment, and progress at her own direction. We need less emphasis on teaching, as this all too often leads to micromanaging the writing process, and more emphasis on fostering, supporting, and guiding. 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' writing self-efficacy beliefs.

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