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# Assessing Students' Writing and Public Speaking Self-Efficacy in a Composition and Communication Course

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**Abstract:** One avenue for assessing learning involves evaluating self-efficacy, as this psychological belief is a strong predictor of academic achievement. As such, the purpose of this study was to evaluate writing self-efficacy and public speaking self-efficacy in a composition and communication course. This course is structured to develop both writing and public speaking competencies; the research sought to determine whether students believed they were leaving the course feeling more confident in their capabilities within each respective academic domain. Results ( $N = 380$ ) from pre- and post-test data suggest that students' reported writing and public speaking self-efficacy significantly increased over the semester. Additionally, students' mastery experiences, operationalized as informative essay and informative speech grades, were related positively to changes in self-efficacy at the end of the semester. These results offer three implications for teaching within this course design and structure.

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Hart Research Associates (2016) reported that of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) member institutions, 99% assessed general education learning outcomes related to students' writing skills and 82% assessed oral communication skills (e.g., public speaking). Together, these outcomes represent two of the top four skills desired for undergraduate students (Hart Research Associates, 2016), echoing Booher's (2005) position that "the ability to express yourself orally and in writing is the single most important skill to career advancement" (p. 13). Consequently, many institutions have shifted towards general education courses planned around principles of multimodal communication, highlighting written and oral outcomes (Reid, Snead, Pettway, & Simeneaux, 2016). This focus on a variety of skills has led researchers to refer to this design as *the basic composition and communication course* (BCCC; see Housley Gaffney & Frisby, 2013; Strawser, Housley Gaffney, DeVito, Kercksmar, & Pennell, 2017). This nuanced design reflects the changing needs of university administration (Valenzano III, 2013) by building competencies across multiple modes and forms of communication. Such

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changes in curricula necessitate additional approaches to the assessment of students' achievement of competence regarding these two communication skills.

This study meets this need by investigating students' perceptions of their writing and public speaking competence in a BCCC. To this end, the researchers utilized the concept of self-efficacy from Bandura's (1986, 1997) social cognitive theory (SCT) as a framework for understanding students' capabilities. Although self-efficacy does not directly evaluate learning, it has been strongly linked to academic achievements (Klassen & Usher, 2010; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991) and conceptually framed as an affective learning outcome (Housley Gaffney & Frisby, 2013). The findings should provide support for the BCCC as an important course in developing students' communication skills as part of their general education requirements.

### **Basic Composition and Communication Course Design**

At the University of Kentucky, the BCCC is a combination of the introductory writing and oral communication courses required by the university's core general education curriculum. As part of a yearlong, two-semester sequence, students are exposed to both written and oral communication content with the goal of cultivating skills in each area. The first course, primarily taken by first-year, first-semester students, concentrates on the process of informing, describing, and explaining topics objectively. It generally is expected that these students will subsequently enroll in the second course in the sequence, which introduces persuasion and argumentation.

Both courses emphasize multimodal communication, with an overlapping focus on writing and speaking content. For example, the first course in the sequence includes two major projects assessing writing and public speaking skills. The first project is a research-based informative essay; the second project involves the presentation of an informative speech. While instructional content prior to the submission of the essay is focused largely on developing writing skills (e.g., grammar, sentence clarity), content following the essay includes a greater proportion of information about public speaking (e.g., delivery, presentation aids). Building to these projects, students also apply knowledge through smaller scaffolding assignments designed to promote mastery. This means that content generally is focused in one academic domain, yet students are exposed to assignments involving principles of both disciplines across the semester. For example, early in the course, students complete a written rhetorical analysis, in which they critique a speech. This analysis provides an opportunity to introduce and discuss principles of public speaking, as well as a template for applying grammatical and syntactical writing knowledge gained prior to the major essay project.

