

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 exactly we should teach our students to help them with the writing tasks they will face after they leave our classrooms, I was quickly overwhelmed. After all, 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 that focusing on the writer rather than the writing was the appropriate approach to take. 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 – in other words, we can teach writing skills that transfer. However, we are not going to achieve that transfer by focusing on skills-based learning. Instead, we must 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.

One of the primary obstacles to developing as a writer is writing apprehension. The term “writing apprehension” was coined by Daly and Miller (1975) while developing their ground-breaking instrument to measure writing apprehension. They found that communication apprehension seriously affects a large proportion of the population (Daly & Miller, 1975). Mabrito (2000) describes writing apprehension as “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” (p. 41). Faris (1999) argues that writing apprehension impacts the “academic, career, and personal choices” that people make (p. 10). This means that highly apprehensive

writers base their major and career choices on the “perceived writing requirements” in those fields (Faris, 1999, p. 16).

Faris (1999) contends this problem goes even deeper in that “writing apprehension or writing anxiety” is a “significant barrier” (p. 10) to the development of written communication skills. Mabrito (1992) also notes that writing apprehension is linked to writing performance and quality. Not only does writing apprehension interfere with the development of writing skills (Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996, p. 20), but 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 (Faris, 1999). In part this interference occurs because highly apprehensive writers seldom freely engage in writing (Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996, p. 20) which means that they have less practice than less apprehensive writers, 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 (Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996, p. 20). Not only do they write poorly now, they do not expect they can ever improve their writing ability.

Therefore, students with poor writing skills are more likely to be highly apprehensive about writing and less likely to be equipped to address this deficiency. With more students entering college with poor writing skills that means 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. We must help students understand the importance of writing and to help them cope with writing apprehension. One such strategy, supported by writing self-efficacy and social cognitive theory, can help students not only cope with writing apprehension but overcome it so they can grow and develop as writers.

Writing Self-Efficacy

Writing apprehension interferes with the practice and study of writing (Faris, 1999; Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996). Writing apprehension is caused by a lack of writing self-efficacy. In order to foster writing growth and development, we must attend to this apprehension. An effective way to reduce writing apprehension is to increase writing self-efficacy (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011; Daly and Wilson, 1983; Pajares and Johnson, 1994). 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 have shown that self-efficacy beliefs are a more consistent predictor of behavioral outcomes than are other self-beliefs (Pajares, 2003). This means writing self-efficacy can influence writing ability as well as diminish writing apprehension. This attention to writing apprehension is necessary as Pajares (2003) notes “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” (p. 152). In fact, all too often the opposite is true and little or no attention is paid to writing apprehension. When writing instruction is directed toward error avoidance or the “doctrine of correctness,” too many students become convinced that they cannot write and have nothing to say (Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996, p. 21). Even as students are taught and develop skills, they do not increase in confidence. Pajares (2003) urges teachers to “take seriously” their responsibility for nurturing the self-beliefs of their pupils. How can we nurture the self-beliefs of writers and help them overcome this apprehension so we can move on to the necessary process of attending to their growth and development as writers? 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 it is important to learn more about social cognitive theory developed by Albert Bandura (1997).

Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Pajares, 2003) is based on the idea that humans have a hand in shaping their lives and social systems. In the early 1960s, the predominant theory of psychology was the psychodynamic model based on a belief that human behavior was regulated by unconscious inner impulses and that behavior that diverged from the norm was a symptom of an underlying pathology which could be changed using interpretive analysis (Bandura, 2004). However, the idea that human functioning is the product of a dynamic interplay among personal, behavioral, and environmental influences was introduced in the mid-1960s and drew increasing attention. The supporters of this new theory, which included Bandura, broadened the frontiers of social learning by pushing for observational learning and vicarious reinforcement (Pajares, 2003). Ultimately, this new school of thought, which became known as social cognitive theory, came to recognize that human agency rather than underlying pathologies was the primary motivation for human behavior and recognized that people set their own goals, anticipate the outcomes of their actions and adjust their actions accordingly, adopt standards to guide those actions, and regulate their actions to achieve the desired goals (Bandura, 2004). By the 1980s, social cognitivists were actively arguing the notion of individuals as proactive and self-regulating (Pajares, 2003).

Agency and Efficacy

Bandura (1997) tells us that it is our self-beliefs that exert control over how we shape our lives by influencing our thoughts, feelings, and actions. At the core of these self-beliefs is personal self-efficacy which is an individual’s judgment of her capability to organize and execute a particular course of action (Bandura). Decades of research in various fields (Bandura; Pajares; Hidi & Boscolo; Pajares & Valiente) have supported

Bandura's theory that personal self-efficacy influences the courses of action we choose to take, how much we will persevere in the face of challenges, our resiliency when faced with difficulties, our level of optimism (or pessimism) with such challenges and difficulties, and our reaction to the physical effects of exhaustion, stress, and depression. Bandura (1997) cites a rich body of knowledge concerning the social applications of this theory to varied spheres of life including physical, biologic, medical, and psychosocial technologies. 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). Pajares (2003) points out that research has demonstrated that self-efficacy is a more consistent predictor of behavioral outcomes than other self-beliefs and this holds true in writing (Hidi & Boscolo). People's beliefs about their personal efficacy "constitute a major aspect of their self-knowledge," according to Bandura (1997, p. 79).

Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy beliefs as a person's belief in her capability to produce the desired effect through deliberate action. In order to possess high writing self-efficacy, a person must believe she has the ability and knowledge to deliver effective writing. Research suggests that beliefs about writing processes and competence are instrumental to one's ultimate success as a writer (Bandura, 1997; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Pajares, 2003). In particular, writing apprehension interferes with the development of writing skills (Bandura, 1997; Daly & Miller, 1975; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Pajares, 2003; Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996). Hidi and Boscolo (2006) further note that for 20 years investigators have found positive associations between self-efficacy for writing and writing outcomes. Pajares and Valiente (2008) point to research that suggests beliefs about writing processes and competence are instrumental to the writer's ultimate success as a writer.

This is because self-efficacy beliefs influence an individuals' chosen course of action, perseverance, resiliency, sense of optimism or pessimism, and reaction to stress and depression (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003). This means 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. Simply possessing high writing self-efficacy then increases the writer's chances of performing well because high writing self-efficacy means the writer is ready, willing, and able to do the work necessary. Writers who possess low writing self-efficacy 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 (Bandura, 1997).

Increasing Writing Self-Efficacy

Diminishing writing apprehension and increasing writing self-efficacy so our students can become more successful writers begins with attending to the sources of writing self-efficacy (Pajares, 2003; Pajares, Johnson

& Usher, 2007; Pajares & Valiente, 2006; Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996). An individual's belief in her capability to act, or self-efficacy, is influenced by four sources, according to Bandura (1997). These sources of self-efficacy are performance or mastery experience, actively engaging in the activity; vicarious experience, such as observations and social comparisons; social persuasions or feedback; and physical and emotional state (Bandura, 1997). In turn, each of these influences impact the overall level of accomplishment at the particular task. This means we must provide our student writers with the sources of writing self-efficacy as well as the agency necessary to act upon them.

Helping writers develop writing self-efficacy means attending to the four sources of writing self-efficacy: actual writing experience, models for study and comparison, feedback, and mitigation of mental and physical stress (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007). This process begins with offering writers many and varied opportunities to write so 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 writing apprehension which often contributes to debilitating emotional and physical reactions to the apprehension (Bandura, 1997, p. 106).

Mastery Experience

Perhaps the most important source of writing self-efficacy is performance or mastery experience—active engagement in the act of writing (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007). Of course writing classes have long offered this experience, but the key is not simply offering writing practice. A key aspect of this mastery experience is writing with a purpose in a supportive discourse community. It is “guided mastery” experience in writing that provides “authentic evidence” of the writer's capability (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). Purposeful writing within a specific context that pushes writers to stretch beyond their safety zone, created in a supportive nonjudgmental writing community, with coaching and mentoring easily accessible, which provides a real audience. In other words, writing experience that focuses on student growth and development as writers and not simply the errors they make in their writing.

Mastery experience is the most influential source of efficacy information and provides the “most authentic evidence,” according to Bandura (1997, p. 80). He points out that “successes build a robust belief in one’s personal efficacy” while “failures undermine it” (p. 80). Experiencing success is not enough to build a “resilient sense of efficacy” (p. 80). People also need experience “overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort” (Bandura, 1997, p. 80). 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” (p. 80). In order to experience both failure and success, people must have many opportunities to practice the particular skill. It is important that this experience be carefully structured so the activities bring enough success to bolster self-efficacy and do not prematurely enter situations which will lead to repeated failure (Bandura, 1997, p. 106).

Vicarious Experience

The vicarious experience of comparing experiences to that of models and comparable peers is another source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, p. 86). Vicarious experience that offers writers the work of others for comparison as well as information about skills and strategies is also important. 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. All these experiences play an important part in the development of writing self-efficacy as it allows writers to compare their work to the work of others and offers models for their own skill and strategy development.

Vicarious experience is especially important for “activities with no absolute measures of adequacy” which makes it important for 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 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).

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. Bandura (1997) says that 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

which will bring repeated failure (p. 106). Pajares and Valiente (2006) also say that regular feedback is one way to increase self-efficacy and writing competence.

Feedback or social persuasion is important, according to Bandura (1997). He says sustaining a sense of efficacy is easier “if significant others express faith in one’s capabilities than if they convey doubts” (p. 1010). However, Bandura (1997) notes that 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” (p. 104). Bandura (1997) says that social persuasion serves as a “useful adjunct” but other influences tend to be more powerful (p. 106).

Physiological or Affective State

Bandura (1997) says that when people are judging their capabilities, they also rely on information received from their physical and emotional states (p. 106). For example, people do not usually anticipate success when they are “tense or agitated” (Bandura, 1997, p. 106). Of course, 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 efficacy. Bandura (1997) suggests that a “major way of altering efficacy beliefs is to enhance physical status, reduce stress levels, and negative emotional proclivities” (p. 106). Bandura (2006) points out that stress reactions typically generate further stress (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 and of what they can do to improve their skills can help reduce stress—especially if these conversations continue over time.

Agency and Efficacy

While each of the four sources of self-efficacy impact the overall level of accomplishment at a particular task, Bandura emphasizes the fact that agency and self-efficacy are interdependent. In order to make the decision to act, people must believe they have the power as well as the capability to act. So what does that mean? That means granting them that power and opportunity for choice. Pajares, Johnson, and Usher (2007) argue that in order for writers to grow they must be actively “engaged” and not simply going through the motions of writing. This type of engagement is more likely to occur, according to Pajares and Valiente (2006), when writers are given autonomy in their writing choices and goals. Bandura (1997) also says

selecting their own goals is key (p. 218). Bandura further stresses those goals should be focused on progress and not products (p. 218) which is in line with current writing theory. Wachholz & Etheridge (1996) say it is instruction focused on creating error-free products that convinces writers they cannot write.

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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