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The Strange Loop of Self-Efficacy and the Value of Focus Groups in Writing Program Assessment

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Abstract: It's long been presumed that increases in self-efficacy are correlated with other "habits of mind," including more effective metacognitive strategies that will enable writing skills to transfer to different situations. Similarly, it's long been understood that high self-efficacy is associated with more productive habits of mind and more positive emotional dispositions towards writing tasks. However, this two-year assessment of College Writing classes at a private, mid-sized, urban four-year university complicates these assumptions. By supplementing substantial survey data with the analysis of data collected in focus groups, we found that the development of self-efficacy does not necessarily correlate to the development of more sophisticated epistemological beliefs—beliefs about how learning happens—nor the development of rhetorical habits of mind. In short, by valuing student focus groups in writing assessment, we discovered a strange loop of self-efficacy in which gains made toward self-efficacy frequently have unanticipated complex and even problematic relations to our desired learning outcomes.

Keywords: self-efficacy, focus group, assessment, writing, metacognition, intrinsic motivation

Each year, faculty in the Writing Studies Program in the Department of Literature at American University—a private, mid-sized, urban four-year research university in Washington, D.C.—assess a different outcome derived from the program's grade rubric. This work is part of the regular institutional program assessment process that most writing programs across the country conduct in one form or another. Our program is currently structuring our assessment according to our four programmatic Learning Outcomes. We assess each outcome on a rotating basis over two years: writing and research are metacognitive processes; information has a life cycle and value; writing requires entering an ongoing conversation; structure, style, and mechanics are rhetorical.[1]

In the past, as at many schools, this work entailed scoring student essays at the beginning and end of the year to look for improvement. However, in part because American University is a private institution, faculty are given a relatively wide berth in satisfying the institutional assessment requirement. Taking advantage of this situation to build a study more pertinent to the conceptual foundations of writing studies and the interests of our faculty, the program's Assessment Committee decided it wanted to take a different approach, tuning into our students' own perception of their metacognitive development as writers. In doing so, we hoped to more fully act within the spirit of the CCCC (2022) "Writing Assessment: A Position Statement," which argues that "members of writing programs are in the best position to guide decisions about what assessments will best serve [the] community." To accomplish this, supplementing a large-scale survey of all students in the college writing sequence (WRT 100 in the fall and WRT 101 in the spring), the Assessment Committee decided to use student focus groups and discourse analysis, relatively rare methodologies in our field. While focus groups are indeed rare, others, such as Pruchnic et al. (2018), have similarly employed a mixed-method approach with the goal of complicating the quantitative data.

From fall 2019 to spring 2021, with the backing of a modest-but-essential $2500 Curriculum Development Award from the university, we designed a two-year mixed-method study meant to assess student self-efficacy by answering the following research question: How does the two-course College Writing sequence affect student self-efficacy and metacognition? This paper reports on the results of the qualitative assessment—a series of focus groups and discourse analysis—that I led as co-chair of the committee. This qualitative assessment was part of a larger IRB-approved study (protocol number: IRB-2020-68) conducted by the Assessment Committee in the Writing Studies Program, which also included two-year quantitative analysis of a survey administered to all students in the College Writing sequence meant to answer the same research question. While I will allude to the results of the quantitative study, the full results are beyond the scope of this paper and will be made available elsewhere. But in short, the surveys, administered to all college writing students at the beginning and end of each of the two years, showed encouraging, statistically significant gains made on most of our measures of self-efficacy. In year one, the first round of the survey in early fall 2019 had an impressive return rate of ≈83% (N=1403). The second round, at the end of spring 2020, had a lower, but still statistically significant and representative, return rate of ≈32% (N=710). In year two, the first round of the survey in early fall 2020 had an impressive return rate of ≈80% (N=1217). The second round at the end of spring 2021 had a statistically significant and representative return rate of ≈35% (N=967).

The results were especially encouraging given that, as Pajares et al. (2007) have shown, the "lockstep" approach to writing in high school diminishes self-efficacy, which, as we know,

1 The program's learning outcomes can be found at www.american.edu/cas/literature/wsp/students.cfm.

is correlated both with higher grades and with our students' ability to persist in revising and improving their writing (Hetthong & Teo, 2013; Pajares, 2003; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). We also know that low self-efficacy is correlated with "learned helplessness" (Zimmerman, 1990). So while we were encouraged by the increases in self-efficacy evidenced in our quantitative study, as this paper will demonstrate, our qualitative analysis enabled us to add depth, texture, and complexity to the quantitative study by tuning into our student's voices.

In addition to reporting on the results of our assessment, this paper will explore in a general way the value of focus groups in programmatic assessment given that, at least if the dearth of examples in the literature is any measure, this method remains relatively rare in our field. In other words, both the results of our study, as well as the value and limits of our qualitative research design, will be of interest to others in our field interested in complicating their assessment data. And I expect there to be an increased interest in complicating assessment data following the revised CCCC (2022) Position Statement. The position statement suggests that programs "consider revising and rethinking" assessment practices, including assessment practices that "draw on multiple methods, quantitative and qualitative, to assess programmatic effectiveness" (CCCC, 2022). As this latest position statement argues, such revisions are necessary to better honor language diversity and to make assessment more equitable.

Although we did not see our assessment practices as "pointless busywork" (O'Neill et al., 2009, p. 109), we sought to be ambitious in revising our old assessment design. But why would we seek to add *complexity* to assessment?

Previous assessments in our program measured improvement by scoring student essays at the beginning and end of the academic year according to normative standards derived from our learning outcomes and our program's shared rubric. But as in most writing program assessments that score completed essays according to a rubric, our methods tended towards valuing "mastery," in the words of the CCCC Statement (2022), over "excellence." In short, failing to capture all of the diversity and complexity involved in learning irreducible to mastery, we found that these results proved of little pedagogical value to our faculty or students. Instead of fully valuing the complexity of learning, our assessment practices held writing to a single standard of validity that, as Ellen Cushman (2016) argues, reproduces colonial imperialism: "the problem becomes when what counts as valid is always judged against a baseline that privileges one group of people's knowledge and forms of expression to the necessary exclusion of others" (p. 5). We agreed that by turning to our students' own thoughts on writing, we might instead, in Cushman's (2016) words, "dwell in the borders" of learning by sidestepping the perceived requirement that valid assessment requires finished writing products, glimpsing the more "pluriversal" realities involved in learning to compose (pp. 5–6). In summary, in line with current best practices for writing assessment, we sought results that were not just valid, but also "consequentially valid" for the program (Elliot & Perelman, 2012), "teacher-driven" and local (Yancey, 2012), and more "fair" to students than we believe conventional normative assessments allow for (Inoue & Poe, 2012).

