Graduate's Writing, Anxiety, Self-Efficacy, and Possible Solutions

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Abstract

Graduate students face writing anxiety and low self-efficacy regarding writing research papers. Holladay (1981) addressed the negative characteristics of anxiety in graduate students by writing: "They are frightened by a demand for writing competency, they fear evaluation of their writing because they think they will be rated negatively, they avoid writing whenever possible, and when they are forced to write, they behave destructively" (as cited in Holmes, Waterbury, Battrinic, & Davis, 2018, p. 66). This chapter identifies several situations and repeating themes associated with writing anxiety, causes of low self-efficacy in research writing, and illustrates positive results from programs offered to assist graduate students in research paper writing.

Keywords: *Graduate Students; Writing anxiety; Writing self-efficacy; Graduate Writing*

"Most graduate students come to their programs not knowing academic writing; however, most graduate programs expect them to know academic writing" (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2016, p. 162). Writing can be a cumbersome task for students, especially when they have developed poor techniques and habits and use misguided information throughout the writing process, which generates anxiety and low self-efficacy.

Anxiety is an "emotional factor" and "can be considered a consequence of low self-efficacy," according to Stewart, Seifert, and Rolheiser (2015, p. 5). Anxiety can bring positive results by bringing about motivation and performances due to "fear of failure" as well as becoming detrimental and "debilitating" which "leads to poor grades" (Stewart et al., 2015, p. 5). Anxiety can bring about "unpleasant feelings, nervousness, and tension, as well as unproductive writing approaches like avoidance, withdrawal, and procrastination" (Stewart et al., 2015, p. 5).

Self-efficacy, an important factor that education has used to measure outcomes (Holden, Barker, Meenaghan, & Rosenberg, 1999, p. 463), involves "the extent to which students are confident about carrying out different research tasks, from library research to designing and implementing practical research projects" (Lei, 2008, p. 668). Another practical definition of research self-efficacy is "the degree to which an individual believes he or she has the ability to complete research tasks, is thought to affect the initiation and persistence of research behaviors." (Bard, Bieschke, Herbert, & Eberz, 2000, p. 48).

Graduate students are no exception to this. Graduate students "see themselves neither as competent writers nor as active participants in the scholarly exchange of their chosen field" (McMillen, Garcia, & Bolin, 2010, p. 428). The National Commission on Writing (2003) estimated that "fifty percent of freshmen make serious grammatical mistakes in their academic papers and only 30% of postgraduate students understand why their thesis should include a critique of the existing literature on a topic" (Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2016, p. 160). Research suggests that students have developed these issues and have a lack of appropriate writing

strategies from earlier childhood education that, ultimately, they bring to higher education settings. Other researchers have written about graduate students' writing anxiety.

Contemporary Issues in Graduate Studies

Holmes et al. (2018) wrote that a few common themes emerged throughout their study including: "lack of confidence in scholarly writing ability, lack of time to dedicate to writing tasks, lack of skills in identifying and utilizing scholarly resources, and institutions sharing the responsibility for improving graduate student writing" (p. 68). An article by the University of Texas Writing Center "identified several situations" that generate anxiety in graduate students including; "adapting to a new style of writing, thinking about criticism received on writing in the past, tight deadlines for the submission of the writing assignment, and not clearly and completely understanding the writing assignment" (n.d.).

Methods to Lessen Anxiety and Increase Self-Efficacy

Many methods have been explored for improving graduate students' scholarly writing, although few have been researched. Approaches have included stand-alone writing courses, embedding writing into early courses, writing buddies, and providing writing handouts, among others.

Students come to graduate school with preexisting emotions and opinions regarding writing and their abilities. According to Stewart et al. (2015), reducing anxiety and increasing anxiety has a "statistical significant association with students' perceptions of using metacognitive writing strategies" (p. 4). The writing approaches brought out by metacognition in graduate school, allows students to acquire "new and more effective strategies" (Stewart et al., 2015, p. 3).

Bair and Mader (2013) postulated that "we cannot leave the development of graduate writing to chance … it needs to be infused into the curriculum, introduced early and revisited in more complex ways" (p. 10). With lack of time as a contributing factor to writing anxiety in graduate students, they have intertwined academic writing in an already established curriculum throughout a program, which is a great opportunity for students to build self-efficacy over time. Bair and Mader strongly advise students to take core courses early in the degree and expand the timespan for the capstone thesis from one to two semesters, as well as exploring ways to embed theory, research and academic-writing skills throughout each course in the emphasis area.

Some universities, such as Kansas University, have developed in-depth programs. Sundstrom (2014) compared the different offerings such as interdisciplinary courses offered to only international students, handbooks on graduate writing, and offering graduate writing courses. Sundstrom stated, "These offerings by other institutions testify to the need for graduate writing instruction that is anything but remedial" (p. 2). The program offered at Kansas University instructs students to research their genre-specific field, while the students are going about doing the research as well as give feedback to the students (Sundstrom, 2014, p. 2).

Plakhotnik and Rocco (2016) created a series of workshops based on the Vopat's writing circles for children, which help students learn how to write, edit, and publish on a variety of topics (2016). In this study, researchers concluded that "a learning practice that works for children is

not always easy to translate into adult learning environments(s)" (p. 165). Holmes et al. (2018) provided focus groups of students an opportunity to give suggestions to strategies for institutions to strengthen graduate writing. Their suggestions included: "providing more one-on-one writing interaction with instructors focused on writing, having writing resources readily available outside of the formal classroom, providing research tools for graduate students early in program studies, and requiring a writing orientation for graduate students upon entry into graduate study" (p. 69).

A series of workshops can be an opportunity to provide research tools, encourage peer review and feedback, provide mentorship from facilitators, as well as instill a positive direction to creating stronger scholarly writers. The idea of workshops does not address the lack of time. Therefore, the facilitators would have to take into consideration the appropriate amount of time and frequency, media devices, as well as the students' needs and preferences. Before taking research courses, students come with preexisting emotions and opinions on research writing. Simon Lei (2008) stated that these negative attitudes toward research impact the amount of effort the students will put into their research (p. 668).

Summary

The implications of improper writing strategies, misconceptions from previous education, anxiety, and low self-efficacy can be detrimental to graduate students, and baggage brought from earlier experiences and doing research writing can be a daunting challenge. Institutions can help alleviate and resolve some of these issues graduate students are facing by carefully observing curriculum design and implementing changes to foster strong scholarly practices for graduate students. The results are an increase in graduate students' self-efficacy and reduced writing anxiety. Some of the most notable factors are facilitators' beliefs in graduate writing, facilitators' professional weaknesses, the institution's culture and mission, as well as already practiced curriculum.

Whether the issue has been generated by poorly developed techniques and habits over time, misinterpreted information, writing anxiety, or low self-efficacy, graduate students should be given the opportunity to build upon their writing skills through structured environments provided by their respective graduate programs or colleges. As with most teaching methods, there is no single fix for every learner. Whether writing workshops, a stand-alone writing course, infusing writing instruction into one or more content courses, the use of rubrics provided prior to the writing assignment, writing circles, helpful handouts, or any other method, with a little help, students can reduce their stress, increase their overall self-efficacy, and ignite an interest in scholarly writing. As Stewart et al. (2015) highlighted: "Care must be taken to assess writing approaches across a variety of contexts rather than extending the conclusions drawn from a single context to an entire institution or collection of institutions" (p. 3).

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