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Mediated-efficacy: Hope for “helpless” writers

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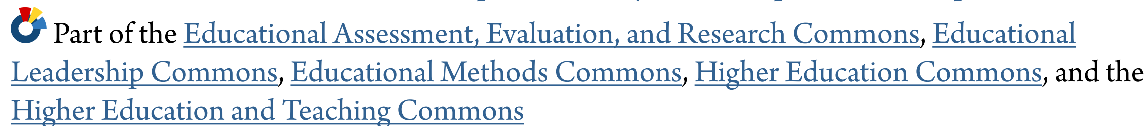

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Abstract

Building on previous studies of college students' writing self-efficacy beliefs, this article presents the empirical foundation for a re-conceptualized understanding of this identity process. 131 college freshmen enrolled in a developmental writing course were evaluated holistically using grounded theory methodology. This study identifies 1.) major theoretical categories revealing the nature of students' initial pessimism about themselves as writers and senses of learned helplessness, and 2.) a subsequent shift toward optimism and self-efficacy triggered by a particular learning relationship formed with their instructors, the core of the posited mediated-efficacy theory. Directions for college-level developmental writing pedagogy are explored.

Keywords: developmental writing, writing self-efficacy, learned helplessness, pedagogy, grounded theory and holistic assessment, mediated-efficacy theory, and student persistence.

Project has received IRB approval.

How Mediated-Efficacy Gives “Helpless” Developmental Writers Hope

Perhaps because of the seemingly magical act of making words appear on blank paper, some student writers and college teachers underestimate or misunderstand the complexity of the writing task. As a result, students can misinterpret their struggles as mere laziness (McLeod, 1987), and teachers can conflate “writing-like” activities (e.g., grammar worksheets) with “actual writing” and, thus, mistake their roles as being primarily “language cops” (Newkirk, 2009, p. 50). In truth, composition scholars are clear: Writing is a complex literacy task that develops slowly and often idiosyncratically (Carroll, 2002), and it involves embracing the contrary dispositions of open exploration and of rigorous critique of ideas (Elbow, 1983). Bruning and Horn (2000) described writing as “a tremendously complex problem-solving act involving memory, planning, text generation, and revision” (p. 26) that engenders unique motivational challenges. Such challenges may be amplified for college students who labor under the additional burden of stigma associated with placement into “remedial” courses (Arendale, 2005). The National Council of State Legislatures reported anywhere between 28 to 40 percent of college students are placed into remedial classes (Bautsch, 2013). Given that only 17% of this demographic complete a bachelor’s degree, finding ways to optimize developmental writer success takes on a new urgency. This article reports on an effective new initiative undertaken at a mid-sized, private 4-year college. While course design elements are briefly mentioned, the impact of this initiative is primarily articulated through the students’ own writing to describe their growth over the semester.

Introduction and Theoretical Context: Motivation and Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura's (1986, 1997) influential socio-cognitive theory of self-efficacy and motivation posited that the beliefs people hold about their capabilities can better predict their behavior than their actual abilities can. He described a recursive phenomenon by demonstrating that senses of

self-efficacy influence the choices people make, the amount of effort they expend on a given task, their persistence in the face of adversity, the way they intellectually conceptualize tasks, and the way they respond emotionally to challenges. He emphasized that these beliefs are not innate but are derived from external sources: mastery experiences, social comparison modeling, labeling and feedback received from others, and physiological states of anxiety or calm. Each of these can affect an individual's sense of agency.

Writing Self-Efficacy and Student Performance

Subsequent research has shown that the educational importance of self-efficacy beliefs should not be underestimated. These beliefs can affect career choices and "are correlated with other motivation constructs and with students' academic performance and achievement" (Pajares, 2003, p. 141). Notable, for this study, is the degree to which self-efficacy beliefs influence a developmental writer's performance. As one pioneer in this research field concluded:

> If writing difficulties result not only from an inability to solve writing problems, but also from one's own decision that one is unable to solve them, then one important step in improving writing would be to strengthen individuals' self-efficacy expectations about their writing ability. (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985, p. 466)

Indeed, in the years since the concept was created, many studies have clearly linked writing self-efficacy beliefs to student achievement (Pajares, 2003; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012; Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989), as well as linking self-efficacy beliefs to various teaching or assessment strategies (Bruning & Horn, 2000; McLeod, 1987).

