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Exploring the Connection Between Self-Efficacy and Preparedness Among First-year College Students

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EXPLORING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SELF-EFFICACY AND

PREPAREDNESS AMONG FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Marianne Hale

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ABSTRACT

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by

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Utah State University, 2024

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The goal of the American education system is to prepare students for college. I wondered, “Do students feel ready?” That question led me to investigate the literature on the development, implementation, and effectiveness of our current standards. The gap I found was that the standards do not address an important aspect of student achievement, that of student self-efficacy. Self-efficacy in writing helps students have the confidence to engage in the task of writing, regardless of the situation. I focused my study of student writing self-efficacy on one English 1010 class. I administered a self-efficacy evaluation in class and conducted a class discussion about preparedness and confidence as it relates to college writing. The results of the study show that students feel unprepared for specific tasks associated with academic writing.

DEDICATION

To Mom

For your example of a lifelong learner and your enthusiasm over every new thing I learned or wrote. I wish you could be here for this crowning moment!

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Marianne Hale

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INTRODUCTION

When I graduated from high school in 1993, I was in the top 5% of my class, with a few community college classes under my belt. I read books with such voracity that my parents had to take them away to get me to join in family events, like dinner. I wrote stories and bad poetry to what amounted to hundreds of pages. When I arrived at Brigham Young University as a freshman, I thought I could write. I thought I was pretty smart. When the feedback from my freshman English teacher and other students seemed to say that I wasn't doing a good job, the criticism negatively influenced my view of my preparedness and sense of my worth as a writer. My reduced confidence also reduced my enthusiasm and output in the class. I never fully recovered from the beating my ego took that first semester, and I spent most of my college career crying every time I had to write an essay, which, as an English major, was constant. My experience of feeling unprepared made me wonder if more students feel that same lack of preparedness.

Since my time as a high school student, new standards have been implemented with the specific purpose of improving student readiness for college. Over those years, I have had opportunities to tutor and substitute teach at the secondary level. I found that many students resisted writing assignments, expressing the same discomfort I felt at receiving negative feedback. My sons, who are all voracious readers and creative writers, have grown up during this time of national standards and struggled in their writing classes over the years. Although they ultimately pass, barely managing that sought-after A, they lack that level of confidence that comes from feeling ready to engage in the work of writing, despite the abundance of writing required at the secondary level. As they left

for college, they expressed the same concern I had in my freshman English class of not feeling good enough for college writing. Preparedness must then be more than experience and more than getting a good grade. Preparedness involves meeting college-level expectations and recognizing your own competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Search for Standards

In an overview of the history of education in the United States, one of the primary purposes of education has been to provide a common set of standards to prepare students for college (Greer, 2018), thus defining preparedness as meeting those common standards. Common standards were created to provide equality of opportunity and preparation for all young people regardless of their economic status, gender, race, or educational background because a farm kid from the backwoods of Kentucky would have received the same education as the wealthy son of a real estate tycoon. Since the 1800s in the United States, "no shortage of efforts have been made to create a semblance of common standards" (Greer, 2018, p. 101). In an effort to provide a common expectation of college preparedness for all students, the federal government implemented truancy and desegregation laws, Title I and IX, and "the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) and the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* (NAEP)" (Greer, 2018, p. 102). With each new law, a new marginalized community was given greater access to the experiences that prepare students for college. Even in 1918, when my grandparents, who never finished 8th grade, were still in elementary school, the national educational reforms were focused on "clearer, more articulated college pathways for American secondary students" (Greer, 2018, p. 101). The hopes and expectations in the early 20th century were that the majority of students would attain a college education, and so standards have focused on college preparation as a primary outcome. That has not changed in the last century; it has only become more imperative.

In the 21st century, the need for post-secondary education drives the efforts made at the local, state, and national levels to reach students of all abilities and raise their personal educational expectations. Woven into those efforts is the concept of readiness or preparedness. To be college and career-ready, a stated purpose of our K-12 educational system, "students in the United States need to be prepared to work in a world that demands more than just proficiency in academic skills" (Green, Sanczyk, Chambers, Mraz, & Polly, 2023, p. 223). College and career readiness for all students, not just the wealthy, required a unifying system of expectations or standards.

In answer to that need, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were announced in 2010 with the majority of states adopting the standards (Conley, Drummond, de Gonzalez, Rooseboom, & Stout, 2011). The stated purpose of the Common Core State Standards is "to help ensure that all students are college and career-ready in literacy, no later than the end of high school" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 3). The implication of this statement is that the committee believed that all students were capable of being prepared and that sooner "than the end of high school" was a probable and reasonable outcome. The Standards are built around this idea of preparedness, repeating the refrain "college and career readiness" on almost every page.

The CCSS were designed in response to the expressed need to provide equitable standards across the country, focusing on college readiness for all students, not just the ones whose parents have been to college. "To develop the standards, the CCSSO [Council of Chief State School Officers] and the NGA [National Governors Association] worked with representatives from participating states, as well as a wide range of

educators, content experts, researchers, national organizations, and community groups" (King & Jones, 2012, p. 18). This varied group sought to raise the bar for everyone. Smith and Williamson (2016) in their analysis of the efforts made by North Carolina's Board of Education noticed that raising standards for reading increased the number of students who met or exceeded the standard (p. 18). These results confirmed the hope that low-performing districts would improve and meet those higher standards, thus increasing preparedness.

The higher standards for writing built into the CCSS specifically address the doing of things: writing in an objective tone, composing different genres, and reviewing the writing of others (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Each writing standard builds on the other so that the earlier levels of proficiency provide the foundation of the later standards. The standards are sufficiently specific to provide clarity: "Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 45). The writing standards are also broad enough to allow for a variety of approaches to teaching and learning. The goal is not to have everyone educated under the same umbrella but to have everyone build their own umbrella using the same principles. This means that not every learning situation will have the same knowledge base or content, but the skills being taught will remain the same.