The Assessment Committee thereby began a journey of rethinking our assessment practices by asking ourselves the questions: what do we really want to know through assessment to best respond to our students' needs, and what's the best way to know it? The committee—which was fairly representative in terms of teaching experience, including the Program Director, multiple full-time faculty, and an adjunct professor—was in part inspired by the university's newly revised CORE curriculum and its focus on "habits of mind." Most on the committee were also steeped in

disciplinary knowledge and attuned to the recent shifts in the field towards conceiving learning in terms of developing rhetorical habits. We discussed, especially, the ways the high-stakes testing environment of secondary schooling was creating—increasingly, we thought, among our student population—habits of mind pernicious to rhetorical thinking, such as grade orientation, rigidity, and an unwillingness to take risks. We were also aware of the role of self-efficacy in the literature of trauma-informed pedagogy, and we discussed the importance of building self-efficacy to confront the "cultural trauma" (e.g., Grier-Reed & Quiñones, 2021) experienced especially among our students from marginalized populations.

In short, pursuant to these discussions and following substantial research in our field, we became specifically interested in the relations between various habits of mind, transfer, and self-efficacy (cf. Anson, 2016; Anson & Moore, 2017; Driscoll & Powell, 2016; Khost, 2017; Yancey et al., 2014). Because there are "positive correlations . . . between writing self-efficacy and performance" (Khost, 2017, p. 273) and the "internalized helplessness" (Khost, 2017, p. 277) that characterizes a lack of self-efficacy, we saw great value in assessing how students' perceptions of their efficacies changes over the course of the year. Little did we know when we began our study that we'd soon be facing a global pandemic—resulting in new challenges, the further erosion of productive learning habits, and new traumas—adding more impetus to our interest in relations between productive habits of mind and self-efficacy.

As I'll argue in this work, our qualitative analyses offered us a way to at least partially achieve the goal of better attuning to our students' needs and desires. Ultimately, as I'll demonstrate, it gave us uncommon and pedagogically useful insights into the diverse embodied physical and emotional experiences that accompany becoming more efficacious college writers as well the relations between these experiences and the development of efficacious writing habits and dispositions. On the one hand, this study complimented our quantitative study. Given that our earlier, more conventional assessments had demonstrated consistent and statistically significant gains relative to our learning outcomes, we were not terribly surprised when our new quantitative study demonstrated gains in self-efficacy; after all, it seemed reasonable that as students improved as writers, they'd feel more efficacious as a result—and our qualitative study supported these encouraging results too. But at the same time, our qualitative study, giving us access to our students' own thoughts and feelings, extended these findings in ways that were unexpected, complicated, and even *strange*.

For example, we noticed that increases in our students' feelings of self-efficacy were frequently disproportionate to improvements in declarative knowledge and to the habits of mind our program seeks to inculcate. In short, we found that the habits that our students reported make them feel better about their writing often conflict with the transferable rhetorical habits of mind that we hope to teach. And additionally, we discovered that increased feelings of self-efficacy don't always align with improvements in the emotional and physical (embodied) experience of writing: students often feel more capable of writing college essays after the college writing sequence, even as the act of writing itself remains emotionally and physically unsatisfying and fraught.

As Peter Khost (2017) argues, we know that "positive correlations are known to exist between writing self-efficacy and performance" (p. 273). Khost (2017) further shows that gains made in metacognitive habits are associated with increased self-efficacy, and he finds great value in teaching these skills as a way "to counterbalance some habituated effects of high-stakes testing and test prep on American students, namely: the suppression of traits such as creativity, engagement, and curiosity" (p. 272). This paper in no way seeks to dispute these relations or this value. However,

in exploring the results of our two-year assessment, this paper will consider the possibility that self-efficacy sometimes finds its causes in the *persistence* of overdetermined, bankrupt formative experiences with reductive forms of writing in the environment of high-stakes testing. Relatedly, it will show that we found in our program an unanticipated relationship between gains made in the problem-solving skills associated with high self-efficacy and the perpetuation of a grade orientation, naive "epistemic beliefs" (Perry, 1998), and an arhetorical approach to writing at odds with habits of reflection and metacognition. In other words, counter to the received wisdom, we noticed that reported gains in self-efficacy with regard to writing did not always correlate with increased metacognitive or rhetorical sophistication.

Again, however, this study does not deny this relationship; it only means to add some complexity to our understanding of this elusive concept, self-efficacy. Instead, by calling attention to the complexity we found in these relations, as demonstrated by this specific population of students in this specific environment, this work echoes Khost's (2017) point that "there is need and room for a diversity of approaches" (p. 272) to the study of self-efficacy.[2] It also builds on other studies that have demonstrated the complexity of self-efficacy, for instance, in relation to variables like gender and academic level (Pajares et al, 2007). Ultimately, this essay means to contribute in three ways to our understanding of assessing student self-efficacy:

1. Revealing complexity in the concept of self-efficacy, it shows that despite quantitative evidence that our students develop increased self-efficacy across the college writing sequence, these gains often conflict with the development of metacognitive and rhetorical habits of mind.
2. It depicts a more complicated relationship between self-efficacy and embodied-emotional experience and disposition than has previously been reported.
3. It recommends the importance of supplementing any study of student belief with research, specifically focus groups, that involves speaking with students themselves.

In summary, while we have strong quantitative evidence that our students are making clear and consistent gains in self-efficacy, when confronted with questions of how this happens and if these results are indeed as encouraging as they appear, our focus group data leaves us with only a provisional answer: "it's complicated."