One common denominator in all of this research is the degree to which scholars have relied on quantitative tools to measure student beliefs. Several compositionists have developed writing self-efficacy scales, usually brief questionnaires or surveys asking students to rate their writing capabilities (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985; Pajares, 2007). Such scales are easy to

score and have been well-tested over the past 30 years as reliable and valid measures of self-efficacy. However, the dominant methodologies used to study student beliefs underpinning self-efficacy have been somewhat limited: Either they have focused too exclusively on student performance and too little on process, or they have only examined one dimension of student self-efficacy development. Certainly, showing connections between self-efficacy beliefs and writing performance is important. Of equal importance is knowing what actually *causes* or *limits* self-efficacy development, *how* students experience the act of writing, and *why* self-efficacy affects performance. Although correlations between using a particular teaching strategy and efficacy gains might exist, other (perhaps multiple) factors might be the actual source of those gains. Moreover, scales are reductionistic instruments, subsuming all of the writing process into a Likert-scaled list of close-ended parts that could prime and therefore limit student responses. Furthermore, the scales themselves have often been constructed in an *a priori* fashion, using pre-conceived notions of self-efficacy. When researchers pre-determine which elements of the writing process will be studied before examining the actual student work, they might not create instruments that adequately capture the full range of student experience. Even researchers who recognize these problems (e.g., Schmidt & Alexander, 2012) often try to construct a better scale rather than turning to other instruments or methodologies. It is a bit like trying to build a better mousetrap when mice might not be the primary pest problem. Researchers might better capture what is actually out there by gathering different kinds of data.

To be clear, the intention of this article is not to discredit any of the previous research, but due to the ways that self-efficacy has been measured and due to the static nature of many of the research designs, the field has not yet reached a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the reciprocal and socially-situated nature of the development of writing self-efficacy. In addition, the field has not made sufficient progress in determining how to best promote self-

efficacy for writing in a way that is not reduced to a single, isolated strategy. As Bruning and Horn (2000) put it, “Less is known about the patterns of beliefs that students hold about writing and how they develop” (p. 29). The current study attempts to address these limitations.

Using Grounded Theory to Gather Different Kinds of Data

Research into non-cognitive elements of student learning is hardly new. Even when self-efficacy theory was first posited, some scholars demanded a more holistic understanding of “how we can help students value their own abilities” (McLeod, 1987, p. 430). Such understanding is rooted in student affect. Yet, affect is not easily quantified or predicted. Two students can react to the same kind of teacher feedback in radically different ways, depending, in part, on temperament and past experiences. Therefore, to attempt to account for a range of student beliefs, this study uses a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory's *a posteriori* methodology allows the researcher to remain unfettered by prior expectations or by frameworks that might obscure essential details or “may perpetuate ideals that could be refined, transcended or discarded” (Charmaz, 1983, p. 111). The grounded theory approach “puts the focus on concepts that fit and are relevant” (Glaser, 2012, p. 28) to the actual process under investigation. In this case, the intention was to shift the focus from any particular pedagogical interventions and instead develop a meta-understanding of the multiple and synergistic sources of writing self-efficacy development. Other scholars have recognized grounded theory has particular value in composition studies because “it doesn't require us to simplify the complex acts of writing and teaching” (Migliaccio & Melzer, 2011, p. 79) and results in conclusions that have relevant applications to practice.

Methodology

In this case, to capture exactly “what is going on” (Glaser, 2012, p. 28) for our first-year developmental writers, the instructional team (of which I was the lead) analyzed narratives

written in the first and last weeks of the semester. By allowing students to write freely, more authentic themes could be uncovered than might otherwise be formed using researcher-generated interview or survey questions. That said, students were also surveyed through a learning inventory at the end of the semester to triangulate findings from the narratives. This survey provided both confirmation and further insight into student experience of the class. However, our primary interest was in the open-ended narratives because they provided un-prompted, learner-based evidence. The narratives revealed the specific components of learned helplessness students brought into their first-year composition course and subsequently demonstrated how students experienced gains in writing self-efficacy. Writing instructors must understand the dimensions of this learned helplessness before they can begin to select appropriate pedagogical strategies for facilitating student empowerment.

Research Context and Background

To better align with *Core Principles for Transforming Remedial Education* (2012), in 2013 my university piloted a revised approach to our developmental writing program. Previously, incoming students whose SAT scores indicated they were under-prepared in writing were required to complete a sequence of developmental courses before taking our interdisciplinary first-year seminar, which also serves as the college-level writing requirement for all incoming students. In 2013, the university launched a new program where freshmen who appeared to be *somewhat* under-prepared in writing (SAT-writing score between 450 and 500) were mainstreamed into special sections of the first-year seminar course and provided a weekly supplemental 100-minute studio aimed at delivering intensive writing instruction, practice, and feedback. To remain consistent with the tenants of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992), beyond this “developmental writer” designation, the instructional team did not *assume* the relevance of any particular demographic data as we examined the student pool. Nevertheless, for the purpose of

providing context for the reader, some information about what it means to be a developmental writer at our university might be useful.

Table 1. Freshman Demographics 2013

		All Freshmen, Enrolled in Freshman Seminar (*N* = 958)	Sub-Set Concurrently Enrolled in Developmental Studio (*n* = 132)	"Top Gainers" from Studio (*n* = 28)
Gender	Female	506 (52.8%)	70 (53.0%)	15 (53.6%)
	Male	452 (47.2%)	62 (47.0%)	13 (46.4%)
Race/Ethnicity	Asian/Pacific Islander	385 (40.2%)	39 (29.5%)	5 (17.9%)
	White/Non-Hispanic	217 (22.7%)	32 (24.2%)	10 (35.7%)
	Hispanic	165 (17.2%)	35 (26.5%)	12 (42.9%)
	African American	27 (2.8%)	6 (4.5%)	1 (3.6%)
	Other *	17.1%	15.3%	none
First Generation College Student		18.5 %	31.7%	n/a

*Includes: International (NRA), Native American, Multi-Ethnic, and Unknown/Other. Terms reflect university designations.