The focus on skills instead of defining a knowledge base means that students will graduate with the knowledge of how to do things, which can translate to any new academic situation. Within the writing standards, this leaves individual districts, schools,

and teachers with the freedom to choose the content and materials they use to teach those skills. The expectation inherent in college and career readiness is that learning those skills, no matter what content and materials are used to teach the skills, develops the characteristics of college-level writers.

In 2011, the CCSS held up to the scrutiny of college professors, proving that as a set of expectations for college readiness, they are exactly what they claim: a measure of student preparedness (Conley, Drummond, de Gonzalez, Rooseboom, & Stout, 2011). These professors looked at the standards and found them to be in line with college expectations. The educators who worked on the standards wrote, "Students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), and Conley, et al (2011) confirmed that college professors view the standards in the same way. And yet, researchers continued to notice that students enter college without being ready to engage in college writing (King & Jones, 2012). They insisted that there was a gap between the secondary standards and the college expectations (King & Jones, 2012).

English educators addressed that gap by developing a framework to define the necessary characteristics of college writers. The resulting framework has five knowledge-building experiences that will help foster the "habits of mind" that they consider "essential for success in college writing" (Council of Writing Program Administrators, The National Council of Teachers, and the National Writing Project, 2011, p. 2). These habits of mind can fill the gap between meeting standards and being truly college ready.

To help educators view the connection between habits of mind and the skills related to college writing success, I created the following chart. The full chart illustrates potential connections between the Common Core Standards and the habits of mind in the Framework. Each row shows how a CCSS writing standard supports the development of a particular habit of mind, which in turn is necessary for achieving an English 1010/2010 outcome at Utah State University. These expectations can work together to build student preparedness for academic writing. As students engage in writing activities, the opportunity is there for educators to encourage the habits of mind that prepare the students to engage in college-level writing (see Fig. 1). College educators expect students to engage actively with the material and demonstrate that engagement in writing. Actively encouraging engagement in high school writing courses while striving to meet the CCSS writing standards will help develop the habits of mind that are valued by college instructors. Educators can see how each habit is influenced by CCSS and subsequently influences the achievement of English 1010/2010 standards.

Figure 1: Standards Connections Chart

Common Core Writing Standards (pp. 41, 45-47)	**Habits of Mind (p. 5)**	**ENGL1010 and 2010 outcomes**
Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem;	Curiosity	Use writing, reading, and dialogue for inquiry, learning, and communicating
Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.	Openness	Collaborate with other writers on drafts and revision

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.	Engagement	Integrate personal authority within a larger conversation
Combine elements of different kinds of writing	Creativity	Understand and rhetorically negotiate the conventions that govern genres, formats, grammar, mechanics, and the use and citation of sources
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision)	Persistence	Revise to learn more about a topic or problem
Take task, purpose, and audience into careful consideration, choosing words, information, structures, and formats deliberately.	Responsibility	Develop academic integrity by accurately summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, and citing a variety of texts and perspectives
They must have the flexibility, concentration, and fluency to produce high-quality first draft text under a tight deadline	Flexibility	Analyze and respond appropriately to different rhetorical situations
[They must have] the capacity to revisit and make improvements to a piece of writing over multiple drafts when circumstances encourage or require it.	Metacognition	Organize ideas, claims, and support according to audience and purpose

The Common Core State Standards are about doing and do not address the attitudes of the students towards these activities or the development of critical thinking and curiosity. This oversight does not mean that the two things are incompatible, but it does suggest that high school teachers and secondary curriculum developers might be ignoring the input already received from higher education on the subject. If one of the goals of higher education is to increase a student's capacity for things like curiosity and

responsibility, then the skills that need to be taught are more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic.

To be truly college-ready, a student needs more than skill, ability, or even experience. A student needs to develop mental and emotional skills that are much more difficult to track and measure. Psychologists, however, have studied and built systems for measuring certain mental and emotional abilities. Those studies have gone to the subjects of the study, the students, to determine which abilities are of greatest value for student success. The ability that stands out above the rest in helping students feel ready to engage in the work of college and prepare for a career is self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is an individual's confidence in their capacity to perform a given task or to cope with a difficult situation (Bandura, 1977). Personal efficacy in any particular task or situation comes from experiences that reinforce confidence (p. 191). Whether people gain self-efficacy naturally or through mentoring intervention, every human being has to learn how to handle “situations that would otherwise be intimidating” (p. 194), through the acquisition of skills and the reinforcement of confidence. While learning to hold a pencil or learning to write a thesis, students can be learning self-efficacy and building a sense of their own competence.

Self-efficacy is one key to understanding the capacity of students to succeed in school and adapt to new learning situations because self-efficacy builds confidence, courage, and persistence (Bandura, 1977, p. 200). In efforts to interrogate the impact of self-efficacy, psychologists and educators have spent several decades studying students

of all ages. Writing self-efficacy scales have been developed and tested in various academic settings, providing the necessary specificity to expect accuracy. Although results have varied, most studies confirm that the influence of a student's self-concept of their performance "had a direct effect on their writing performance" (Pajares F. , 1996, p. 554). Students who are prepared have the positive self-efficacy that they can complete college-level writing tasks and the positive self-concept that they are writers.

Many factors influence a person's performance of a writing task as well as their attainment of confidence (Pajares F. , 1996). To understand the relationship between a student's feelings about themselves and their performance of a particular task, several studies were done in the last two decades of the 20th century. One study found that high self-efficacy in writing leads to more effective writing because efficacy affects "how long they will persist in the face of obstacles" (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985, p. 466). Shell, Murphy, & Bruning (1989) cautioned, however, that "beliefs about the likely outcomes…assume importance only after persons believe" (p. 92). This means that individuals need to be aware of and believe in their capacity to accomplish a task for self-efficacy to help them persist in a challenging task. A positive self-concept leads to persistence. Persistence, though, is born of confidence in one's ability to accomplish a particular task. Looking at the list of writing tasks associated with the Common Core State Standards, it appeared that students need to acquire a sense of writing self-efficacy for each of those tasks.