Qualitative Analysis Methodology

Focus groups were conducted with randomly selected students in the College Writing sequence—WRT 100 at the beginning of the fall semester and WRT 101 at the end of the spring semester. WRT 101, which focuses on a special topic, is viewed in our program as a continuation of WRT 100; teachers bring a variety of diverse pedagogical approaches to these classes and, while we have shared learning outcomes and a rubric, faculty are given almost total freedom in how to realize those outcomes. Focus groups maxed out at eight people for each session and were led by two faculty members on the Assessment Committee, in rotation. To help preserve anonymity, no demographic information was collected. As with the quantitative design, by conducting the focus groups both before and after completion of the College Writing sequence—that is, approximating a quasi-experimental pre/post-test design where the College Writing sequence is the "treatment"—

2 Information about American University's demographics can be found at www.american.edu/about/academic-profile.cfm

we hoped to assess student development as a result of the sequence. It's important to note that there was no control group—a significant limitation.

As Wodak and Meyer (2009) argue, "generally speaking, corpus size undoubtedly boosts representativeness, and this, in turn, enhances the validity of the analysts' claims" (p. 140). For these reasons, we pursued as many student participants as possible, given our financial and logistical limitations, through a process of random selection among all students in the program. One randomly selected student per WRT 100 (*N*=62) class was recruited, knowing that not all 62 students would be interested in participating. These same students were then contacted to participate again in the spring, with about 25% attrition. Students were paid $20 in the fall and $30 in the spring for participating. In summary, participation was as follows:

Year 1: For AY 2019-2020, in the fall, we had 3 groups and 24 participants; in the spring, we had 13 groups and 7 participants.

Year 2: For AY 2020-2021, all focus groups were conducted over Zoom. In the fall, we had 4 groups and 22 participants; in the spring, we had 3 groups and 17 participants.

We designed the focus groups to enable students to articulate their own experience, offering a thicker description than our survey allowed. Extending the study into a second year allowed for us adjust our focus group questions based on what we learned in the first year, and as with the quantitative analysis, we modulated and added questions to get a better idea of our students' affective and embodied experience in relation to the development of metacognition. This process was complicated by the onset of COVID-19; however, we were able to successfully continue our work on Zoom. It's likely that our students' responses to these questions were colored by what they were experiencing during the pandemic. However, while the committee discussed this, we could not think of a way to gain purchase over the situation, to tease out what was resultant of pandemic experience while maintaining consistency in our study. And we did not find anything specific in the pre- or post-pandemic data to help us make a distinction.

Questions were formed in relation to our program's learning outcome and shared rubric. The specific learning outcome we were assessing was as follows:

> Writing and Research Are Metacognitive Processes: students will formulate strategies for the creation of new knowledge. They will experiment with and refine reflective approaches to research and the writing process that are adaptable to a variety of rhetorical contexts.

Here are the final questions used for the 2020-2021 study:

1. So you have a writing assignment. Tell us about your writing process?
2. What are the research strategies that work best for you?
3. What are the revision strategies that work best for you?
4. What are the rhetorical and/or persuasive strategies that work best for you?
5. What are some of your concerns or fears about writing?
6. How writing usually makes you feel emotionally, physically, or otherwise.
7. Describe a time where writing made you feel good, emotionally, physically, or otherwise.
8. Describe a time where writing made you feel bad, emotionally, physically, or otherwise.

Following the collection of focus group data, qualitative analysis proceeded through a version of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There were three phases to the data analysis:

1. In the first phase, the focus group team formed inductive coding categories around "general themes" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 28). The purpose of this phase was to get a sense of the major themes in the discourse for eventual codification. The coding team

then met to refine the codes through a process of axial coding meant to address "when, where, why, who, how, and with what consequences, thus giving the concept greater explanatory power" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 125). Subcodes were then selectively coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) under organic coding categories by the team leader.

2. The team leader then conducted a "fine analysis" of the codes by once again applying them to the data. Following Wodak and Meyer (2009), this process emphasized "figurativeness, vocabulary, and argumentation types;" these types included implicit meanings, forms, tropes, cliches, references, knowledges sources, and so on (p. 28). This step led to further refinement of the coding categories.
3. This process was repeated through a final coding conducted by the team leader to help avoid "cherry-picking" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 11) as well as the "cherry-picking charges frequently leveled" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 140) at this type of coding work. This step led to the removal of one code (#8) that was redundant. Coding categories can be viewed in the supplemental PDF.

This qualitative approach comprised of focus groups and discourse analysis yielded five major findings. I will explore these findings below.

Findings & Analysis

Finding #1

Students worry their high school skills will be insufficient in college, but they feel more confident about their writing after the College Writing sequence. However, increased feelings of self-efficacy are undermined by the persistence of other emotional and physical difficulties experienced when writing.

Fall focus groups reveal that most students come to American University with significant concerns about their ability to perform as writers in college and in college writing classes specifically. Even students that feel efficacious about their writing in general are concerned that their abilities and skills won't translate to college. However, the focus groups underscore that by the end of college writing sequence, many students have developed habits of mind associated with increased self-efficacy, that they associate more positive effects and emotions with the experience of writing in college, and that they attribute these gains substantially to what they have learned in the college writing sequence. These findings corroborate the consistent improvement in self-efficacy found in our quantitative analysis.

In the fall, students more often used negative emotional terms to describe their feelings about college writing. There are many succinct and very explicit expressions of this lack of confidence in response to the different questions: "I'm not confident at all." "I'm overwhelmed." "It stresses me out." "[Research is] not a pleasant experience." "I'm super not confident at all." Expressing a related and common sentiment, one student responds, "I'm scared of trying to figure out what the professor wants." Relatedly, many students arrive in the fall evidently overconfident about their writing, as gauged through the disjunction between their perceived self-efficacy and their lack of declarative knowledge and rhetorical-compositional sophistication (this will also be explored under "Finding #5" below).

Coming in, many students are overconfident about what they term "persuasive writing," by which they mean versions of the five-paragraph essay (one student explains that persuasive writing is "basic"). It's clear that students arrive in fall having overlearned the five-paragraph–type

essay. Often, they simply conflate this form with writing in general, and report not being able to conceive of writing outside of it. One student explains in response to Q7:

> honestly, I'm just so used to writing like five-paragraph essay kind of thing. It's not that I want to keep writing that way. I know it's a horrible way to write an actual like real life college level essay. But I'm afraid that I don't entirely know how to not write in that format. And so far, like I don't know if that's going to be taught to us, or just like expected of us to figure it out.