Further, according to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey for the 2013 class, in comparison to other institutions, our students consistently under-rated their knowledge, skills, and abilities--with 26% anticipating need for special tutoring or remedial work in writing (nearly twice the number than for those at comparison schools). A high proportion of these students are also low income (Kelley, 2014). In short, from the outset our cohort reflected several "at risk" markers as well as the attendant affective self-beliefs that often accompany membership in such a group.

To understand the scope of this study, readers should also note that our experienced instructional team embraced increasing student writing self-efficacy as the single most important learning outcome for the studio portion of the course. Initially, various learning outcome options were considered, but discussion at the summer-planning faculty meeting led to a consensus-decision that to optimize any other learning, writing self-efficacy had to come first. The team chose not to test any particular curricular or pedagogical intervention, but instead instructors attended a workshop where they honed their general understanding of self-efficacy development

mechanisms. Therefore, the pedagogical context for this study diverges from most previous research, which has focused on a discrete change. Given the self-efficacy gains all students demonstrated across all sections, our approach seems to not only have been effective but suggests that self-efficacy development is less about any particular teaching technique and more about other, larger factors. Moreover, while the instructional team was concerned about student performance, we were also aware that it is often unrealistic to expect to see measurable gains in writing ability over the course of just one semester (Carroll, 2002). Therefore, one of the primary things we were curious about was the degree to which students' senses of writing self-efficacy, independent of writing *ability*, were detectable in a single semester.

Pre-and-Post Writing Narratives

At the very first writing studio meeting of the semester, students were asked to write for 50-minutes describing their strengths and weaknesses as writers, drawing on personal experiences to illustrate their points. This sample (n=131) served as a narrative pre-test, informing the instructional team about the levels of writing self-efficacy students had upon entering the class. At the end of the semester, these same students repeated this identical writing exercise with the added instruction that they should think about their strengths and weaknesses in light of what they had experienced over the course of the semester. The instructional team evaluated and coded these pre-and-post narrative tests three ways. First, we developed a scoring rubric to identify levels for five components of writing self-efficacy, derived from Bandura's (1997) essential pillars. Along with assessing students' general belief in their writing capability, the rubric awarded high scores for student experiences of mastery, positive modeling, low anxiety, and active sense of social agency. [See Appendix A.] Once inter-rater reliability with this rubric was established using anchor papers for norming, student work was divided amongst the instructor team for scoring. Identifying information had been removed from these writing

samples, and instructors did not score their own students' work. Second, scorers were asked to identify those students who had made the most gains in writing self-efficacy. The choice to deeply analyze the most successful students was deliberate because we were most interested in what activates success, as opposed to what triggers failure. For those "top gainers," scorers wrote brief qualitative summaries of the key student-identified elements that characterized her or his development. These summaries, along with the students' original work, were all turned over to me (the lead instructor) for a third phase of cross-section comprehensive coding using the constant comparative method to conceptualize from the data. This involved line-by-line analysis of 56 narratives (28 pre-tests and 28 post-tests). I labeled key ideas/codes that emerged from the student writing, described further in the results section. I then organized these codes thematically to develop general categories. From these thematic categories emerged unifying core categories. To establish trustworthiness, I reported these categories back to the scoring team for member checking. In the following report, I quote the students' own language to honor their agency; however, my specific selections are also emblematic of larger themes. Pseudonyms are used throughout both to protect student identity and to also allow readers to track how individual student responses changed over the semester.

Results and Discussion

Theme One: Barriers to Self-Efficacy

Almost all of the students began with good working vocabularies to describe effective writing, meaning their struggles were not for a lack of conceptual awareness but had to do with a perceived inability to *apply* these elements to their own writing. Further, it was sometimes hard to distinguish between cause and effect because of the recursive way self-efficacy develops, or fails to develop. That said, the four categories identified here–disengagement, fear of judgment, conflation, and collapse–came from those things students described as their "weaknesses" as

writers. Notably, as these categories come from writing students did on the first day of class (the pre-test), they must refer to their high school experiences. Such information is useful because sometimes college teachers fall into a *tabula rasa* trap: Instructors don't know what educational contexts our first-years have come from, and even the students themselves, seeking a fresh start, can be eager to jettison the past. But, this past can affect the present and impede teaching and learning effectiveness.

Disengagement: "Boring topics about books you didn't like." Many students described struggling with the "weird" topics their teachers provided on which they were required to write. Jennifer recalled starting life with a "fascinating dream of becoming a writer. I loved writing for pure fun and creating stories;" however, something changed once she entered high school, "Having a teacher assign you a boring topic about a book you did not even like reading crushed every last hope I ever had for becoming a writer." Students perceived such topics as limiting their creativity and range of expression. Mario reported, "My teacher knew ahead of time what my answers were supposed to be." There was no hope for engagement: "I almost couldn't care less about [high school essay prompts]." Writing was done to please someone else in order to fulfill an extrinsic agenda. It was seen as "regurgitation," not exploration, "not fun."

