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Mapping the Meaning of "Help": Tutor Training and the Sense of Self-Efficacy

Fall 2010 / Training

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A writing-center director explains how the concept of "self-efficacy" helps define successful strategies and objectives for both writing consultants and student writers.

"I don't feel like we accomplished anything." With a frown of frustration, one of our writing consultants[1] — let's call her Amy — sank wearily into the chair beside my desk to chat about the session she had just had. "He seemed overwhelmed, and after a while I felt that way too. I tried to get him to talk about his ideas, but he just kept saying he was a bad writer and couldn't do papers." I pointed out that after 45 minutes with Amy, the student seemed more positive and left expressing gratitude. But Amy sighed, "I can't see how I helped him at all."

I could have continued, protesting that we are teachers, not magicians; tutors can only do so much in a single 45-minute session. Yet I knew all my conventional reassurances couldn't quell the doubt Amy felt about this nebulous task of "helping" students. While fervent beliefs in the power of writing and in the importance of peer tutoring empower our writing consultants, the lack of closure inherent in our work creates an inescapable uncertainty. Particularly in training new consultants, I was looking for a better way to wrestle with their persistent questions: What does it *mean* to help students become "better writers"? How can tutors *know* their efforts are helpful?

During an internship project last year, one of our consultants came upon a concept called "self-efficacy" that educational psychologists link to students' academic success. At first, this term seemed simply a fancy way of saying confidence.

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However, I discovered that the term gives specific and scholarly definition to our vague goal of enhancing "confidence" in student writers. While of course



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confidence alone won't write a good paper, efficacy research suggests that "writing self-efficacy and writing performance are related" (Pajares, Johnson, Usher 105) and that therefore, "one important step in improving writing would be to strengthen individuals' *efficacy expectations* about their writing ability" (McCarthy et al. 466 emphasis mine). Thus the self-efficacy concept offers a more precise version of the general writing center goal of giving students "the confidence and strategies to keep growing and improving" (Leahy 47): it suggests we need to raise students' *expectation* that they will be able to complete a writing task. And it brings not only a welcome way of defining a benefit of writing center visits, but also an opportunity for refocusing tutor training, for mapping the meaning of "help" for writing consultants.

Self-efficacy: what tutors need to know.

The social-cognitive concept of self-efficacy fits easily into existing training material, for it helps us to describe and define ways of building students' sense of agency in their own learning. Early in our training sessions and in our Writing Center Handbook, I draw students' attention to the idea that a task (writing a paper) can be accomplished best by people who *believe* they are capable of doing it—a belief that Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura labeled "self-efficacy" in a 1977 article. And that belief can be nurtured—or discouraged—in four ways.

- First, and foremost among the sources of self-efficacy are personal experiences of **success through effort**, what Bandura calls "mastery experiences." He puts it simply: "Successes build a robust belief in one's personal efficacy. Failures undermine it" (1).
 - A second source of self-efficacy beliefs is the "vicarious experience" of observing **models similar to oneself** who "teach observers effective skills and strategies" by example (2).
- By this time, new consultants readily notice the similarities between Bandura's list and our own writing center "do list": help students experience success, model strategies for writing.
- A third factor, what Bandura calls "social persuasion," involves **encouraging** students' capabilities while giving them **opportunities** to exercise them.
 - The fourth and final way to build positive self-efficacy beliefs is to reduce the anxieties and negative **attitudes** writers have concerning the writing task and their ability to complete it.

As we talked about these principles in training and staff meetings, experienced consultants were quick to point out the striking similarities between these sources of self-efficacy and the goals and practices of peer tutoring. Using the framework of enhancing students' self-efficacy beliefs, our writing consultants found a more explicit focus for our writing center goals: helping students experience *success through effort*, aided by tutorial *modeling, persuasion, and emotional support* of those efforts. But perhaps more importantly, the four factors help define what consultants can *do* to address these goals and give four flexible components to consider as they assess the needs of individual students and sessions.

Structuring sessions to build self-efficacy

Component 1: Success through effort

Bandura's main point is the need to help writers *actively* experience success in overcoming obstacles. Whether first-semester undergraduates still hoping high school strategies will see them through or older students faced with the demands of more complex research projects in their major field, the students we serve often lack positive experiences of success in academic writing. Consultants give students an opportunity to talk about ideas and try out skills and strategies in a tutorial session, offering small increments of positive experience in addressing writing assignments. In training, we talk about building in moments for students to produce some tangible "take-away" during the session, whether it is notes from brainstorming, an outline, an improved thesis statement, or simply a plan for revisions.

A look at recent consultants' session reports[2] (in our center, these are written to inform other consultants only) reveals how a student who arrives with negative experience gains confidence by working through steps in the writing process:

She had no confidence in her ideas, as her professors had already shot her down in a few of her other subjects. She was very wary of the length of the paper and didn't know how to structure or organize her views. We brainstormed a bit, created a rough outline, and talked a lot about the best and most logical organization. She had a great topic and lots of valuable ideas; she just didn't have faith in them.

As the student left the Center, she told her consultant she felt "pretty confident" and ready to write her paper. Writing center sessions easily can become sites of much talking and little actual writing. Bandura helps us recognize that active, guided practice — whether in a laboratory, a music lesson, or a writing center — furnishes learners with the experience of improving through effort.