As this quote suggests, there is widespread concern at first that this overlearned form won't translate into the complexities of college writing. For example, one student responds to Q4:

> I feel like for me like I've always been stressed about just following the template cause all my teachers are very like you need it have like this, like this structure, five paragraphs, blah blah blah. And they were more strict on that than you getting your message across, which I know is weird and I always thought that was weird. So, I've always been more stressed about that . . . so, I guess I'm struggling in that way a little bit right now.

This suggests a confused concept of persuasive writing, synonymous with the five-paragraph form, which many students appear to recognize as relatively rote, mechanical, and vacuous compared to the "understanding" that college-level writing entails. Therefore, the confidence students express relative to "persuasive writing" in the fall is frequently chimerical, resting on a very limited notion of persuasion; students have an inchoate understanding of this, leading to a good deal of anxiety about college writing.

Indeed, as the above quotes suggest, anxiety is created precisely because of their inchoate understanding that something is now "different" and that the previous sources of their confidence and self-efficacy may not translate. Another student explains in response to Q7:

> Okay, well I'm going to college. For me, I feel like I'm about to encounter this huge, like, like shift and like how they want us to write it, you know? But like I don't really know what that is. I don't know what that is supposed to look like . . . but yeah, I'm like, I don't really know like what's really stuck, but like I know it's going to have to change.

However, in the spring semester, there's some evident improvement in the emotional and declarative language they use to describe their metacognitive awareness and self-efficacy. In response to Q2, one student describes the fall as being "thrown in the deep end," explaining that by the spring they know how to "swim in the deep end." Consider this encouraging response Q6:

> My overall writing skills have improved, and I've gotten a lot better at revising my own work and stuff. Like that I just feel a lot more confident with my writing, especially because I was really nervous coming into college; I didn't know if my writing was at college level and because I feel more competent with that, I definitely feel like more capable and I could write things like outside of the classroom, if I wanted to.

Of course, not all students feel they made significant gains in all categories; for instance, one student responds to Q1 that they feel "pretty much the same with my skills" about their writing after the sequence; and as we'll see, we found that gains made in self-efficacy are frequently complicated by stagnant or even regressive movement relative to other habits of mind and forms of practice, such as grade orientation and hypostatization. Additionally, in our study gains made in the rhetorical dimensions of writing, specifically, are uneven (if still evidently positive overall), especially when registered in relation to declarative knowledge.

In summary, while there was certainly diversity in student responses, overall, improved self-efficacy prevails. As measured by an increase in coded positive/confident "emotion words/expression" in this study (code #6) in spring focus groups, students especially report feeling more efficacious about their ability to find topics "they actually care about," to do research (see "Finding #2" below), to read scholarly sources, and to write across different genres and different situations, and more. As we've seen through the examples above, many students are aware in the fall that something will have to change for them to succeed as college writers. And encouragingly, for instance, one student reports a "shift in thinking" in response to Q1. This "shift," which many students anticipate in the fall, describes an evident advance in metacognitive and reflective awareness about the complexities of college-level writing.

However, while these gains are certainly encouraging, as we'll see in relation to other findings from the study, we found reason to be concerned about the nature of these efficacies. In some cases, students appear to be becoming more confident, not about a competency in producing the kind of rhetorically effective writing that we strive for as a program, but in translating overlearned forms (e.g., five-paragraph essay) and bad habits (e.g., grade-orientation; a focus on "correct answers") from high school into a new college-level "game." Self-efficacy understood this way might entail, for instance, an increased confidence in going to the professor for the "corrections" that will yield the best possible grade.

Finally, especially in the second year of our study, we saw evidence that gains in other dimensions of the emotional and physical experience of writing overall do not keep pace with gains made in self-efficacy. That is, students report physical and emotional exhaustion at similar rates in the fall and spring semesters. And the rates are high. In the fall focus groups, students frequently expressed exhaustion at the mere thought of writing. They similarly expressed feelings of being underprepared and disadvantaged compared to other students at American University, as well as "imposter syndrome," a prevalent concern that their writing successes are fraudulent. Two students describe the "cringe" involved when sacrificing their own voice to "write for their teacher," or for some other perceived artificial audience/purpose (as with the Common App essay, which two students, in their words, "hated"). In the spring, a student describes the "anger" they feel at having to conform to (to them) arbitrary requirements such as word counts, given that they have "already stated their ideas" and "can't expand." Another feels "deprived of the gift writing has to offer" because they are writing for their professor and for a grade, to which a peer enthusiastically responds, lamenting that they take the "easiest stance" in order to "impress somebody": "I completely agree with that! Every word of that!" In short, students often view their writing successes as inauthentic expressions of both their intellectual and individual realities because writing success means performing for their teacher, and this experience is emotionally and even physically uncomfortable; and while we may already have a sense that students view authenticity in expressivist terms, what's new here is the extent to which this experience of inauthenticity is experienced at an emotional and embodied level. In short, they often feel more efficacious in their ability to do the work, but nevertheless, for various reasons, don't feel good about doing it.

Relatedly, in line with Bandura's (1977) assertion that one's physiological/emotional state is one of the four main sources affecting self-efficacy, we found that a lack of gains in emotional stability and granularity can affect persistence. For example, echoing comments from their peers, one student in the spring reports that they "cry when they have a lot due at once," and this causes them to shut down and "ignore" writing. For this student, the primacy of the embodied and

physical-emotional experience of writing is manifest; they find that they need a snack, or even a nap, as "you have to physically come up with words." Another student comments that no matter the topic, they "definitely don't like writing" because it's "an emotional and physical drain." Because it's emotionally draining, this student notes that writing is much more difficult than taking tests. There is complexity here, too; another student finds emotional release in crying, which then allows them to persist despite a fear of "underperforming." Similarly, students in the spring continue to report high levels of performance related anxiety around writing; one student describes a spiral in which feelings of inadequacy lead to "panic," and sometimes to not completing the assignment. In short, even with gains made in self-efficacy, there are not necessarily improvements made in the embodied experience of writing.