Fear of Judgment: "A long scary rollercoaster." Compounding the problem of rigid and narrow essay topics was the student sense that their writing was going to be harshly judged. Jennifer lamented, "I feel I have just been beaten down with everything I have ever written." Many had the sense that they were being set up to fail and that their teachers took pleasure in inflicting that failure. Tara described, "Writing felt like going on a long scary rollercoaster with the Grinch anxiously waiting on the other side to judge me." She saw herself as out-of-control and headed into certain doom. Thus, judgment seemed impossible to predict or control. Regardless of who or what was doing the actual judging, many felt what Jennifer observed,

"There has been no positive feedback for a long time." Mario described being "weighted down by a red pen of death." Sara commented, "Every time I received a paper back from editing, it would always look like someone had accidentally splattered ink on my paper." Her adverb choice indicates that this kind of feedback felt random and casual; for her, editing is accidental and messy.

Conflation: "My handwriting is horrible, so I'm a bad writer." Likely because of a sense that everything was open for arbitrary attack, students reported that they were often unable to discriminate parts from a whole. To them, "grammar" was the same thing as "writing." Consequently, students sometimes confused or conflated writing elements: Mario saw content as the same as style; handwriting and page formatting were as significant as thesis. In essence, writing was a single daunting monolith.

Collapse: "I have faith in myself at first, but soon accept defeat." Because students perceived writing as an overwhelming monolith, most exhibited a lack of coping strategies for dealing with the natural setbacks that are part of the writing process. Jorge called it "hitting a brick wall." From the specific, "In my head an idea will be there and I can put it on paper easily but revising it is a whole other story," they leapt to the general, "Writing is just something I can say I am not that good at." They had little awareness of techniques that could be mastered that might help. Instead, students described many states of being stuck, "If I don't get stuck at the very beginning, once I start I still don't know what to write." Being stuck led to a lack of resilience. Maggie reported, "The moment I hit a writer's block, I disintegrate in my seat, doubt myself and almost feel obligated to accept defeat and failure." While she did not clarify to whom she felt that obligation, her lack of agency is striking.

Part of the reason for these underdeveloped coping skills may stem from an inability to self-assess one's work. Mark wrote, "I wonder if this essay will come up to pass the college level

requirements, or if I am just being a Nervous Nelly. I don't really know what my writing strengths and weaknesses are." Some students knew they were grappling with old patterns that needed to be unlearned or modified in the new college context, "It has become a habit for me to restate what the author has already said." Others recognized that specific kinds of writing were particularly vexing. For example, many talked about the anxiety they felt when asked to perform on-demand, timed writing. Such anxiety could be compounded by a tendency to compare oneself unfavorably with others. Maggie said, "During the SAT exams, I belittled my writing abilities because the scurrying of others' pens made me nervous that my essay was not as good. I have faith in myself at first, but soon accept defeat."

Core Categories: Pessimism and Learned Helplessness

These four areas where students located the sources of their writing weaknesses–a lack of control and intrinsic motivation, fear of judgment, writing-element conflation, and poor coping strategies–proved to be both features of low self-efficacy and a breeding ground for some troubling emotions associated with writing. One might expect students who had had these sorts of experiences to express high levels of writing anxiety. This certainly was the case, resulting for some in a kind of obsessive over-concern. Maggie described, "I spent days and nights trying to perfect my final essay in even the smallest of ways."

Alongside the anxiety were also high levels of demoralization. Kim, one of the students who exhibited the lowest levels of writing self-efficacy on the pre-test, wrote:

> I have *never* been a very strong writer. English has *always* been the one class that I *hate* to go to *every single day*. The *only* strength I have as a writer is I get to the point. Which in many cases is *not a strength* at all. If I don't get stuck at the beginning, once I start I still don't know what to write. Although most of the time I have an idea in my head, I am *never* able to articulate it well on paper if at all. All throughout school I was *always* too

> short for length requirements whether it was a paper or a speech. *Neither of which I can execute.* [italics inserted for emphasis]

Most distressing about this example is the fact that these 116 words represent her entire output for the allotted 50-minutes. The concern is not that she lacked having much to say so much as the fact that *these* were the details she was able to share. Cognitive psychologist Martin Seligman (2002) describes pessimists as those who believe that the results of negative events are permanent, that one experience of failure permeates all aspects of that experience, and that they themselves are to blame for failure. At the same time, pessimists exhibit a lack of agency to affect change. Using this lens, it is easy to see that Kim has developed a pessimistic view of herself as a writer. She used categorical terms (e.g., *never, always*), indicating her sense of permanence. Her negative writing experiences have also permeated to the extent that she hated going to English class every single day. She additionally undermines the one strength she thinks she might have and then blames herself for this state of affairs. Seligman's research has shown that pessimists are much more prone to giving up in the face of adversity, and pessimism can be linked to an even more severe state of learned helplessness, where people feel there is nothing they can do to control future outcomes. In her discussion of the affective domain of the writing process, McLeod (1987) pointed out that "some students who fail continually on a task learn to be helpless at that task and to see failure as inevitable on similar tasks–in many cases giving up before they have even begun" (p. 431). Therefore, as indicated in Kim's case, if an absence of student writing self-efficacy is actually a form of learned helplessness, then it may be particularly challenging to help such students become more effective writers because they are not just *un*motivated, they may be *anti*motivated, believing themselves completely incapable of change.