Many safeguards are in place to ensure students have the desired expertise upon completion of the course, including instructor training, ongoing assessment, and standardized rubrics. However, mixed research findings raise questions regarding whether students are sustaining the competencies they develop over the length of the course (Housley Gaffney & Frisby, 2013; Housley Gaffney & Kerckmar, 2016; Strawser et al., 2017). Contrary to courses centered solely on public speaking, the inclusion of a composition requirement introduces additional objectives and outcomes that may influence how much students feel they have learned and developed (i.e., Social cognitive theory, self-efficacy; Bandura, 1986, 1997). SCT posits that human thought and action result from a system of dynamic interplay between personal, environmental, and behavioral factors in a process labeled triadic reciprocity. As a personal

factor, self-efficacy refers to “one’s perceived capability to accomplish given academic tasks and can be thought of in terms of *can do* statements” (Usher, 2015, p. 148). Scholars treat self-efficacy as a universal belief contextualized across specific academic domains; it reflects separate changes in the development of writing and public speaking skills (Bandura, 1997). In other words, it is possible for students to feel confident in one area while feeling simultaneously inadequate in another. When writing and public speaking skills are taught in the same course, the assessment of domain-specific outcomes is needed to ensure student growth in each area.

Writing self-efficacy has been extensively studied as a predictor of achievement (Pajares, 2003), and research supports the notion that students’ beliefs about their writing capabilities are related to their composition performance (Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1989). Students who rate themselves higher in writing self-efficacy are more likely to write better essays than students who see themselves as less competent (McCarthy, Meier, & Rinderer, 1985). Similarly, research examining the relationship between public speaking self-efficacy and achievement generally shows a positive association. Dwyer and Fus (1999, 2002) demonstrated that public speaking self-efficacy was positively correlated with cumulative course grade at two different times within a semester. Specifically, public speaking self-efficacy was associated positively with students’ grades at both the middle and the end of the semester. Together, these results show promise in assessing public speaking self-efficacy as an indicator of future student success.

### **Mastery Experiences and Self-Efficacy**

Communication researchers have investigated several antecedents to the development of students’ self-efficacy. These sources include instructor relevance (Weber, Martin, & Myers, 2011), classroom justice (Vallade, Martin, & Weber, 2014), and clarity (LaBelle, Martin, & Weber, 2013) as well as student state motivation (Weber et al., 2011) and academic entitlement (Vallade et al., 2014). However, the notion of student performance on a task as an influencer of self-efficacy is seemingly absent from the instructional literature. This absence comes in contrast to SCT, which emphasizes the importance of performance accomplishments, or mastery experiences, as a source for cultivating capability beliefs (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Mastery experiences represent engagement with tasks that provide authentic evidence of mastery in a domain. Despite a tendency for communication research to value learning and performance as *outcomes* (Clark, 2002), a SCT framework including mastery experiences suggests that it may be prudent to use past performance as an indicator of future potential (i.e., self-efficacy) for assessment.

It is important to note that mastery experiences are not synonymous with gaining new skills (McCroskey, 1982). Rather, self-efficacy stems from reflection on one’s experience, as success or failure prompts a judgment of one’s competence (Pajares, 2006). Thus, mastery experiences can also be conceptualized as a result of one’s level of achievement (Bandura, 1977). Usher and Pajares (2008) further described this process:

After students complete an academic task, they interpret and evaluate the results obtained, and judgments of competence are created or revised according to those interpretations. When they believe that their efforts have been successful, their confidence to accomplish similar or related tasks is raised; when they believe that their efforts failed to produce the effect desired, confidence

to succeed in similar endeavors is diminished. (p. 752)

Within the domain of writing, the relationship between mastery experiences and self-efficacy is dependent on measurement (Pajares, 2003). That is, students experience different levels of self-efficacy between writing *task* self-efficacy (e.g., “write a term paper of 15 to 20 pages,” Shell et al., 1989, p. 99) and writing *skills* self-efficacy (e.g., “correctly use parts of speech,” Shell et al., 1989, p. 99). At the collegiate level, expectations for students’ composition skills may change when writing is framed as a process of scholarly inquiry (Downs & Wardle, 2007). With the potentially different expectations for “college-level” writing and the lack of an exclusive pedagogical focus in this area, it remains unclear whether students can fully cultivate their writing self-efficacy. For example, while Strawser et al. (2017) concluded that students in a BCCC did not report greater writing self-efficacy at the end of the semester compared to the beginning of the semester, Housley Gaffney and Kerckmar (2016) discovered that students did report greater self-efficacy at the end of a similar course. Given the limited research on BCCCs and these conflicting results, the following research question was posed:

RQ1: Do students in a BCCC experience greater writing self-efficacy at the end of the semester compared to the beginning of the semester?