Even though there is a need for task-specific self-efficacy, we have to begin with general writing self-efficacy. Researchers who have focused on general writing self-efficacy found that any kind of writing task, regardless of the attendant instruction, has

the potential to increase self-efficacy (Fritson, 2008). As students write, they learn new skills, and their ability to write increases. Writing ability is not static and is dependent on "self-belief variables (i.e., writing hope and writing self-efficacy)" (Sieben, 2013, p. 136). As these variables raise an individual's writing self-efficacy, writing anxiety lowers, and vice versa (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011). Prolonged, intentional exposure to writing increases writing skills, writing self-concept, and a student's capacity to persist, which can decrease the kind of writing anxiety that I experienced during my undergraduate studies (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994).

Assuming that many factors contribute to writing anxiety, Korgan et al (2013) performed a study based on Bandura's (1997) model for evaluating self-efficacy. Their goal was to understand "the intrapersonal and environmental factors that contribute to the development of academic self-efficacy" in college freshmen (Korgan, Durdella, & Stevens, 2013, p. 12). They found a strong affective correlation between Bandura's (1997) three primary environmental factors and academic self-efficacy, thus proving the impact of the classroom environment on a student's development of self-efficacy (Korgan, Durdella, & Stevens, 2013). Even in the perfect classroom environment, students need to have certain skills for self-efficacy to be a predictor of academic success.

Writing studies at all age levels have leaned into three general writing skills, ideation, conventions, and self-regulation, as being the most valuable predictors of achievement (Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim, & Zumbrunn, 2013). Conventions can be taught, and ideation cultivated in the right classroom environment. Paraphrasing Bandura (1977), Bruning and Kauffman (2015) indicated that "successful performance reflects not only skill levels but also the confidence individuals have for performing in

specific domains and contexts" (p. 160). Their argument supported the Korgan et al study on the impact of environmental factors. They encouraged teachers to develop writing self-efficacy in their students, using Schunk and Swartz (1993) as an example, by focusing on an environment of positive modeling and feedback that promotes self-efficacy. In such an environment, skills are taught and a student's self-concept as a writer is encouraged.

Positive self-concept is part of positive self-efficacy. Students who think of themselves as writers and willingly engage in writing tasks are more successful in their writing classes. Perin et al (2017) investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and academic success by focusing on summarization and persuasive writing tasks. They surveyed the students using a list of sixteen "I can" statements, which gave them a clear idea of how the students felt about their ability to perform summary and persuasive writing. They also had the students submit writing samples and asked the teachers to provide a judgment on each student's capabilities based on their experience with the students (Perin, Lauterbach, Raufman, & Kalamkarian, 2017). Although teachers have a more accurate understanding of student capabilities than the students, they did confirm that students who have self-efficacy and have been taught the requisite skills have greater success in college-level writing (p. 909).

Over the last several years, studies have investigated self-efficacy considerations and self-efficacy's impact on college readiness in countries around the world, using "I can" statements, similar to Perin et al. (2017). Sun et al. (2020), in China, focused on how the self-efficacy writing scale can be applied to second language learners. They adapted previous self-efficacy writing scales (Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim, &

Zumbrunn, 2013) to meet the needs of their population. Ultimately, they felt that they proved that self-efficacy in ideation, conventions, and self-regulation all "positively correlated with writing performance" (Sun, Wang, & Kim, 2022, p. 745). This was reinforced by Teng and Wang's (2022) study of Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) students, which used an existing Academic Writing Self-Efficacy Belief Questionnaire based on past studies and self-efficacy instruments. Well-grounded in the theory of self-efficacy, the study was able to confirm that even in an EFL environment, self-efficacy impacts student achievement and their sense of preparedness.

Zumbrunn, Broda, Varier, & Conklin (2020) in Great Britain and Camacho, Alves, De Smedt, Van Keer, & Boscolo (2021) in Portugal conducted similar studies with elementary and high school students. Their multifaceted studies looked at the connection between writing self-efficacy and academic achievement. Zunbrunn et al. (2020) confirmed that the three-factor model (ideation, conventions, and self-regulation) was a better fit for understanding writing self-efficacy than a single-factor model. Camacho et al (2021) used the Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale and required students to write two essays as part of the study. They used behavioral and performance measures to establish the correlation between all of the factors, determining that self-efficacy is important to student success.

In 2022, two different studies addressed the impact of confidence on student achievement. Djatmika et al. (2022) conducted a study in Indonesia at six different universities and took a multi-faceted approach to show the impact of psychological variables on academic writing. Self-efficacy was just one of the three but was shown to have a positive influence on writing by itself and in conjunction with a growth mindset,

self-regulation, and metacognition. Nallaya et al's (2022) research was conducted at an Australian university. They collected data from a Bachelor of Teaching program at two different points in the semester to measure student confidence "to employ the academic literacies required in their study program" (p. 264). The feedback they received was that students struggled to take their knowledge of one kind of writing into a new writing situation, which caused low levels of confidence in the new situations. Self-efficacy translates well when the required tasks are similar. This study discovered that writing self-efficacy doesn't translate well when the tasks change, meaning that self-efficacy needs to be attained for every college writing task for it to result in academic success (Nallaya, Hobson, & Ulpen, 2022).

There is a reciprocal relationship between confidence (or self-efficacy) and improved academic performance. Educators and researchers value self-efficacy as a predictor of student success. The Common Core State Standards assume that students will feel capable and confident when they become proficient at the writing skills needed to be college ready. Self-efficacy comes before student success, but student success promotes self-efficacy (Traga Philippakos, Wang, & MacArthur, 2023). Students often don't recognize the correlation between accomplishment and competence (Korgan, Durdella, & Stevens, 2013) (Perin, Lauterbach, Raufman, & Kalamkarian, 2017). This is where the gap was for me as an undergraduate and for my sons: understanding how to take the skills and accomplishments from our secondary education experience and apply them to college writing tasks. With all of the environmental and mental health factors that cause students to struggle to develop self-efficacy, this gap is not easily filled (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011) (Sieben, 2013).