Other students exhibited similar features of pessimistic thinking and learned helplessness. Luis believed an essay could be categorically doomed from the start, "I believe that if I have a bad time with the topic, and my introduction doesn't attract the readers, then it would continue with the rest of the paper." He also attributed his failures to his own personal shortcomings, "I tend to be a lazy writer and just want to jump into the easy parts to get it over with." Certainly, people can be lazy writers, but another way of framing his difficulties might be to suggest that he is not motivated to work through set-backs. Such a lack of motivation might be explained by the fact that many of the students equated their worth as writers with the grades they received on their essays. Mei-lee explained, "Speaking two languages, I write in a way that makes sense to me, but not in English. I didn't know I was doing it wrong, until I received my first essay back with red marks all over it." Thus, her agency became externalized.

In general, the language students used, or did not use, to describe themselves as writers at the beginning of the semester indicated an overwhelming sense of isolation. They perceived themselves as working alone in a hostile environment where the dreaded red pen lurks. This is not to say all students had given up. Some believed "I am trying and that's all that matters." And, "I will get there someday!" Harris asserted, "I consider my enthusiasm in my writing one of my key strengths….I believe in my ideas." The trick for writing instructors is to help all students develop this kind of enthusiasm and confidence.

Theme Two: Facilitators of Self-Efficacy

The good news is that by the end of the semester students saw significant gains in writing self-efficacy. Their post-test narratives revealed three key areas where that self-efficacy flourished: increased coping skills, personal agency, and critical distance.

Increased coping skills: "What helped me most was going in and talking." By semester's end students had developed much stronger coping skills linked to a stronger sense of

connection in a learning community. Many identified one-on-one conferences with their professors as transformative. Kim, who exhibited the least writing self-efficacy at the start of the semester, ended it asserting "I feel more comfortable about writing now and loved being able to come in and get help on several drafts to get the essay shaped into a strong piece that would get a good grade." True, she is still concerned about her grade, but that comes last in the series; her feelings of comfort, love, and ability to receive help come first. Quite a contrast to the pessimism and negative emotions she expressed previously! Many others wrote about the support systems they forged with both professor and peers. Valerie observed, "Peer reviews help me a lot. They have helped me understand that it's not always going to be perfect at first, but with revision it can almost get there." Chris admitted that he "used to just slap facts into my papers and thought that I was done." He credited peer-editing workshops for the fact that, with a larger sense of audience, he now is "delving deeper into the topics I've chosen." Jorge noted "I believe a strength I developed from this class is to use your resources as much as possible."

Many students discovered these sorts of resources and identified their utility in two dimensions: They came to see writing as a sum of manageable parts, and they became more accurate in self-assessment. Instead of globalized "bad writer" self-labeling, in recognizing concrete things that could be done to improve, they also developed more accurate understandings of their weaknesses as writers. Eduardo noted, "In order to get better, you have to realize where you are behind first. For me, realizing my two greatest weaknesses has helped me tremendously." Although, he also admitted "It's very hard to find those weaknesses and discover your strengths, but when you do, everything seems to fall into place." Conversely, some students realized they had falsely inflated senses of their writing abilities. However, their process of deflation signaled increased self-efficacy. Luis discovered, "I had thought I had a thesis in my earlier papers but learned that I didn't…I have started to practice more and am kind of starting to

enjoy it because it's not as hard as I thought it was." Mario reflected, "I realize I can be arrogant in the respect that I can find flaws in others and am oblivious to my own mistakes, which I can see needs to stop."

Accurately understanding one's weaknesses meant it became possible to find solutions. Elizabeth recognized, "I found that writing and reading over multiple drafts helps me. It's also hard for me to begin an essay, but lo and behold, there's a solution to this problem: An outline can help me map out my ideas better." Eduardo had a similar experience, "It was hard for me to try and come up with a solution for fixing this weakness [going off on tangents]." However, he realized the essence of the problem had to do with failing to communicate effectively to his readers, so "to make this weakness better I would ask some peers of mine to read the essay and ask if anything was confusing." Thus, they each had created tool kits of strategies they could use to fix their specific writing problems.

Personal agency: "I have turned weakness into strength." This sense of having resources at one's disposal signaled a new sense of agency and empowerment. Alongside specific writing content (e.g., teaching what a thesis statement is), two specific pedagogical strategies seemed to have had the most impact. One was allowing students to generate their own essay topics or have essay topics emerge from class discussion. Again and again, this sort of comment emerged: "Writing about things that I like to write and in a style that I like really changes the game." The new game was "more fun," which translated into "caring what I put into it and actually putting an effort toward the supporting authors, evidence, and making a good thesis." Kim concluded, "I don't hate writing as much. When it is a topic I care about, I become very passionate." Moreover, when she feels her own ideas are controlling the paper, she described less anxiety about things like length requirements.