Compared to writing, less is known about the influence of students’ public speaking mastery experiences on self-efficacy. This lack of knowledge may stem from the idea that many students do not receive public speaking instruction as adolescents (Morreale & Backlund, 2007); thus, students entering the BCCC without prior public speaking knowledge need skills training to enhance their self-efficacy. For example, Dwyer and Fus (1999, 2002) found that public speaking self-efficacy at the beginning of a semester was unrelated to students’ final grades. To develop competence, it seems that students must be exposed to effective public speaking behaviors and training.

As such, measurements of public-speaking self-efficacy should identify specific skills associated with competent performance. Although Dwyer and Fus (1999, 2002) assessed public speaking self-efficacy, their studies omitted behaviors associated with public speaking mastery (e.g., delivery, audience analysis, outlining). In contrast, Warren (2011) created a public speaking self-efficacy scale based on these expected behaviors such as “I can make it clear that I am a credible speaker during my speech” and “I can use vivid language during my speech” (p. 42). Yet, empirical evidence of the effects of gaining this knowledge on student competence is mixed. Housley Gaffney and Frisby (2013) reported that students claimed to be more confident in their abilities after gaining new knowledge, but Strawser et al. (2017) found that students in a BCCC did not experience changes in public-speaking self-efficacy over time. Consequently, given the lack of clarity of these findings, the following research question was proposed:

RQ2: Do students in a BCCC experience greater public speaking self-efficacy at the end of the semester compared to the beginning of the semester?

The BCCC in this study incorporates a variety of scaffolding assignments that illustrate concepts and generate instructor feedback. Students then use this information to complete a major project in each communication domain. Viewed from the lens of SCT, students' performances on these major assignments will prompt them to significantly reflect on and interpret their abilities (Bandura, 1986, 1997), which then should lead to greater perceptions of competence. Based on Hodis and Hodis's (2012) findings that students' self-efficacy increased over a semester in a public speaking course, it is expected in this study that students' self-efficacy will linearly increase as well. However, they noted that the magnitude of this increase depends on the communicative context (e.g., writing or public speaking).

In this study, students' grades were chosen as an operationalization of one potential variable that may influence this increase. Because students use grades to reflect on their own performance and form judgments of their abilities (Pajares et al., 2007), using grades as an indicator of mastery should provide a link between students' performances and subsequent interpretation of their abilities. While other studies also adopt this perspective, they often utilize final grades, an outcome conflated by multiple other assessments (e.g., attendance, participation; Dwyer & Fus, 2002). This study chose to utilize a specific assignment--the informative essay--as a synthesizing mastery experience within the writing domain. Following SCT, students who feel their efforts have been successful (based on their essay grade) should report increases in writing self-efficacy over time (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Thus, the first hypothesis is proposed:

- H1: In a BCCC, mastery experience (i.e., informative essay grade) will be related positively to increases in writing self-efficacy from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester.

Similarly, the incorporation of a major public speaking assignment accurately depicts mastery experiences specific to public speaking (Bandura, 1997). Additionally, public speaking self-efficacy is dynamic and changes depending on students' experiences with success or failure. The culmination of several experiences in the form of a major project should provide students with an opportunity to form a judgment of their skills. Thus, the second hypothesis is proposed:

- H2: In a BCCC, mastery experience (i.e., informative speech grade) will be related positively to increases in public speaking self-efficacy from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants included 380 undergraduate students (135 men, 245 women) enrolled across 23 sections in the BCCC at a large Southeastern institution. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 24 years ( $M = 18.15$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ). Participants were mostly homogenous in terms of class rank, with 92.4% identifying as first-year students, 2.9% as sophomores, 0.5% as juniors, 0.8% as seniors, and 0.8% as other. Eight participants (2.1%) identified as sophomores by credit, whereas

two participants (0.5%) identified as transfer students who were not clear regarding their rank or status. Students did not report any other demographic data.