Even with all of those concerns, the courage to try new writing situations, and to not fear the task of writing, is vital to a student feeling prepared to write, which is vital to their success even outside of a composition class. In writing programs, we ask students to engage in the writing process of composing, receiving feedback, revising, receiving feedback, and revising again. Even some students who profess to be "good" writers struggle to persist through this process, lacking the eagerness to engage in writing tasks. It seems to not be "work" that scares them but writing itself. Self-efficacy in writing pushes students over that fear and allows them to engage in the task of writing without anxiety. Self-efficacy in writing gives students the confidence to engage in a new writing situation and the persistence to see it through. Self-efficacy in writing prepares students for college-level writing when it is paired with the acquisition of the skills outlined in the national and state standards. A lack of self-efficacy will negatively impact how a student uses those skills in the next writing task (Nallaya, Hobson, & Ulpen, 2022) which does not constitute college readiness. Take that to the next logical step: a lack of self-efficacy negatively impacts students' perceptions of their readiness for college-level work.

RESEARCH STUDY

Research Question

Although my review of the literature led me to the conclusion that lower self-efficacy would reduce students' sense of readiness, I was interested in asking the students how they perceived that self-efficacy prepared them for college. I decided to back off my assertion and consider the question more neutrally: what is the connection between a student's writing self-efficacy and their sense of preparedness for college-level writing? I developed the following study using what I had learned from previous research. For me, these studies reinforced the idea that self-efficacy matters, but the only true way to determine a student's self-efficacy is by talking to the student.

To begin, I defined writing self-efficacy as the eagerness and experience to engage in specific writing tasks. The specific writing tasks were taken from previous Writing Self-Efficacy Scales and deliberately tied to college-readiness expectations from the Common Core State Standards. College-readiness, as defined in the standards, involves research-based writing, argumentative writing, reflective writing, and narrative writing. The expectations from Utah State University's English 1010 and 2010 courses do not include narrative writing as an outcome, so I did not include that specific type of writing in my design.

Design

Based on the previous self-efficacy studies, I determined that I needed to use a skills-based questionnaire to guide students in expressing their writing self-efficacy.

Pajares (1996) encouraged researchers who are seeking to study self-efficacy to build a questionnaire that is "tailored to the domain of functioning and/or task under investigation" (p. 550). Between Pajares and Bandura's cautions about being task-specific in a self-efficacy questionnaire, I recognized the need to craft evaluation questions that focused primarily on skills that college students need to succeed. I used the table I created (Fig. 1) to determine areas of skill to focus on. As a result of Perin et al's (2017) study, I chose not to investigate how students feel about how well they write because the efficacy of that judgment has been called into question.

I reviewed several sets of Writing Self-Efficacy Scales, but the most impactful were from Perin et al. (2017) and Shell et al. (1989). They didn't create questions; they designed statements with a positive "I can" opener. Using that format, I developed eleven statements based on the English 1010 outcomes, Composing Processes, and CCSS high school graduation expectations in writing. In addition, I threw in a few writing tasks that were life skills related, like writing a grocery list or writing on my own time. The last four statements I took from Shell, et al.'s Writing Self-Efficacy Scale, but I adjusted their language choices, putting the statements into more modern language to make them more understandable at all skill levels.

The original Self-Efficacy Scale recommended using sixteen statements (Bandura, 1977). Bruning et al. (2013) cited Bandura's recommendation to use domain-specific tasks in a Self-Efficacy Scale and explained that such specificity would pick out the skills in that domain that lead to success (p. 36). I intentionally crafted statements that hit on cognitive and procedural subskills in the domain of writing with specific skill-based tasks. It was important to get as specific with the tasks as possible because, as

Bruning and Kauffman (2015) pointed out, a sense of writing self-efficacy "may differ widely from one activity to another for a given individual" (p. 160). I intentionally varied the task difficulties in hopes of getting a variety of responses. I am interested in how students perceive their own self-efficacy rather than how they perform it in a classroom environment.

Writing Self-efficacy Statements

1. I receive As and Bs on my writing assignments.
2. I write on my own time for my own enjoyment.
3. I can write a complete sentence with proper punctuation.
4. I can argue a point of view in writing.
5. I can take notes on a spoken presentation.
6. I can take notes on something I read.
7. I can summarize someone else's main ideas.
8. I can write an account of my day.
9. I can write a grocery list.
10. I can rewrite or revise an essay based on feedback.
11. I notice grammar errors in other people's writing (e.g., spelling, punctuation, and capitalization).

From Shell, et al's WSES, with adjustments:

12. I can write a resume describing my employment history, education, and skills.
13. I can write instructions to teach someone else how to play my favorite game.
14. I can write a formal email with a salutation, body, and appropriate closure.
15. I can fill out an application for insurance coverage.
16. I can compose a one or two-page essay.

The next step was to develop a point scale for the students' evaluation of themselves. Studies on self-efficacy alone (Bandura, 1977) use a 100-point scale for each statement because it allows for a wide range of responses, thus giving the researchers a more accurate picture of each person's sense of self-efficacy. Studies on writing self-efficacy, like Zumbrunn et al. (2020), determined that a 100-point scale could be counterproductive because of the age of the population they were working with or

because anxiety would prevent them from responding. They determined that the shorter scales were effective at producing verifiable results.

I decided to use a shorter scale as well, but when I thought about how those results would be perceived by the respondents, I felt that I needed a different approach. Zumbrunn et al. (2020) asked students to determine their capacity to engage in or accomplish a task. My question, however, asks how students perceive their own writing efficacy, and it required that I let them look at the issue from a scale other than "can/can't". I wanted to know how they felt about specific writing tasks and how much experience they had in each task to better understand whether students perceive themselves to be prepared for those tasks, emotionally and intellectually.