The second most impactful pedagogical strategy was the power of positive feedback. As Valerie put it, “I have benefitted from having a teacher that doesn’t tell me everything that is wrong with my paper and instead tells me what is good about it [and] where I can improve.” Eduardo articulated its value as “helping me extremely because being confident while I write helps me have fun with my essay rather than worrying about if my writing sucks.”

Or, as Tara said, “When you have better guidance, you get a better attitude; when you get a better attitude, an individual’s full potential can really come out.” Jennifer clarified a key distinction, “Sure getting an A on a paper is rewarding, but it’s not as meaningful as someone saying ‘I really enjoyed that paper; Good job!’” Seeing grades as less important signals a significant shift in motivation and self-regulation.

Critical distance: “You can complicate, extend and disagree with an author’s idea.”

Along with engaging students in the writing process, this new sense of agency seemed to simultaneously provide students with some critical distance. They no longer felt like pawns being pushed around by prescribed length requirements, the rules of grammar, or the obligatory use of required readings. They felt they could own these things and turn them to their advantages. Nowhere was this more striking than in their attitudes about the course reading. Students came to see that reading carefully gave them something to say in their essays. Elizabeth observed, “In the beginning when I had to use authors [in my essays], I noticed that I did not analyze their ideas as far as I could. But I discovered…that you can complicate, extend, and disagree with an author’s idea.” This insight led her to “better draw out creative analysis.”

To be able to have these kinds of epiphanies, students not only saw themselves as writers, but they saw themselves in relationships with other writers. I mentioned previously the number of students who described positive experiences with peer review. Jennifer took this a step further and saw the authors of the course readings as models for her own writing: “We have read so

many authors this semester, and analyzing their work and the style they write with has helped me figure out the type of author that I want to be."

Core Categories: Optimism and Self-Efficacy

While no students ended the semester reporting they had become master writers, what was striking were the number who came to recognize writing as a process, and this resulted in more patient, realistic, and hopeful goals. Jorge observed, "How do I feel about myself as a writer now? Well, I certainly feel more confident. I still feel as if I am not a great writer, but that takes time, and that is what I realized in [this] class." This movement from achievement goals (i.e., getting the paper finished, getting a good grade) to process goals signals a shift from the helplessness of pessimism to the self-efficacy of optimism. According to Seligman (2002) optimists see adversity as fleeting, context-dependent, and manageable. Optimistic students are, thus, able to see themselves as capable of persevering through challenges and, by doing so, acquire writing self-efficacy (Pajares, 2001). I cannot begin to quote all of the student lines reflecting their insights into the writing process. Two stood out. Maggie summed up the whole idea, "My weaknesses are not so much things that devalue my writing, but they are more works in progress. They are fixable." This translated into the realization "I can just keep working on how I revise essays. My strengths and weaknesses do not define me as a writer; they just shape me into the student I am today." Perhaps Tara was most poetic, "Now I feel like writing is taking a canoe ride down a lake, it may be a long ride, but at the end it's breathtaking."

In addition to seeing writing as a process, other students stopped seeing their struggles as unique and alienating. Harris realized "There are still some areas where I can improve my writing. Not as bad as it sounds, these are places where not just me, but where a lot of people seem to struggle." They expressed less anxiety, even if it was just "I don't really dread writing anymore." Many articulated increased self-efficacy as having discovered their "voices" as

writers. Others commented on feeling “freer.” Some talked about “enjoyment,” “passion,” and “pride” in their writing.

Mediated-Efficacy Theory and Discussion

Core category analysis (Glaser, 1992) reveals contrasting portraits of students at the start and end of the semester, demonstrating key features of their lived experience in the transition from pessimism and learned helplessness to optimism and increased writing self-efficacy. Many students started the semester with a lack of intrinsic motivation, judgment-induced anxiety, writing element conflation, and a lack of coping strategies. They ended with increased coping skills, personal agency, and critical distance. The primary purpose of this study was to generate a theory about that self-efficacy development. However, after examining the data, I concluded that the premise under which I began this analysis may be flawed. The very notion of *self*-efficacy relies on a conceptualization of independence and individuality that contradicts what the students themselves reported. In their experience, they actually felt *more* independent, in one sense of the word, when they had *less* self-efficacy. Unfortunately, this independence was not characterized by autonomy so much as by excruciating isolation. Their subsequent gains in confidence and agency were associated with their senses of being embedded in a caring community with other writers and receptive readers. Essential to that sense of community is the writing instructor who allows it into being.