### Procedures and Measures

The data reported in this study are derived from an ongoing assessment project of the first course of a two-semester BCCC sequence. Students completed a questionnaire (for course credit) on writing self-efficacy and public speaking self-efficacy through Qualtrics, an online survey engine, during the first two weeks of the semester and again during the final two weeks of the semester. Course instructors included graduate teaching assistants ( $n = 5$ ), part-time lecturers ( $n = 1$ ), and full-time lecturers ( $n = 7$ ); some instructors taught multiple course sections.

*Writing self-efficacy* was assessed using 7 items related to students' perceived capability for performing certain writing skills. The items were taken from a 9-item writing self-efficacy scale constructed for assessment of the BCCC by a team of both composition and communication faculty (see Housley Gaffney & Kerckmar, 2016; Strawser et al., 2017). Items included statements such as "I can properly cite sources in my writing" and "I can proofread my own writing for errors." Participants responded by moving a slider between 0 (no certainty) and 100 (very certain) to indicate their capability for performing the skill. Alpha reliability was acceptable at the pre-test ( $\alpha = .89$ ;  $M = 67.97$ ,  $SD = 16.37$ ) and the post-test ( $\alpha = .91$ ;  $M = 81.34$ ,  $SD = 13.18$ ).

*Public-speaking self-efficacy* was assessed using a 19-item scale developed by Warren (2011). Students were presented with specific skills related to public speaking (i.e., "I can grab the audience's attention at the beginning of my speech"; "I can use creative transitions between the main ideas in my speech") to which they responded by moving a slider between 0 (no certainty) and 100 (very certain) to indicate their beliefs regarding their capability for performing the skill. Alpha reliability was strong at the pre-test ( $\alpha = .96$ ;  $M = 66.29$ ,  $SD = 15.95$ ) and the post-test ( $\alpha = .96$ ;  $M = 79.94$ ,  $SD = 12.73$ ).

*Writing grades* were assessed using the evaluation score given by the respective instructor on an informative essay assignment. Rubrics for the assignment were standardized across all class sections, and instructors were required to use these rubrics for assessment. The assignment asked students to construct an essay in response to one of three topics, each one based in communication theory and requiring outside research. Students received a score ranging from 0 to 150 ( $M = 128.66$ ,  $SD = 15.92$ ), with 15 points separating evaluation scores of "A," "B," "C," and "D," respectively. Participants completed this assignment before the mid-point of the semester.

*Public speaking grades* were assessed using the evaluation score given by the instructor on an informative speech assignment. Rubrics for the assignment were standardized across all class sections, and instructors were required to use these rubrics for evaluation. All students delivered a research-based four to six-minute speech informing the audience about a topic of their choosing. Students received a score ranging from 0 to 150 ( $M = 132.92$ ,  $SD = 10.47$ ), with 15 points separating evaluation scores of "A," "B," "C," and "D," respectively. Students completed the informative speaking assignment during the last two weeks of the semester.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables are included in Table 1. The first research question asked whether students experienced greater writing self-efficacy at the end of the semester compared to the beginning of the semester. The results of a paired samples *t*-test indicated that students' reports of writing self-efficacy at the end of the semester ( $M = 81.34$ ,  $SD = 13.18$ ) were higher than their reports of writing self-efficacy at the beginning of the semester ( $M = 67.97$ ,  $SD = 16.37$ ),  $t(379) = 17.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.90$ .