I needed a scale that addressed both perspectives on a particular task. Most studies, like Zumbrunn et al. (2020), focused on the single idea of how the student felt about their capability to accomplish the task. Whether the scale includes Bandura's original 100 or Zumbrunn's more circumspect 5 response possibilities, all of the studies are linear and reinforce an inherent binary of good and bad. I felt it was important for my study to remove that binary.

I developed the nine-square approach to allow for the kind of nuanced approach I was looking for. I had not seen it used in any research before, but it is similar to placing an answer on an x and y axis because it allows respondents to consider each statement from two different angles: willingness to try (eagerness) and the development of skills (experience). When we approach a writing task, it is important to have a nuanced view that removes a sense of binary: I'm good at it or I'm not. My scale chose the terms eager and experienced to identify that sweet spot where self-efficacy lives.

Figure 2: Nine-Square Grid

Implementation

After developing the plan, I met with the Director of Composition at USU. We discussed my plan and the necessary IRB approval. The director suggested that I reach out to one of the lecturers for English 1010. This lecturer is an exceptional teacher at USU with a pattern of using innovative techniques to support student development. They discuss the topic of writing apprehension during the first week of the semester and implement a grading system that supports the development of good self-regulatory behavior in the classroom. I felt like their class would be a good fit. After receiving IRB

approval, I scheduled a time to come visit the class to conduct my research. I administered the self-efficacy evaluation in a single English 1010 class and conducted a class discussion about preparedness and confidence related to college writing.

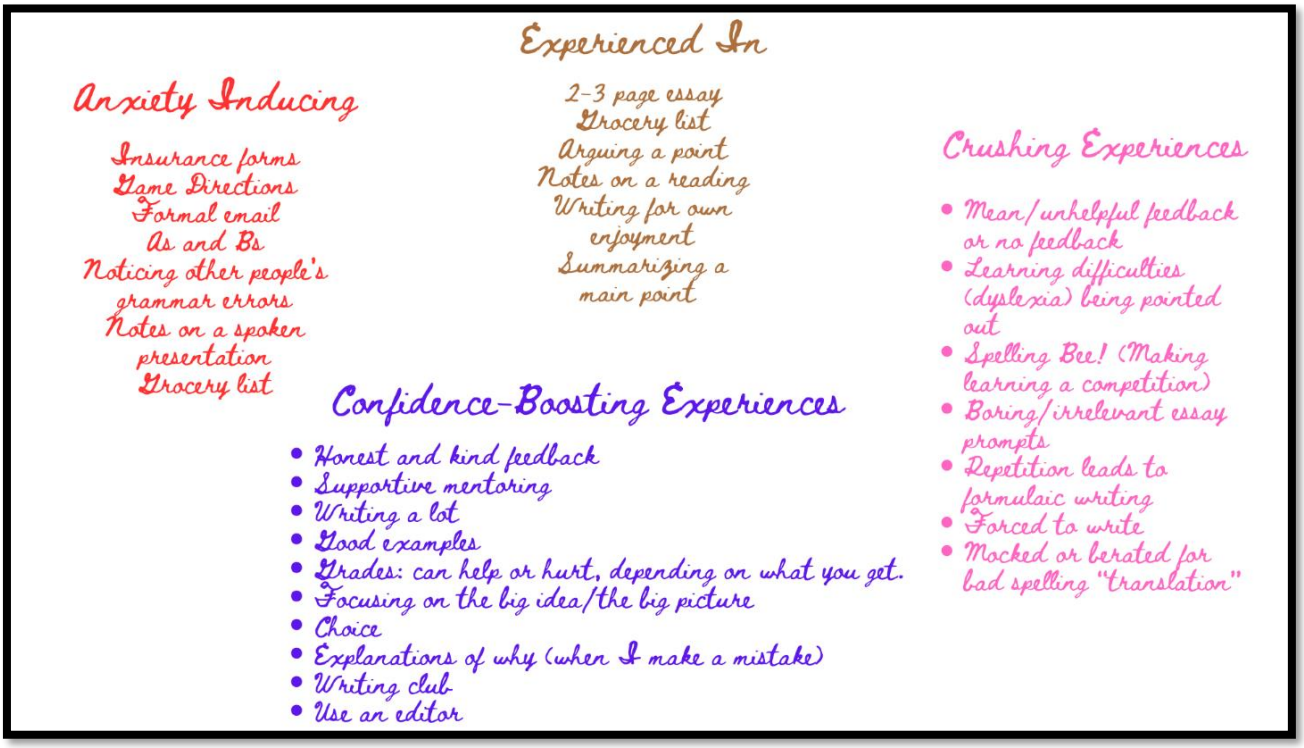
Each student received a copy of the alignment grid. First, I asked if anyone had ever heard the term self-efficacy before. One student had, but he couldn't remember what it meant. I told him that was fine and went on to explain that I view it specifically as a form of confidence that depends on eagerness and experience with engaging in a particular activity. I emphasized that we would be focusing on writing self-efficacy and that I wasn't concerned about how good they were at a particular activity only how eager and experienced they were with the activity. For each question, they wrote the number of the question in the square on the grid that best represented their experience with and sense of apprehension towards that task. I let them fill in the worksheet using the slideshow list of self-efficacy statements by reading each statement aloud and giving them about 20 seconds on each slide. I invited them to get into small groups or partners and talk about their feelings about the statements and where they ended up putting different statements on the worksheet grid. I encouraged each group to answer the question, "What has helped you to feel confident in your writing?" I gave them 5 minutes to talk amongst themselves, then I asked them to share the results with me.

Results

Class Discussion Analysis

As a class, we discussed writing anxiety and wrote on the board our experiences that have increased or decreased writing efficacy (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Discussion Notes



I noticed immediately that experiences in writing ran the gamut from typical academic activities like taking notes to more lifestyle-related tasks like writing a grocery list. In the same way, writing tasks that induced anxiety were varied. I wrote what they said on the whiteboard and commented on the variety. Several students expressed that the task gave them anxiety because they had never done it before, like filling out insurance forms, but an equal number expressed that they felt anxiety because they have a lot of experience in it and they know how hard it is, like receiving As and Bs on writing assignments.