Finding #2

Especially strong improvements in research skills and information literacy are evident.

Students frequently cite improvement in research skills and information literacy as being at the core of their increased self-efficacy. They report both increased skills and confidence in a range of information literacy practices, from heuristics to locating quality sources to an increased ability to read academic sources to being able to synthesize and integrate sources in the increasingly complex ways required of them. "Research is hard," one student states flatly in the fall, as their group describes the simple Google searches they do that tend to pass for research. In the spring, another describes what they learned in the College Writing sequence as being "super helpful" in their major. Students report that hands-on library sessions in particular are useful. This finding corroborates the consistent improvement in self-efficacy found in our quantitative analysis.

The fact that students lack self-efficacy in relation to research and information literacy coming into American University is clear. In response to Q2, one student characterizes research and the library as "scary." Despite some evident overconfidence, this is a common sentiment. Versions of the emotion "overwhelmed" appear frequently. Many forms of anxiety stem from obvious confusion. For instance, some students view the college library, and therefore college research, specifically with finding and reading books; more than one student viewed physical hard-copy books as more "scholarly" and more college level. Additionally, and perhaps relatedly, many students view topics in oddly hypostatized ways, as things to be "found" in the library, reflecting arhetorical "epistemological beliefs" (e.g., Neely, 2016; Perry, 1998) in the objectivity and stability of knowledge. Also, there were individuated concerns, as with a student who expresses specific anxieties related to coming to the university from a "small town" with limited resources. Others report specific concerns, like, "I just feel like JSTOR is overwhelming" because it's "hard to see what you're searching for." And because, as one student puts it in response to Q2, "databases are beyond complicated," incoming students make it very clear that they usually resort to Google searches as their exclusive research strategy.

In the spring, the situation is significantly improved. Students report being more confident reading academic sources and synthesizing research into their writing. Overall, they report overall developing better and more sophisticated research skills and habits while multiplying their affordances. In addition to various analytical and reflective strategies, frequently report increased facility with the databases and overall have a more sophisticated understanding of research. In response to Q1, one student claims that they are "way more comfortable using the library." One student in response to Q2 reports having developed good habits for research as a "muscle memory"

that has enabled them to be "meticulous with my sources" in other classes. However, despite the obvious gains, the Year 2 focus groups revealed that negative emotions associated with research frequently persist in cases where rhetorically naive research habits and epistemological beliefs remain. For instance, one student describes "anxiety" about incorporating research, fearing that they may have "forgot" that they learned some idea from a source that they'd failed to cite, unclear about the boundaries between research and their own original thought. Reflecting the persistence of naive epistemological beliefs, despite increased self-efficacy, many continue to fear that they may not be able to locate or may have missed some of "the research on their topic."

Finding #3

Students struggle with declarative knowledge about argumentation and rhetoric as well as transferring skills from WRT 100 to WRT 101.

Many faculty in our program use the same or similar texts on rhetoric and argumentation, including, especially, Harris' (2017) *Rewriting* and Graff and Birkenstein's (2021) *They Say/I Say*. Surprisingly, even with prompting in spring focus groups, students frequently fail to connect these works on argumentation to other rhetorical concepts, and they frequently struggle overall with declarative knowledge about rhetorical and persuasive terms. One reason appears to be that students usually learn about rhetoric and persuasion in WRT 100, but do not connect that to the work they are doing in WRT 101. One reason that students seem to struggle with declarative knowledge about rhetoric and skill transfer is that they simply don't seem to be making connections between the kinds of rhetorical skills they learn in doing rhetorical analysis, for instance, and the kinds of persuasive skills they learn in Harris (2017) and Graff and Birkenstein (2021), for instance. In fact, with regard to the latter, even in the spring, students frequently view rhetorical knowledge as knowledge related to a specific genre of writing, the "rhetorical analysis" (or forms of literary analysis they learned in high school). Some do not seem capable of applying these same skills to other situations or to their own writing (or aware that they should), and the data suggests that sometimes increases in confidence with regard to persuasive and rhetorical strategies may therefore hinge more on increased efficacy in writing that "mutt genre" of "rhetorical analysis," specifically, as opposed to learning the lessons of rhetorical thinking that genre is meant to inculcate. This lack of declarative knowledge is evident seemingly regardless of self-efficacy, although it was more striking where they reported more confidence.

Failing to make these connections, discouragingly, students report that they are likely to turn back to the scholastic five-paragraph–type form and strategies that they know work for them. They feel like this strategy works for them, at least well-enough to collect the grade they seek. And even where rhetorical concepts are evoked, it is often in relatively unsophisticated ways. For example, one student took the cue with regard to discussing what they learned about rhetoric in College Writing classes by listing concepts from Graff and Birkenstein (2021). This declarative knowledge distinguished this student; and yet, they reported "adding" moves from Graff and Bikenstein (2021) in revision to fulfill the requirements of the class and assignment—a decided *arhetorical* approach to the use of rhetorical concepts. Relatedly, another student in the spring naively views rhetoric as diction, or "fine tuning," during revision. In short, where teachers don't offer students to practice rhetorical skills by confronting different rhetorical situations, assignments may in fact form a blockage to their development of metacognition and self-efficacy.

Finding #4

Student self-efficacy and motivation to improve appear closely linked to the quality of the student-teacher relationship and extrinsic motivation. Students tend to cite WSP teachers positively in developing self-efficacy.

One especially interesting finding is that if students report a strong relationship with their teacher—and to a lesser extent a strong respect or regard for the quality of their teacher independent of their relationship—they also report increased self-efficacy. Students are simply more motivated to work and improve if they report these kinds of relationships; this in turn leads to evidently increased feelings of self-efficacy. Perhaps no comment captures this idea better than the student who, in response to Q5, declared that their teacher's personality was "the reason we all tried so hard," claiming that she wanted to "show the professor that I was learning from him." Other students described the motivating and productive potential of both student-teacher relationships and teacher personality in similar terms. Furthermore, students report that relationship-acquired efficacy *transfers to other classes and writing situations*, simultaneously increasing intrinsic motivation in general.