Table 1

*Zero-Order Correlations for Study Variables*

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Initial Public Speaking Self-Efficacy	0.49**	0.70**	0.34**	-0.66**	-0.47**	-0.01	-0.01
2. Ending Public-Speaking Self-Efficacy		0.42**	0.74**	0.34**	0.19**	0.19**	0.10*
3. Initial Writing Self-Efficacy			0.51**	-0.40**	-0.65**	-0.06	0.06
4. Ending Writing Self-Efficacy				0.27**	0.33**	0.15**	0.22**
5. Public Speaking Self-Efficacy Change (End minus Initial)					0.68**	0.17**	0.09*
6. Writing Self-Efficacy Change (End minus Initial)						0.20**	0.12**
7. Informative Speech Grade							0.46**
8. Informative Essay Grade							—

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

The second research question asked whether students experienced greater public speaking self-efficacy at the end of the semester compared to the beginning of the semester. The results of a paired samples *t*-test indicated that students' reports of public speaking self-efficacy at the end of the semester ( $M = 79.94$ ,  $SD = 12.73$ ) were higher than their reports of public speaking self-efficacy at the beginning of the semester ( $M = 66.29$ ,  $SD = 15.95$ ),  $t(379) = 17.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.95$ .

The first hypothesis proposed that in a BCCC, mastery experience (i.e., informative essay grade) would be related positively to increases in writing self-efficacy from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester. This hypothesis was supported,  $r(378) = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ .

The second hypothesis proposed that in a BCCC, mastery experience (i.e., informative speech grade) would be related positively to increases in public speaking self-efficacy from the beginning of the semester to the end of the semester. This hypothesis was supported,  $r(378) = .17$ ,  $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

Using SCT as a framework, the purpose of this assessment was to examine students' writing and public speaking self-efficacy in a BCCC. Specifically, mastery experiences--operationalized as one major writing grade and one major speaking grade--were used to examine students' self-efficacy. The results can be interpreted in terms of two general themes. First, students reported greater self-efficacy for both writing and public speaking at the end of the course. This finding suggests that completing academic tasks within two separate academic domains did not mitigate the development of self-efficacy over time. Because "the relation between beliefs and achievement may become stronger as persons become more proficient" (Shell et al., 1989, p. 97), course directors and instructors can feel confident that students will be better writers and public speakers upon moving into the second course in the sequence (or out of the BCCC altogether).

Second, students who performed well on the two major projects--an essay and a speech--appeared to associate grades with increased feelings of writing or public speaking capability. As mastery experiences, grades represent cumulative opportunities for students to apply their knowledge. These mastery experiences are likely cultivated through instruction that includes interaction and opportunities for reflection (Bandura, 1986; Pajares et al., 2007). Thus, if grades are related to increases in self-efficacy, it is critical that instructors emphasize adaptive reflection as students make progress on major projects. Doing so should help students develop important capability beliefs that can be longitudinally sustained and thus most representative of their writing and public speaking competence.

## Implications

This assessment supports the practicality of the BCCC as an effective course design and bolsters the marketability of courses such as the BCCC, which integrate principles of multimodal communication, within larger university contexts. Continued assessment of courses such as the BCCC can reiterate their importance by highlighting the extent to which students are learning essential writing and oral communication skills, and may help Communication Studies emerge as an "essential discipline" (Hess, 2016, p. 11) in the undergraduate curricula.

To sustain the present results, several practical implications are presented. First, it is important to note that to ensure that students are truly gaining mastery experiences, instructors should institute frequent opportunities for reflection throughout the course. In this study, only major project scores were used to operationalize mastery experience; however, it should be noted that these assignments were considered to be the culmination of students' learning experiences throughout the semester, and, thus, most representative of their communication capabilities.

Moreover, ample opportunities for reflection were built into scaffolding assignments and activities leading to these major projects. For example, students completed a small writing assignment early in the semester, with a subsequent revision and reflection video that required them to reflect on their writing and to set goals for their major informative essay. Students also recorded multiple post-speech reflection videos, as well as rough drafts and rehearsals. These assignments simultaneously required students to reflect on their experiences and promoted their writing and public speaking knowledge. Because of the desire for learning outcomes in two

separate academic domains in a BCCC, instructors should strategically allow for reflection between assignments and across communication modes. In other words, while emphasizing that the importance of mastering communication knowledge and skills is critical, simply providing students with opportunities for mastery experiences does not guarantee they will be motivated to enhance their efficacy (Pajares et al., 2007). Without high levels of interaction and reflection, students may not interpret their performances adaptively.