I had intended to ask about their coping mechanisms, but as I listened to them talk about the tasks that brought on anxiety, I realized that I needed them to tell me what happened to lead to this sense of anxiety. I asked them, “What experiences in school

crushed your confidence?" The notes on their responses are listed in Fig. 3 as "Crushing Experiences." An analysis of the foundations of each of these ideas led me to determine that teachers have been at the heart of the confidence-crushing experiences. The students expressed that they wanted feedback that respected their intelligence and showed a belief in their ability.

The class also expressed that having the freedom to choose what to write about and being given opportunities to just write for the fun of it, not for a grade, increased their confidence. Confidence is undercut when students are not allowed to choose what to write about or are given a formula to follow. The class felt that this technique led to unengaged and forced writing. Mostly, though, this class talked about how their English 1010 instructor treated them like thinking, feeling, capable human beings, which they claimed has rebuilt their confidence, or writing self-efficacy. After the discussion, I was very interested to see what sort of information would come out of the writing self-efficacy alignment grid.

Alignment Grid Analysis

After collecting the data, I began to organize it so that I could find patterns. My first method was to simply record how many times a given self-efficacy statement showed up on the grid (Fig. 4). This helped me to see clusters where multiple students responded the same way to a single statement. Out of 19 students, 12 students were Anxious-Inexperienced (AI) in filling out insurance forms. On the other end of the spectrum, 8 of the 19 were Eager-Experienced (EE) in writing a grocery list. I spent time with this view, noticing how it informed my understanding of the students' perception of their writing self-efficacy. I recorded the patterns in how students responded to each

statement. The following graph shows that students are mostly "Experienced" in these readiness skills, suggesting that the problem of preparedness is not about a lack of experience.

Fig. 4: Data Results, Statement View

Confidence Alignment Square	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Eager Experienced	5	4	4	4	2	4	1	5	8	3	3	5	2	4	1	3
Eager Unsure		2	1	1	1	1	1					1	3			
Eager Inexperienced		1			1			1	3			2	2	2		
Neutral Experienced	7	4	5	3	5	6	3	8	6	9	5	6	2	3	1	7
Neutral Unsure	1	5	5	4	4	2	7	3	1	4	8		3	1		
Neutral Inexperienced		4	1			1		1				2	1		5	
Anxious Experienced	4			5	1	2	5					1	1	2		9
Anxious Unsure	2		2	2	3	3	2	1		3	1	2	2	3		
Anxious Inexperienced					2				1		2		3	4	12	
Total:	19	20	18	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19

I wanted to break it down statement by statement to look at the patterns of their responses. Experience clearly did not equal eagerness, and very few students were eager to write an essay, one of the main staples of scholarship. Their lack of eagerness to engage in one of the most basic forms of writing we do in college suggested to me that they do not feel prepared.

PATTERNS

1. *I receive As and Bs on my writing assignments.*
   16 of the 19 students reported being experienced but with varying levels of anxiety. Almost half of them (7) were neutral-experienced in doing well on writing assignments.
2. *I write on my own time for my own enjoyment.*
   No students reported anxiety about this behavior. 12 felt neutral about the activity, (one student reported two different results in the neutral category

for #2) regardless of their experience with it. Only 7 felt eager to engage in this behavior.

3. *I can write a complete sentence with proper punctuation.*
   This was split between experienced (9) and unsure (8) with just one outlier that is listed as neutral-inexperienced. Only 5 expressed an eagerness to engage in the behavior. 10 were completely neutral. I considered this one of the most basic of the tasks, so their lack of preparedness for engaging in this concerned me.
4. *I can argue a point of view in writing.*
   This was split between experienced (12) and unsure (7) with no outliers. Anxious-experienced was chosen most often (5). Argumentative writing is a staple of both the secondary curriculum and college course work, even outside of a composition class. In spite of their experience, it was more common for these students to not feel prepared to engage in this task.
5. *I can take notes on a spoken presentation.*
   Only 4 students were eager to participate in this activity. 9 were neutral. 6 were anxious.
6. *I can take notes on something I read.*
   Most students reported being neutral-experienced (6) in this. The numbers were spread out across most of the rest of the choices, except eager and anxious inexperienced, which were 0.
7. *I can summarize someone else's main ideas.*
   Most students reported being neutral-unsure (7) when it came to this activity. The next most commonly reported level was anxious-experienced (5). No student reported being inexperienced. Summarizing is also a basic college-level skill. Even though they are experienced, they lack confidence.
8. *I can write an account of my day.*
   Most students reported being experienced (13) in this behavior. Only 1 student reported anxiety associated with it.
9. *I can write a grocery list.*
   Most students reported being experienced (14). One student reported anxiety and inexperience.
10. *I can rewrite or revise an essay based on feedback.*
    Most students reported feeling neutral (13) about this activity. The other six were split evenly between eager-experienced (3) and anxious-unsure (3).
11. *I notice grammar errors in other people's writing (e.g. spelling, punctuation, and capitalization).*

Most students reported feeling neutral (13) about this activity, with most of them being neutral-unsure (8). The other six split between eager-experienced (3) and anxious-unsure/inexperienced (3).

12. *I can write a resume describing my employment history, education, and skills.*

12 students reported being experienced, with only one of those feeling anxious about it. The other six were split evenly between eager and anxious.

13. *I can write instructions to teach someone else how to play my favorite game.*

This is the only statement that showed up at every level. Unsure was chosen the most (8), but no one square received more than 3. I thought that this would be a good measure of their comfort with more technical writing tasks, which many of them will engage in regularly in their fields. It is clear that regardless of their experience with writing, self-efficacy has not translated to this task.

14. *I can write a formal email with a salutation, body, and appropriate closure.*

Eager-experienced and anxious-inexperienced were both chosen 4 times.

15. *I can fill out an application for insurance coverage.*

12 students reported being anxious-inexperienced. 5 students reported being neutral-inexperienced. Only 2 students reported being experienced.

