Writing Self-Efficacy and Performance Among Students in an Online Doctoral Program

Erin Breitenbach, A.T. Still University, USA*

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3780-7783

Katherine Adler, Missouri State University, USA

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7238-008X

Vanessa Pazdernik, A.T. Still University, USA

ABSTRACT

Writing an argument is an essential skill for doctoral students in achieving academic and occupational success. Writing an argument effectively requires the ability to use correct writing mechanics, but doctoral students may tend to think their writing mechanics are better than they are, and their ability to write an argument effectively may be compromised as a result. At one university, this gap between student perceptions of their ability to write and their writing performance appeared to exist. A study was conducted to determine whether there was a mismatch between perceived writing self-efficacy and writing performance. Study results showed that higher perceived writing self-efficacy seems to be associated with certain mechanical writing errors, including wordiness and inaccurate grammar. Knowing this mismatch between writing self-efficacy and writing performance may exist is important (1) for students in terms of their awareness and (2) for tertiary educators to better target tertiary writing interventions.

KEYWORDS

Doctoral Students, Graduate Students, Perceived Writing Self-Efficacy, Writing, Writing Performance

INTRODUCTION

Writing an argument is an essential skill for doctoral students in achieving academic and occupational success. First, writing is the basis on which their degree is awarded. The ability to write well is one of the most important tools for success for graduate research candidates (Badenhorst & Guerin, 2015; Simpson et al., 2016). Second, writing in a grammatically correct, clear, correctly punctuated, and well-structured manner is an essential skill for any professional (Ferguson, 2009; Law & Baer, 2012; Varelas et al., 2015), whether they work in academia or industry. Therefore, graduates of doctoral programs higher education institutions should be expected to demonstrate clear and effective mastery of the mechanics of writing (Duchardt et al., 2016) to package and deliver their words effectively. Students are finding more and more access to artificial intelligence tools that are intended to improve

*Corresponding Author

writing, but if a student feels they are a good writer (whether or not they are), will they utilize available resources to improve?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing grammatically correct, clear, correctly punctuated, and well-structured text is a valuable skill. However, employers reportedly have a difficult time finding qualified candidates who can write clearly, which is an essential skill for graduates in the 21st Century (Holland, 2013; Schartel et al., 2019). Interestingly, "academic writing…is gaining recognition as an area that all students need support in, regardless of linguistic or educational background" (Wilmot, 2018, p. 258). In 2006, the Chronicle of Higher Education published a study indicating that college professors felt students were unprepared for college-level writing. If students entering college have limited writing skills, students' likelihood of success in academic writing activities is low (Sanoff, 2006). Poor writing skills have implications for students in terms of their professional careers. Schartel, Dunn, and Lane (2019) found, in their research, that supervisors felt recent graduates were ill prepared in terms of writing skills, grammar, and proofreading skills. In this same study, supervisors rated proofreading and correct grammar at a higher importance than interns (Schartel et al., 2019).

Some researchers have related the lack of writing skills to the proliferation of social technologies and casual communication formats such as texting and instant messaging. In particular, grammatical mistakes in formal writing have been significantly related to the use of social technologies (Purcell et al., 2013; Shafi et al., 2010; Turner, 2009). As students tend to use these same casual communication formats in writing assignments, providing students with feedback on their writing is necessary for improvement. The form of this feedback can vary, including writing improvement strategies and online grammar checkers. With this said, understanding the extent of poor writing among doctoral students, perceived writing self-efficacy, writing improvement strategies, and online grammar checkers can offer an option to students as a means of assessing the accuracy of their written work.

Extent of the Problem in Doctoral Students

Proficiency in basic writing composition is an expectation of doctoral students. It is also generally assumed that these students will already be relatively skilled writers when they enter a doctoral program. Yet, many doctoral students lack writing abilities, even though a written culminating project (i.e., dissertation, thesis, or capstone) is the primary medium of assessment in a doctoral program. In the online environment, a lack of writing skills is a particularly troubling issue since writing is the primary communication medium. Even online course discussions are done in writing. In other words, "students writing abilities become magnified in digital submissions" (Duchardt et al., 2016, p. 467).

Research has shown that undergraduate college students can lack strong writing skills (Carnes et al., 2015) and that grammar skills may even decline among some undergraduate college students during the time they are in college (Willis et al., 2012). Where undergraduate and graduate students are expected to achieve a mastery level between 90-100% in their writing of complete and complicated sentences, Duchardt et al. (2016) found that 60% of undergraduate and graduate students did not write complete sentences, 73% could not master complicated sentences, and 60% could not master punctuating complicated sentences correctly. In fact, it is possible that poor writing skills among doctoral students originate at an early age. Writing is not a part of the national reform movement in the United States and is not emphasized in secondary schools (Graham, 2009). In 2011, the Nation's Report Card indicated that only 24% of students in grades 8 and 12 were proficient in writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). This 2011 assessment was the most recent of this kind for which results are provided online. Furthermore, English composition classes at institutions of higher education tend to focus on content and creativity rather than essential writing skills such as structure and grammar (Fields & Hatala, 2014). Deductively speaking, poor writing mechanics preclude one's

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