Second, directors and instructors of the BCCC (and other basic or introductory communication courses) should be cognizant of grades functioning as more than just an outcome; as mastery experiences, they also can act as an important part of the learning process. As such, it is important for instructors to ensure accuracy in their rating practices and feedback. Given the implications of grades and mastery experiences for self-efficacy beliefs, providing students with assessments true to their capabilities is particularly necessary. With instructors' tendencies to be overly polite in their feedback (Reynolds, Hunt, Simonds, & Cutbirth, 2004), and potentially too generous in grade distributions, it becomes increasingly necessary for BCCC directors to train instructors to achieve reliability and validity in their assessments of students (Frey, Hooker, & Simonds, 2015). This training is especially true for the BCCC within communication departments, where many graduate teaching assistants and faculty members may not have backgrounds in either teaching or assessing writing. It becomes critical for such programs to introduce methods for assessing both writing and public speaking assignments, many practical strategies for which currently exist both within and outside of communication literature (Krupa, 1982; Stitt, Simonds, & Hunt, 2003).

Third, with the increasing number of grade oriented and academically entitled students entering the college classroom (e.g., Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008), being able to discuss grades as part of the process instead of the ultimate outcome may be a helpful way for instructors to frame learning within higher education. This discussion is particularly relevant given the impact of grade inflation on students' levels of entitlement (Lippmann, Bulanda, & Wagenaar, 2009), whereby they have come to expect higher grades for minimal effort (Greenberger et al., 2008; Kopp, Zinn, Finney, & Jurich, 2011). As Chowning and Campbell (2009) noted, "instructors can emphasize the student's role in his/her own grade and success" (p. 996), perhaps by explaining that grades in a particular course are earned through a succession of smaller assignments designed to provide opportunities for practice, personal growth, and ultimately, mastery. Students may be taught that mastery involves reflecting on grades and feedback in order to gain confidence in their strengths and overcome remaining weaknesses.

### **Limitation and Future Research**

The results of this study should be interpreted within the scope of three limitations, however. First, the assessment procedures used in this study failed to account for individual instructor and course differences across class sections. Although BCCC instructors receive training prior to the semester and are required to evaluate both major projects using a standardized rubric, grade norming practices are omitted. Second, SCT posits that physiological and affective reactions play a role in the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). In the context of the BCCC, it is possible that students' apprehension toward writing and speaking make it difficult to master. Existing research suggests that most first-year students enrolled in

basic communication courses experience some level of anxiety related to speech presentation (Hunter, Westwick, & Haleta, 2014) and writing apprehension has been linked negatively to writing self-efficacy (Pajares & Johnson, 1994). Perhaps the physiological reaction to apprehension in the BCCC plays an influential role in students' beliefs about their capabilities. Future research is needed to parse out this possibility (Hodis & Hodis, 2013).

Third, the nature of the basic course remains in flux. Today, students can choose from online or hybrid courses, in addition to those courses geared toward specialty areas (e.g., living-learning programs, honors, or discipline-specific sections). Self-efficacy is a context-dependent construct; it is uncertain if differences in other course aspects play a role in developing self-efficacy. This dependence may be especially present in courses where students share the same major, given that Bandura (1986) emphasized the role of peer comparison in the development of self-efficacy. For instance, nursing majors taking a class together who exhibit stronger skills and experience greater achievement may develop greater personal efficacy beliefs. As the basic course continues to change, future analyses should continue evaluating how self-efficacy functions in this environment.

## Conclusion

Writing and public speaking skills are two of the most desirable outcomes in general education (Hart Research Associates, 2016), and the present research advocates for a course that allows students to concurrently develop skills relevant to both domains. In addition, Morreale, Valenzano, and Bauer (2017) contended that communication education programs, such as the one examined herein, provide students with opportunities to improve the educational enterprise. If a course can improve students' self-efficacy regarding critical outcomes relevant to the collegiate experience, university systems may be more likely to see the value in offering these courses as introductory platforms to collegiate writing and public speaking.

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