16. *I can compose a one or two-page essay.*

All students reported being experienced in this. 9 students also reported feeling anxious. 7 students reported feeling neutral. Only 3 students reported feeling eager. By English 2010, students are composing longer than 1–2-page essays, and English classes aren't the only ones that require long writing assignments. Most of these students feel unprepared to engage successfully in that kind of work.

The first view told me about patterns in the class in general but didn't tell me anything about individual students. To protect their privacy, the students were randomly assigned a letter. I gathered each student's results and organized them alphabetically in the spreadsheet (Fig. 5) so that I could see how each student felt about writing. Student g, for instance, clustered all of their responses in two squares: neutral-experienced (NE) and neutral-unsure (NU). They only moved away from neutral for statement 15 about filling

out insurance forms. In contrast, student k spread their responses out very evenly across the grid, demonstrating a wide range of emotions and experiences with the writing tasks. Student p didn't give an answer for statement 3; they put statement 2 on the grid twice. These different responses can help me see that I do not have a homogenous group that I am working with.

Figure 5: Data Results, Student View

Student	EE	NE	AE	EU	NU	AU	EI	NI	AI
a		9,13,15,16	12		1,2,3,4,6,7,11	5,8,10			14
b	2	8,10,12,16	1		5,9	3,4,6,7		15	11,13,14
c	4,5,8,9	2,3,6,7,10,11,12	1,14,16		13			15	
d	1,3,4,11,12,14,16	8,9,13		5,6	10	7		2	15
e	1,7	2,3,8,10,14	4,16		5,11	6	9,13	12	15
f	5,6,9,12,14,15	1,4,7,10,16		3	8,11	13		2	
g		1,3,4,5,6,8,9,10,12,16			2,7,11,13,14				15
h			4,7,16		11	1,5,10	9,12,14	2,3,6,8	13,15
i	1,3,4,9,11,12,13,14,16	5,6,8		7	2	10			15
j	1,9,13	2,8,14	6,16	12	3,4,5,7,10	11		15	
k	9,8	3,5,6,12	16	2	7,10,11	1,4,14	13		15
l	2,9,12,14	1,5,7,11	4,13,16		3,8,10	6			15
m	2,8,10	1,5,9,12	7,16	13	4,6,11	3,4			15

n	3,8,9,10,11,12	14	1,5,6,7,16	2	4,13			15	
o	3,6,8,10	5,9,11,12	1,14,16	4	2,7			13,15	
p	4,6	1,2,10,11,14,16	7	13	8	12		2	5,9,15
q	1,3,6,8,9,10,11,12,16	4,7		2	5,13				14,15
r	1,6,9,16	2,8,10	4	13	3,7,11			12	5,14,15
s	2	1,4,6,8,9,10,16			3,5,7	12,14			11,13,15

Even though eager-experienced (EE) was chosen the least often, it is well represented in this view. Almost every student had at least one writing task that they felt strong writing self-efficacy in and some were confident in as many as 10 of the writing tasks! By contrast, the lowest form of efficacy, anxious-inexperienced (AI) was not selected more than three times by any one student.

I find it interesting that even in a class where students spoke highly of their instructor's support of their writing, barely a fourth of the class could claim to be eager about any of the tasks presented to them. Neutrality seems to be the best they could come up with for most tasks, except for insurance forms and essay writing which brought out anxiety in the majority of the students. Neutrality and anxiety both indicate that students feel unprepared to write essays and argue a point, even though they have had experience in both. My goal of showing how students feel about writing has not resulted in a strong binary of results. Instead, it reveals a lack of feeling prepared in tasks that are important to college-readiness.

TEACHING APPLICATIONS

My study set out to explore the connection between preparedness and writing self-efficacy. The students in my study did not show an overwhelmingly positive self-efficacy, nor did they show a lack of experience in college ready skills. Their sense of where they were lacking in preparedness was not about specific skills, but about feeling empowered and trusted by their instructors. Being empowered to speak up and trusted to problem-solve on their own in high school are among the most important experiences any students can have in high school to prepare them for college (Martinez Molinero & Ford, 2020).

Helping students gain confidence should not be about giving them a false sense of their abilities but rather a true sense of the nature of what they are doing. A study by Conley D. T. (2009) emphasized that giving students autonomy and accountability resulted in superior effort and outcomes across all types of high schools—alternative to college prep. These students took their writing personally and felt trusted by the staff. Like the students in my study, they valued teachers and experiences that helped them feel confident and capable. This intangible concept of feeling confident and capable is self-efficacy.

Skills and confidence are developed simultaneously and recursively. “Students who lack confidence in skills they possess are not likely to engage in tasks where those skills are required; they will more quickly give up in the face of difficulty” (Pajares & Johnson, 1994, p. 328). Confidence needs to be supported even as skills are developed. Confidence comes with a sense of responsibility and accountability. Confidence comes

from being invested in the work and valuing both the outcome and the creative process. Confidence comes as students find their own way with a little guidance, rather than simply being receptive buckets for knowledge to be poured into.

Teacher Attitude

Writing self-efficacy develops in classrooms, growing or dying as teachers interact with their students' writing. Instructors have an impact on the development of self-efficacy, both in the instructional materials and the attitudes they bring to the classroom (Kriner, 2017). Students need teachers to enter the classroom believing that the students are capable of learning and capable of creating quality writing. Teacher attitudes inform their feedback, but even before that, the teacher displays his bias in the way he teaches. Does he assume that his students are intelligent, capable individuals who can learn what he is teaching and might already know some of it? Does he instead assume that the empty vessels before him need to just hold still so that none of the knowledge he is pouring in will drip down the sides? The students in my study would argue that the previous teacher taught them more than the latter. They valued the way their English 1010 teacher considered them capable of regulating their own coursework and evaluating themselves. That teacher's attitude impacted their self-efficacy.