Clearly, some of the ways such caring communities are built involve simply avoiding those practices associated with learned helplessness. Writing teachers should eschew enforcing rigid and arbitrary requirements, put away the red pen, and resist presenting writing as a kind of cuneiform-covered monolith for which only they have the master code. However, this study demonstrates that effective writing instruction is about more than avoiding bad practices. It entails actively developing a teaching environment that sees the value in whatever students bring

into the classroom. I have already discussed two pedagogical techniques that the students identified as important: student-generated or non-directive essay topics and positive instructor feedback. In addition to those, other elements were also essential. On a separate learning inventory given at the end of the semester, over 90% of students (n=131) reported "having the same group of students and having the same instructor for both my writing studio and discussion section" were somewhat or extremely important for their learning, indicating the significance of the relationships forged in the class. Eighty-three percent of students also described "frequently" encountering a positive classroom climate. That was the highest single-answer on the entire inventory. Therefore, of all of the deliberate measures the instructional team took to cultivate student writing self-efficacy, these four stand out–encouraging student-generated essay topics, providing positive feedback, scheduling the same instructor for seminar and studio, and optimizing a positive classroom climate. The studios provided much more than just 100-minutes of additional instruction time each week. They created a space where the students felt their teachers were on their side. Or, as Jennifer put it, "My teacher wanted me to succeed. She looked out for me and was available to help me."

Therefore, rather than generate a new theory about self-efficacy development, this study indicates a need to re-conceptualize the construct and explore how *mediated-efficacy* functions to motivate student writers. This is not to suggest that as students develop writing self-efficacy they do not also develop a more internalized locus of control, becoming more self-regulated and task-oriented (Pajares, 2003). But, such emerging personal agency arises in tandem with forging stronger, not weaker, ties with other people. Self-efficacy theory identifies the importance of modeling and positive feedback but seems to suggest these are crutches that might be discarded once an individual achieves sufficient confidence to operate independently. In the context of this study, that premise is initially appealing, and one might posit that the developmental writing

classroom must provide that kind of shelter. However, such a teleological view of writing self-efficacy is flawed.

Becoming a writer is inherently an emerging process (Newkirk, 2009). Self-efficacy depends on the nature of that emergence, which is colored by the relationship between writer and audience. Every writing task represents a new context in which, to some extent, efficacy must be newly forged. For students receiving grades on their writing, there is no more important audience member than the teacher. To help student writers find their agency, teachers must realize that role is neither an opportunity to wield the "red pen of death" nor something to pretend does not exist. A mediator is someone who intervenes to negotiate a reconciliation. The developmental writers in this study needed to reconcile negative self-beliefs developed in the past with newly-forged positive identities that could impact their future performance. Put another way, writing teachers have power over their students and must use that power to mediate a process where students dismantle learned helplessness, dispute pessimism, and develop optimism. Teachers must enter into the reciprocal relationship in which mediated-efficacy is formed.

To a certain extent this requires re-conceptualizing not just how writing is taught in college but also how instructors view themselves as writing teachers. Notably, our success in the first-year seminar class came from our ability to balance conflicting role-demands effectively. Instructors broke down hierarchies between ourselves and our students while at the same time drawing on our writing expertise and authentic passion for the subject. We were simultaneously reading coaches, fellow writers, and in-house consultants while ungraded studio work was polished into formal essays. We tried to provide constructive, non-judgmental feedback while also knowing we ultimately had to evaluate the quality of that work. Getting that balance just right is the hallmark of a teacher whose students develop mediated-efficacy.

Limitations

The findings presented in this study may not be generalizable beyond our sample population at our institution, and any claims regarding impact for particular groups of students (e.g., first generation college students or Hispanic males) must be qualified by the fact that the "top gainer" sample used to derive mediated-efficacy theory was small. Connections between efficacy gains and student demographics also could be skewed due to confounding variables. For example, many of the Asian students in our sample attributed poor writing skills to weak English language mastery. However, these student narratives do offer valuable insights into the personal dimensions of first-year developmental-level college student experience, into the teaching practices that seem to have facilitated self-efficacy development, and into areas for further research. Moreover, they demonstrate that profound changes in writing self-efficacy can be detected after a single semester (Camfield, 2015).

Implications: Mediated-Efficacy in the Disciplines and Areas for Future Research

For readers familiar with contrasting learning theories, this study might imply a Vygotskyan victory. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of socio-cultural learning posited that "all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (p. 57) and that it is within those relationships meaning is made. Bandura (1986) deliberately distanced himself from this model. He described learning as a socio-cognitive process that relies on modeling and self-efficacy, emphasizing intellectual interpretation as the mechanism by which individuals construct reality. However, the learning that happened for the participants in this study appears to have occurred in *both* socio-cognitive and socio-cultural dimensions. Students followed social cues from their instructors, which in turn influenced how they thought about their learning potentials. In other words, mediated-efficacy theory has features of both socio-cultural and socio-cognitive theories. Recent research in affective neuroscience might explain how this is so.

Hardcastle (2003) asserts that emotion is “the ‘core’ around which we structure ourselves and the world” (p. 43). Thus, emotion is fundamental to all learning—or, as she puts it, “we use our emotions cognitively” (p. 43). As students construct narratives about themselves as writers, their teachers can powerfully determine whether they are the heroes or the victims of their educational stories. Therefore, acknowledging the role of student affect in mediated-efficacy has implications both for teaching practice and for student learners.