Indeed, having formed a connection with their teacher, students report different versions of "hearing the voice of their teacher" as a transferable, productive, and motivating knowledge. The significance of the forms of extrinsic motivation glimpsed in the student-teacher relationship are also clearly evident in the fall, and students with strong self-efficacy often attribute their confidence to high school teachers. As one student says, "I had teachers that were really supportive, and that's one way my writing really flourished, is when it's like I trusted them, and I felt comfortable taking risks and tried to build upon their writing." Conversely, in response to Q5 in the spring, one student claimed that in a particularly "boring" college writing class, "students just didn't click with [the teacher] and didn't want to be there." And as a result, while this student "wanted to be enthusiastic . . . at the same time it felt wrong to do that." That the difficulty the teacher had connecting with the class produced an environment where it felt "wrong" to be enthusiastic about learning speaks strongly to the significance students place both on the student-teacher relationship, and to the embodied classroom experience, where mood precedes experience.

It was even the case that, where declarative rhetorical knowledge was evident, it was in non-negligible coincidence with a reported strong student-teacher relationship. For example, one student commented in response to Q6 in the spring that their teacher "was able to really help me with revisions and making sure I enjoyed the writing process, so when I'm writing revisions now, really in any class, I always kind of have his voice in the back of my head." When asked what kinds of things that voice said, the student enthusiastically (and encouragingly) claimed that it better allowed them to achieve their rhetorical "purpose"; and interestingly, in explaining this relationship, the student, channeling the voice of their teacher, demonstrated further declarative knowledge in referencing "counterargument" or "naysayer"—one of only a few students in the spring to do so. In this case, a strong student-teacher relationship led to one of the clearest examples of declarative knowledge.

At the same time, even students that report substantially using teacher and peer feedback to revise *still* view revision in terms of correctness; that is, viewing feedback as directive, they report only revising according to the explicit "corrections" their teachers (especially) suggest. Furthermore, students also report ignoring feedback that isn't specifically directive, and they don't see the value in that feedback. One student, in discussing the significance of student-teacher

relationships, reduced their self-efficacy to a kind of advantage in getting their teachers in general to "tell you what you need to do." One ties their increased sense of self-efficacy to their discovery "you can apply what you learned [about finding the answer that "the teacher wants"] from one relationship to another"—not the kind of transfer we were hoping for! This ability to extract directive feedback from teachers can indeed lead to increased self-efficacy and feelings that the student now better understands how to get by in college, but for dubious reasons. Furthermore, this fact may complicate any simple characterization of the significance of a strong student-teacher relationship. For example, ample and well-timed feedback can actually work against gains in metacognition and self-efficacy, as teachers potentially and *unwittingly reinforce* a naive view of writing and rhetoric.

Related to the forms of extrinsic motivation in the student-teacher relationship is the value of intrinsic motivation relative to course topic in the WRT 101 class. We found that course topic represents a similar, if lesser, effect on motivation leading to transferable self-efficacy. As one student notes, their confidence "completely depends on the class," especially the class topic or theme. Intrinsic motivation as a personal interest in a class or topic can even work to mitigate negative and debilitating feelings about writing; as one student puts it, they're "scared of being judged," but like writing "when it comes from the heart." The theme of topic interest as motivator is prevalent in both fall and spring. We also found that students frequently specifically cite the writing prompt as a source of their experience. As one student comments in the fall, if the assignment/prompt is "boring," I will "probably write it the night before" and "only revise it two times." A student in the spring similarly argues simply that it's "frustrating" having to write when they're not interested in the class/prompt.

In Year 2, new findings about the role of the teacher in extrinsic motivation helped shed light on the persistence of negative emotions about writing (as measured by only slight gains in the quantitative analysis). Specifically, further evidence showed the multiple ways students view their self-efficacy in relation to their teachers, and that it's "dependent on what others say," as one student puts it. Having confirmed our findings from Year 1, in Year 2, we gained further insight into how the teacher-student relationship develops indirectly through various forms of classroom communication, like feedback and essay prompts. We found that these classroom documents and practices are emotionally charged. Many students express a relation between their confidence about writing and the feedback they receive from their professor, which lets them know if they are, as one student says, "on the right track." One student, lacking confidence, expresses the attendant anxiety about feedback in the fall: "What will the teacher think? What will my grade be?" For another student, anxiety adheres to reading essay prompts, which is where they view the professor as communicating "what they want." This student describes being "really scared" about misinterpreting the prompt and consequently letting their professor down. Another student similarly mentions a fear of "underperforming" for their teacher because of difficulties interpreting their teacher's desires.

Both the positive effects of extrinsic motivation, and these negative feelings, it appears, are tied to a reduced understanding students have about our pedagogical goals broadly and the rhetorical situation of the college writing classroom specifically. That is, our study found that even where there are gains in self-efficacy, students frequently retain naive epistemological beliefs about learning, viewing assignments as having a "correct answer" that their teachers both point to through materials and feedback and adjudicate through grades. As we saw in Finding #1, it may be

the case that a persistence in this *habitus* complicates any gains made in self-efficacy, reinforcing the negative emotional disposition so many students have towards writing. Put differently, gains in self-efficacy owing to student-teacher relationships may reflect students' increased confidence that they can "play the game" of figuring out "what the teacher wants" in order to achieve the desired grades.

We can further understand students' emotional relation to classroom materials and assignments in these terms—there's reason to believe that students gain in self-efficacy where the teacher's language is clear and directive. But the dynamics of this gain are complicated: while some students clearly become more efficacious writers by developing these ecological (e.g., Cooper, 1986) relationships, gains made by "grade-oriented" students in these same terms may reinforce epistemic beliefs about learning formed in the testing environment of high school. Furthermore, it's likely these gains are complicated by demographic. For example, although we did not collect demographic information for our focus groups, our undergraduate population has a relatively large international population (15.8%), and these students may have a different relationship with teacher authority that would affect these findings.

Finding #5

Students still often retain naive scholastic epistemic beliefs about writing and rhetoric overlearned in high school.