Scaffolding

Beyond simply having the right attitude, the class in my study wanted educators to provide sufficient scaffolding, but not hand-holding. One approach to scaffolding is to provide students with the vocabulary necessary to talk and write about the subject.

Intentionally teaching the language and vocabulary of composition studies gives students the skills to understand the instructions and complete assignments effectively (Bloom, 1997). Successful completion of assignments adds to a student's positive sense of writing self-efficacy. Teaching the vocabulary of the subject also helps students to understand how their work is being evaluated. "Evaluation means looking hard and thoughtfully at a piece of writing in order to make distinctions as to the quality of different features or dimensions" (Elbow, 1993). Understanding what evaluation means can take the sting out of a critique and can help students engage with feedback in positive ways.

The impact of scaffolding on self-efficacy was reinforced by a recent presentation at the Utah Council of Teachers of English (2024) where two educators from Alpine school district reinforced student self-efficacy through scaffolding, trusting, and giving feedback. Their emphasis was on independence and ownership of their writing, two elements shown to improve writing self-efficacy. This approach showed improvements in the students' overall writing self-efficacy over the course of the unit (Gee & Morris, February 2024). Educators who are looking to truly prepare students for college can investigate the specific scaffolding approaches that allow for more student ownership of their writing.

Feedback

From the responses in the class discussion part of this study, positive, constructive feedback also promotes writing self-efficacy. The students spoke about feedback being "honest and kind" and "focusing on the big idea/big picture" (Fig. 3). The students didn't

ask teachers to always tell them that they were doing a good job but to tell them the truth in a kind way.

Teacher feedback on student work is an intentional response. The expectation is that a teacher will carefully read what a student has written and give suggestions for improvement. This can be a time-consuming process that often teaches the teacher a great deal about which parts of her lessons are not getting across to her students. It is only human to become irritated when faced with paper after paper that fails in exactly the same way. It is neither helpful nor constructive (meaning "to build up") to let that irritation show in the way that we give feedback.

Educators can think about giving students feedback the same way they would give feedback to their peers. In a workshop presented at the 22nd Annual Teachers of Technical Writing Conference in Pittsburgh, Alexander et al. (2019) presented a heuristic for professional feedback that offers three keywords as we approach reading a peer's paper: specific, knowledgeable, and kind. Alexander et al. (2019), encouraged responses that are detailed, actionable, and focused on coherence rather than spelling and grammar. They also pointed out the importance of knowing something about the subject matter and reflecting back to the writer through feedback what we understand the paper to be doing. Most importantly, even when responding to peers, reviewers need to be kind, meaning inclusive, uplifting, supportive, and mentoring (Alexander, Cheek, Itchuaqiyaq, Shirley, & Walton, March 2019).

As a mentor of students who are building self-efficacy, a teacher's role is to "validate this sense of efficacy by clearly conveying to students they are acquiring knowledge" (Schunk, 1991, p. 123). Looking for the quality first and pointing that out to

students will give them a foundation of strength from which to view the less flattering evaluations. Teachers want feedback to encourage students to act and to show them that they are trusted to take that action. In a 2011 study on writing self-efficacy in university students, the researchers affirmed that “providing detailed feedback on students’ papers, facilitating discussion on the challenges of writing, and mentoring and tutoring students who need additional writing support” (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011, p. 358) would promote positive writing self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

When I decided to return to college in January of 2021, I had flashbacks to my undergraduate experience and wondered if I had it in me to do school again. I worried that I had even more baggage and less preparation than I'd had at 18. Over the last year, as I have written for my graduate school courses under the mentorship of great teachers who express their belief in their students openly, giving constructive, kind feedback all along the way, I have perceived a significant change in myself. My self-efficacy in writing has grown. I do not agonize about putting words on a page. I am delighted to revisit a paper and make it better. I know that I have gained new skills and had old ones revitalized inside of me, but the most important thing has been my own perception of the act of writing. Writing no longer causes me to collapse into a puddle of tears because I have writing self-efficacy (and not just in writing a grocery list). All students need that same confidence in their ability to put their thoughts on paper so that they can be truly ready for college-level work.

Self-efficacy, as Albert Bandura described it in 1977, is not an acquisition of a set of skills; it is a lack of anxiety or fear associated with a particular task or situation. Writing efficacy, then, does not mean the ability to accomplish a task well but the courage to see the task through to the end, even if one is not an expert. Writing efficacy cannot show us their actual skill in completing a writing task, but it can show us a student's willingness to engage in difficult writing tasks. That willingness to engage, call it courage, determination, or persistence, is a key element for success in any endeavor. In many ways, willingness is more vital to college success than previous academic prowess.

Bandura's description of self-efficacy leads me to believe that building self-efficacy builds resilience. It is not merely confidence in the task; it is confidence in one's ability to engage in and persevere through a difficult task.

The students in this study communicated to me that confidence mattered to their perception of their own preparedness. A child who feels confident in his ability to learn a new skill will continue to try even when his efforts at holding a pencil are awkward at best. A woman who feels capable of creating a coherent sentence will continue communicating, even when her thoughts don't get across perfectly. Skills are necessary, of course, but without self-efficacy, students will not feel confident, empowered, and capable, and they will be less willing to engage in college-level work. True writing preparedness then, is the confidence to engage in college writing, knowing that your success is based on effort and not innate talent. As students learn new skills and are helped to develop habits of mind (Fig. 1), they become more prepared to meet the expectations of college writing courses.

Independence and ownership can result in more willingness to engage in writing tasks that provide experience. Educators are already providing experience as they teach to the established standards. The students in my study were mostly experienced in all the writing tasks associated with college-readiness standards. As educators work to improve the classroom environment to encourage independence, ownership, and confidence, they do not want to neglect teaching those necessary writing skills that prepare students to write in college. By focusing on a positive attitude about the students, providing empowering scaffolding, and giving honest and kind feedback, educators will reinforce the skills needed for college, build the habits of mind from *The Framework for Success,*

and develop stronger writing self-efficacy. All of this will lead to students feeling more prepared to write in college and beyond.

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