In my work as pedagogy coordinator for our first-year seminar course and as director of our writing in the disciplines program, I often hear other professors lament that students do not know how to write. They believe that writing consists of a discrete set of skills that easily transfers from one course to the next: Freshman composition should have taken care of imparting those skills. Scholars have well-established that such a notion of transfer is a myth (Carroll, 2002; Newkirk, 2009). What has not been explored is the corollary myth that *writing self-efficacy* automatically transfers from one class to another. In reality, the instructional team has the sense that as students move out of our carefully crafted seminar environments into the university at large, their fledgling self-efficacy is at the mercy of other professors–professors who might believe their role is to weed out unqualified students. However, a contrasting perspective argues that students “must be armed with optimism, self-regard, and regard for others, and they must be shielded from doubts about the authenticity of their accomplishments” (Pajares, 2001, p. 34). Teachers must activate this optimism. While it was not the primary intention of this study, powerful future research might investigate the impact of an even more deliberately designed “optimistic classroom” that teaches students how to refrain from categorical thinking and to reframe writing problems as manageable. Future research might continue to explore the potential relationship between learned helplessness and low self-efficacy. Additionally, given Bandura’s (1993) work linking teacher efficacy with student learning,

program administrators need to understand how to help faculty develop the skills and efficacy to foster such a positive classroom climate.

However, given that one of the most striking findings from this study has to do with correlation between increased self-efficacy and student agency, perhaps the focus really needs to shift from the "powerful" instructor to the "empowered" student-learner. Such work has already begun in terms of exploring the potent impact meta-cognitive ability has on student learning (Brown, Roediger & McDaniel, 2014). This study suggests that acquiring meta-*affective* skills might be equally important. Students need to understand how they *think* in their classes, but understanding why they *feel* the way they do might be even more predictive of their success. Future research could look for connections between mediated-efficacy and student persistence to degree. Given that efficacy impacts motivation, such correlations seem likely. Further work might also explore the role of mediated-efficacy in disrupting other negative emotions (e.g., stereotype threat) that can be barriers for students from marginalized populations.

Conclusion

Even those professors who accept that they must teach writing in upper division classes sometimes express anxiety because they feel they do not have the appropriate special knowledge of composition to teach writing effectively. This study reveals that what might be pedagogically more important is entering into a relationship with student writers that positions the instructor as a mediator between what it is the writer wants to say and the academic audience being communicated with. Specific writing skills become the tools of that mediation. Useful yes, but not unlike the utility of knowing how to use a hammer–only truly valuable when used to build something. Mediated-efficacy requires a balance between helping students wield tools on their own and creating the context in which they believe they have something worthwhile to construct.

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APPENDIX A: WRITING SELF-EFFICACY SCORING RUBRIC

Writing Self-Efficacy Scoring Rubric

This semester, students wrote for 50 minutes during the first and last writing studios, describing their strengths and weaknesses as writers and providing some personal experiences to support their claims. In reviewing these 'pre' and 'post' writing diagnostics, please score each sample using the following scale.

Evidence of Efficacy: The student is able to identify elements of effective writing AND *demonstrates belief in his/her ability to use these elements successfully*. While the student identifies writing problems, he/she may offer possible solutions to these problems. The student is aware of writing as a process and is able to prioritize specific future tasks. The student may comment on effective (or new) management of time to effectively fulfill an assignment.

-1	0	1	2	3
negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence

Evidence of Mastery Experiences: The student describes having had successful writing experiences at any level or point in the process (i.e., student does not have to have "mastered" all of writing to have had mastery experiences).

-1	0	1	2	3
negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence

Evidence of Use of Positive Modeling: The student refers to course readings and/or other writing as aspirational models used when approaching her/his own work. The student might also talk about the utility of peer and/or instructor feedback. The student might refer to his/her own successful previous writing as models as well.

-1	0	1	2	3
negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence

Evidence of Reduced Anxiety and/or Increased Positive Affect: The student uses positive or affirming adjectives to describe her/himself as a writer. Student may even express confidence and/or enjoyment of writing. Problems are accurately attributed but seen as specific and manageable (e.g., "I need to work on coming up with strong thesis statements."), as opposed to global and catastrophic (e.g., "I am stupid.").

-1	0	1	2	3
negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence

Evidence of Empowerment or Positive Social Agency: The student takes responsibility for his/her own writing, as opposed to blaming other factors for poor outcomes. The student may express willingness to "keep trying" and attributes success to improved writing ability rather than luck or external forces. The student may express "ownership" of the writing topics (e.g., "I write to express my ideas."), rather than just writing to please the teacher. The student may describe proactively seeking feedback from readers and/or actively utilizing available writing support systems.

-1	0	1	2	3
negative evidence	lack of evidence	very weak evidence	moderate evidence	strong evidence

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Student ID or Name:_______________ Score Pre-Diagnostic ___ /15 Score Post-Diagnostic ___/15