Authentic growth will require that students move beyond ideas, skills, habits, and practices that they *overlearned* in the (often) artificial grade- and test-oriented composing environment of the high school classroom. But our data shows that most students, even after the College Writing sequence, hold strong to a belief that there is something like a "correct answer" to writing. This begins with finding the "correct" topic and locating the "correct" research for that topic, and then finding the "correct" words.

For instance, consider this exchange from a fall focus group: "I think once I have like a decent topic, I feel pretty confident in finding it, but I didn't like enjoy the topic or I didn't understand it and then it would be a lot harder, if that makes sense." A second student then adds:

> Yeah. I think for me it depends on how much I already know about it cause then I know where to look. So, if I know more about the topic beforehand, I feel pretty confident because I know the resources I can find and the information I can be looking for. But if it's something I've never heard of, I typically get a lot of anxiety about it because I didn't know where to look to find the research.

A third student then responded: "every paper I've ever written, I always feel worried about getting enough research. That's just me personally, but they never truly feel confident until I'm in the thick of it and I know how much there is. But initially I'm pretty worried about it." This hypostatized view of writing—that each topic somehow correlates to some basically stable body of research that students need to find—is prevalent. As a result of this epistemic belief, students report that they privilege topics that they are already familiar with because they know how to "find" the (hypostatized) research for that topic. Another consequence of this perspective is that students frequently report avoiding risks by returning to topics that they are already familiar with. In these ways, self-efficacy frequently increases as students realize they can remain entrenched in previously held epistemic beliefs.

At the same time, as I began to elaborate in Finding #1, a major concern of students in both the fall and spring is that college writing—which forces them to find the "right answer" through foreign strategies, practices, and forms of expression—will diminish their own "voice." That is, for instance, if they need to find the "right topic," they will need to express ideas that are not their own; and if they need to find the "right words," they will need to locate words that are not their own. In other words, students reason that when teachers tell them that their style is not appropriate for a certain kind of paper, that the problem is that they didn't give the correct "answer" vis-a-vis style (conceived mostly as diction). But they wonder, isn't what they've produced *their unique* style? That is, as long as their writing is grammatical (i.e., "correct"), why should they have to change their style, which probably can't be changed anyways given that it's a function of their unique voice?

One student puts it thusly in the fall in response to Q7:

> One of the problems that I seem to face a lot in high school writing was a teacher not like liking my style of writing. Um, and I could never really pinpoint what my style of writing was, but I was told by some of my teachers . . . that my style of writing didn't work for why I was writing. I never understood that. And I always thought that style was just such a personal thing that you can't really change. Like if there's no like grammatical or rhetorical flaws with it, like, how can it be wrong?

Even in the spring, focus groups students still frequently clung to these same epistemic beliefs, an expressive view of writing in understood in competing terms of authenticity and correctness. From this perspective, revision is reduced to the use of Grammarly to locate "errors"—an application most students evidently use—and this, coupled with the teacher's "corrections," should be enough to produce "correct" writing. Indeed, in the spring, students still frequently report continued difficulties with higher-order revision, and explicitly seek and value directive feedback from teachers that addresses their writing at lower levels. This approach is closely related to a clear *grade orientation* that potentially blocks metacognitive development in making use of feedback and revising (Q5 and Q6). Quite justly, these students frequently report frustration with feedback given after grading; in fact, this kind of feedback may even result in decreased self-efficacy. As one student states in response to Q5, "I don't know how to take this and make this writing stronger because nothing will fix the grade I got on it."

The good news is that reported gains made in self-efficacy mean that many students do indeed develop metacognitive habits that reflect in increasingly complex (and emotionally sophisticated) thinking about the writing process, suggesting in some cases an increased habits of openness (even an increased openness) to learning. However, again, especially when in doubt, many turn back to overlearned reductive strategies, including familiar topics and the five-paragraph form; indeed, they report that they will reuse topics, and even research, from high school and/or other classes. And because they have overlearned writing practices in response to a high school test and grade orientation that inculcates these perspectives and practices, students also express a tendency to adapt habits and strategies they've been rewarded for in the past to all new situations—indeed, problematically, many students tie their increases in self-efficacy to realizing that they can succeed in college by adapting those habits. And even where students report increased self-efficacy, this is tensed against evident anxiety that these strategies overlearned in high school might not work. The evidence furthermore suggests that persistence in an overlearned high school habitus might

sometimes not only block metacognitive development, but also emotional and dispositional development.

As noted above, while the quantitative analysis demonstrates consistent gains across semesters in self-efficacy, our questions measuring the emotional and embodied experience of writing showed less (or no) gain and significantly lower scores overall. The qualitative analysis allowed us to see that where our students express rigid and arhetorical views of writing, this rigidity is often accompanied, as might be predicted, by a fear of failure. This fear, in turn, seems to block the development of a more flexible, rhetorical *habitus* likely needed to alter the fearful disposition. That is, although the extrinsic motivation of getting a good grade (a grade orientation) is evidently frequently dominant in shaping our students' emotional-embodied experience, the qualitative analysis suggests that, even where it results in increased efficacy (often determined by good grades), *negative motivation*—a fear of failure and humiliation—shapes both an intellectual and emotional disposition to writing that blocks authentic learning. Put differently, the desire to avoid failure tends to hypostatize writing and ossify affective dispositions in a vicious cycle. In these ways, even students that suggested increased self-efficacy report being prone to struggle with the emotional experience of writing. In short, where efficaciousness is imagined in relation to a grade orientation, there are not necessarily gains made in the emotional and dispositional experience of writing.

For example, we noticed that naive epistemic beliefs appear associated both with a lack of metacognitive development and negative emotions. One student describes the pain of being "bullied" by a teacher that didn't respect their authentic voice; another describes a fear that the teacher making fun of their work with their spouse; another, claiming that their fear of writing has increased during the year, is afraid of peer review and discovering that their work "doesn't sound as intellectual [as their peers']." A student describes "stress dreams" because of their fear of being viewed as "less than perfect." The persistence of an overlearned epistemic belief about learning as the pursuit of the correct answer—perhaps even the pursuit of perfection itself—thereby helps us to understand the various forms of anxiety students experience around experiences of failure.