Component 2: Modeling

Professor Bandura describes such supervision in terms any educator of writing consultants would recognize: "Through their behavior and expressed ways of thinking, competent models transmit knowledge and teach observers effective skills and strategies for managing environmental demands" (2). One of our consultants recently illustrated this modeling with her session description:

We worked primarily on strengthening her topic sentences and making sure everything linked back to her argument. I helped her with a few of them, and then she revised all of the rest, which revealed to me that she really understood what her topic sentences should be doing.

Even as recent writing center scholarship has called into question the "lore" that "mandates forbidding tutor directiveness" (Thompson et al. 79), a self-efficacy orientation offers a context in which a more directive style fits into our collaborative tradition. The venerable teaching technique of direct modeling, described by Richard Beach in a 1986 article as "*showing* students how to do something rather than *telling* them what to say (59 emphasis mine) comes into play as part of the larger effort toward student self-efficacy. In conjunction with the other components, modeling becomes a natural and essential part of the tutorial session, with consultants showing students how to perform the task at hand. It is a more directive component than the others, so its presence might be greater in a session with a struggling second-language writer and smaller

when a consultant wants the student to do most of the work on her own.

Component 3: Persuasion and encouragement

Of course an emphasis on showing and demonstrating relies on the student's desire to be shown and advised. In order to try out their skills, students must be persuaded that the outcome will be worth the effort. All too often in our work we encounter students who shake their heads despairingly and mutter, "I can't write." Another task of tutors thus becomes drawing writers away from the precarious ledge of limited expectations. As Isabelle Thompson and her colleagues put it, "the tutor is responsible for making the student feel comfortable enough to take risks and develop and maintain motivation to complete the task" (81). Self-efficacy experts agree that "the messages these students receive from adults and peers about their writing are directly related to the degree of confidence students feel toward themselves as writers" (Pajares et al. 116).

A recent consultant report described the student writer as "frazzled" and "anxious about writing," yet after some talking, "she had a lot to say, and we began to form a thesis. Pulling that strong thesis out of her took a while because she doubted herself so much, but eventually she left with a good thesis and an outline, and she seemed a little more relaxed." Moreover, the student had actively engaged in constructing her thesis and outline. As Bandura puts it, "Successful efficacy builders do more than convey positive appraisals... they structure situations for [students] in ways that bring success" (2).

Component 4: Reducing anxiety

Bandura's fourth factor, dealing with anxieties and negative attitudes, connects to writing center efforts to help writers "develop control of their feelings so they can focus on writing" and the role of "peer" tutors as empathetic listeners (Hawkins 4, Taylor).

A recent, rather extreme emotional outburst in our center involved a first-year student who began her session "crying and physically shaking," claiming she had "no idea how to write the paper." After friendly, calming conversation with the writing consultant, the student settled down to talk through her ideas. The consultant reported, "I think she mostly needed a confidence boost. We plotted an outline together, talked out an agenda, and setup 2 more appts for next week." Having gained control not only of her emotions but of her writing project, the student left the session visibly relieved and vocally grateful for the "very positive and encouraging" atmosphere of the Writing Center. The importance of such activities — creating an outline, setting an agenda, planning future sessions — may seem obvious to those who run writing centers, but as consultants connect a task-oriented approach to self-efficacy with actions the student can take, they make the moves of a purposeful practice that fosters assurance — in both students and their tutors.

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Building a consultant's own sense of self-efficacy

A dual effect of our shift toward the self-efficacy orientation appeared as a welcome side effect of our training sessions: consultant confidence. Certainly

writing consultants, no less than the students they tutor, need their own strong self-efficacy beliefs in order to pursue this challenging job. As in many other training programs, our new consultants pair off and practice tutoring in “mini-sessions,” observe experienced consultant “models” at work, and of course read, write, and talk about writing center theory. But we tie these training activities to the four components of self-efficacy to define our work as

- giving students **experiences** of “success through effort” during the tutorial session
 - as they engage in practice sessions and also schedule at least one Writing Center session to work on their own writing with an experienced consultant.
- acting as knowledgeable peer **models** who teach by showing, not just telling
 - when they observe sessions and discuss issues in staff meetings.
- seeking out students’ strengths and **encouraging** them to build on skills they have.
 - in writing self-reflections on their own writing strengths and challenges.
- using **empathy and understanding** in relieving students’ anxieties
 - as they read about and discuss common concerns with colleagues.

Because the self-efficacy concept offers a concrete description of “helping students become better writers,” it offers consultants both a sharper definition of their choices in facilitating a tutoring session and a promising new way to value the help they give. And we add more than a bit of professional terminology when we incorporate self-efficacy into our “idea of a writing center.” Therese Thonus argues that effective writing center education “requires training tutors in specific interactional and pragmatic features that research...suggests are most conducive to success” (“Assessments”). Bandura’s four factors involve just such a set of behaviors and “pragmatic features” for conferencing—and they also apply to tutors in training. As we empower writing consultants with this firmer definition of exactly *how* they “help” student writers, they gain a positive sense of self-efficacy themselves.

Notes

[1] Writing Consultant is the term we prefer in our Writing Center. I use “tutor” elsewhere in the essay when needed as a conventional and convenient term.

[2] All the examples quote from tutor comment sheets written during the semester when this new training was introduced. Thanks go to AU Writing Consultants Amelia Cohen-Levy, Maeg Keane, and Meghan Nesmith for their comments and reflections. Special thanks to Melissa Pasterkiewicz Reddish, whose enthusiasm, comments, and advice as consultant and trainer of new consultants contributed significantly to this project.

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