While this dispositional tendency is prevalent, it is not, of course, shared by all students. For example, a couple students in the spring enthusiastically described assignments where, as one puts it, "they can mess up without fear of penalty." Describing the benefits of "productive failure," these students clearly saw the value of taking risks to learning and growth, a strong sign, we believe, of metacognitive growth.

Conclusion

It's long been presumed that increases in self-efficacy are correlated with other "habits of mind," including more effective metacognitive strategies that will enable writing skills to transfer to different situations (Bandura, 1977; Beaufort, 2007; Driscoll & Wells 2012; Flower & Hayes, 1984; Khost, 2017; Zimmerman, 2002). Similarly, it's long been understood that high self-efficacy is associated with more productive habits of mind and more positive emotional dispositions towards writing tasks: "students with high self-efficacy are more likely than students with low self-efficacy to self-regulate their own learning" (Bandura, 1977, p. 434), to work hard, to be persistent when faced with obstacles, and to feel less anxious about the work they need to do (Zimmerman, 2002). Students with low self-efficacy may perceive work to be harder than it actually is, which can cause negative emotions such as stress and depression" (Driscoll & Wells, 2012). Our findings offer

some further evidence that these otherwise clear relations may sometimes be more complicated than they appear on the surface. We found that, for some students at least, the development of self-efficacy does not necessarily correlate to the development of more sophisticated epistemological beliefs—beliefs about how learning happens—nor the development of rhetorically effective "writing dispositions" (Driscoll & Wells, 2012), habits of mind, or what Michelle Neely (2016) calls "rhetorical beliefs." And as we saw in the last section, high self-efficacy isn't even always associated with more positive embodied-emotional experiences or dispositions.

Additionally, while we have no reason to contest that students with low self-efficacy struggle more than others with the emotional experience of writing, others have found that students with low self-efficacy improve as much or more in the development of the writing habits we hope to inculcate. Our study therefore supports the counter-intuitive assessment findings of Mitchell et al. (2017), who demonstrate that lower writing self-efficacy and higher anxiety can actually be associated effective help-seeking behaviors. Conversely, as they argue, students with high self-efficacy are less likely to go beyond their professor to seek help. While these behaviors may be immediately effective, they may also reinforce a grade-seeking disposition, naive epistemic beliefs, and disrupt the formation of more sophisticated rhetorical habits.

Complexity theory (e.g., Dobrin, 2011; Hawk, 2007; Taylor, 2001) describes the concept of the "strange loop." Like a Mobius Strip, Klein bottle, or Escher drawing, the strange loop has no top or bottom, no inside or outside. There is no clear hierarchy; its form is self-organizing and always becoming. In a strange loop, effects appear disproportionate to their causes. In short, in analyzing focus group data, we noticed that the form of the strange loop often characterizes increases in student self-efficacy. That is, we noticed that gains made in self-efficacy are fundamentally complex, and don't always seem to follow a linear developmental path—things are not always as they appear. Adding to the complexity, the results varied according to different measures of self-efficacy; for example, the relationship between gains made in self-efficacy with regard to information literacy had a different character than gains made with regard to rhetorical awareness.

Ultimately, we learned that reported gains in self-efficacy are often tied to a perceived facility with executing over-learned and reductive writing models, and also to a grade-orientation that produces "what the teacher wants"—in short, a perceived ability to more efficaciously draw on previously learned strategies to produce essays that are a "correct" response. This is sometimes called "over-efficaciousness." In this way, many students view writing assignments much as they do tests, which is perhaps not surprising given the relations between high school writing pedagogy and high-stakes testing. Writing viewed this way, we found, begins with finding the "correct" topic, locating the "correct" research for that topic, and then finding the "correct" words. We found that this "ossification" (Anson, 2016) leads not only to blockages with regard to the openness (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) that characterizes learning, but also to the use of recycled topics, recycled research—in general, a turn to those old reductive strategies (such as the five-paragraph essay) many students "know works" for achieving the desired outcome (the grade).

These findings led to important conversations in our program. Instead of simply telling a straightforward story of linear cause-effect improvement in self-efficacy, the qualitative analysis instead prompted conversations about what self-efficacy is in the first place and the complexity involved in learning in general. As Jonathan Alexander (2016) discovered in his attempts to "queer" assessment processes, our data complicated any normative account of learning and instead provoked "a broad set of conversations about what writing is, what we wanted our students to

understand about writing, and . . . what our students could teach us about writing from their perspectives" (p. 204). The conversations are still continuing in our program across committees, but one outcome is an increased emphasis on demands that our courses explicitly reinforce the rhetorical skills learned in WRT 100 in WRT 101. Another outcome has been to lend further support to teachers interested in going "gradeless."

It's in these terms that I would like to emphasize the value of using assessment as an opportunity to *formally* listen to and learn from students. To our Assessment Committee, this suggests the value of complicating the usual forms of assessment with qualitative strategies such as focus groups. I'm reminded of Alexander's (2016) point that assessment is rarely as straightforward as it appears and is always "full of twists and turns" (p. 202). In our case, the gains made in self-efficacy evident in our quantitative analysis appeared, for the most part, to be straightforwardly positive. At the same time, in asserting the value of focus groups for doing this work, I would also like to conclude recognizing some limitations of this method. Above all, we had no way to correlate responses to different variables, such as gender, race, and class, to the responses. Our qualitative assessment, on the other hand, allowed us to gain substantial correlational data. And even if we were to devise ethical methods that allowed focus group participants to identify themselves, we would have run into even stronger sample size concerns than those already evident in this study. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, we hope that we've positively contributed to realizing the goal in the 2022 CCCC Position Statement to better honor language diversity and to make assessment more equitable by attuning to our student's voices from the "bottom-up."

It was only through the qualitative analysis that we were able to discern that evident gains made towards self-efficacy did not always pertain to the actual skills and habits our program attempts to inculcate. In short, the use of focus groups revealed a strange loop of self-efficacy that blurred the relationship between cause and effect. More specifically, even as the quantitative data appears to show a linear relationship between our pedagogical interventions and improved self-efficacy, we discovered reason for concern in the unanticipated, complex, and problematic ways that the self-efficacy outcome relates to those interventions. It is in this spirit of complexity that I believe that focus groups and discourse analysis can be a vital strategy for programmatic assessment.

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