Social learning theory and academic writing in graduate studies

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* has reported a median of 50% for dropout rates in doctoral programs, all disciplines combined (OECD, 2019). Among reasons for not graduating, PhD students identify a lack of experience and competencies with academic writing, impeding on their progression as students, but also as novice scholars (Litalien & Guay, 2015). Indeed, graduate students are required to undergo professional socialization, by engaging with other scholars, to learn the norms and practices of their respective research fields (Skakni, 2011). This paper aims at communicating preliminary results from a doctoral research to provide a greater understanding of peer learning in academic writing groups organized by Master's and PhD students. The social learning theory developed by Bandura (1971) is used as a foundation to our study, with its self-efficacy concept at the forefront of our theoretical framework. In that regard, PhD students can develop confidence in their abilities to successfully complete writing projects based on four sources of influence: mastery experiences; vicarious experiences; social persuasion; and physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 2019). While studying a learning community composed of 4,000 graduate students, as an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995), we conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 PhD students, followed by a content analysis of transcripts using a qualitative data analysis software (NVivo12). Participants representing 12 Canadian universities and 14 scholarly disciplines shared significant learning experiences related to all four self-efficacy sources of influence. Of particular interest, findings revealed that PhD students gathering in public places (cafes, libraries, coworking spaces, museums, parks) increased their self-efficacy through peer learning (exchanging, observing, modelling). These results are presented with a view of recommending valuable strategies to develop academic writing competencies through social actions led by graduate students, in conjunction with institutional support in the context of higher education.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* has reported alarming dropout rates of 50% in doctoral studies, all disciplines combined (OECD, 2019). Among reasons for not completing study programs, PhD students identify actual or perceived deficiencies in writing abilities, which not only impede their progression as students, but also as novice scholars (Litalien & Guay, 2015). Since academic writing competencies are not necessarily taught in a deliberate fashion to graduate[1] students (Kapp, 2015), PhD students can suffer from the imposter syndrome, feeling like they do not possess the intellectual capabilities, in comparison to their peers, to successfully complete their study program (Burchelle-Reyes, 2021). Therefore, the professional socialization of graduate students is essential to help them learn the norms and practices of their respective research fields by engaging with other scholars (Skakni, 2011). As such, academic writing groups are recognized to facilitate the development of writing competencies, all the while, enhancing perseverance in graduate studies (Murray, 2015). More specifically, Ferguson (2009) asserts that dissertation writing groups formed exclusively of doctoral students offer practical and psychological advantages by reinvigorating productivity, resulting in increased motivation and self-confidence. This paper communicates results from an ongoing doctoral study on social learning in academic writing groups to provide a greater understanding of how PhD students develop writing self-efficacy.

Academic writing groups in higher education

The socialization of PhD students rests on a proactive posture consisting in developing strategies depending on individual interests, aptitudes, and circumstances (Vezina 2016). In that regard, a multitude of options exist for those who wish to join academic writing groups as a mean to progress their writing projects. The *writing retreats* represent an opportunity to disengage from everyday routine, by traveling to a location more or less isolated, where participants fully commit to intensive writing activities over a previously set period (Kornhaber et al., 2016; Murray & Newton, 2009). The *writing teams* are composed of experienced scholars and/or novice scholars meeting at regular intervals over a set period to write in a shared space and offer each other feedback on their respective written products (Aitchison, 2009). The *writing workshops* consist of professional development sessions during which participants receive guidance from an expert to improve their academic writing competencies (Larcombe et al., 2007). The *writing spaces* are physical environments set up to support academic writing activities where participants can go if they wish to benefit from optimal writing conditions (Pigg 2014). The *writing cafes* draw their name from existing businesses (serving hot beverages) in a region where participants invite each other to meet at proximity of

their residences to write at their convenience (Mewburn et al., 2014). The *digital writing platforms* offer opportunities for participants to collaborate online by means of virtual applications to integrate technology enthusiasts, individuals from remote locations or those unable to leave their homes to write in the presence of others (Beutel et al., 2010; Jolly et al., 2020). Irrespective of the selection, all academic writing groups are based on the same central perspective: writing is a social activity (Bruffee, 1986).

Social learning in PhD programs

The social learning theory was developed by Albert Bandura (1971), a Canadian psychologist interested in learning resulting from the observation of others and the consequences of their behaviors. When applied to an educative environment, this theory provides a foundation to explain how students develop the capacity to maximize effective behaviors leading to successful academic outcomes. Interested in performances related to academic writing, we chose a core concept inherent to the overarching theory, named *self-efficacy*, and defined by Huerta et al. (2017) as "the belief in one's capability (or confidence) to write in a given situation" (p. 171). With this definition in mind, PhD students can develop confidence in their abilities to successfully complete writing projects based on four sources of influence: mastery experiences; vicarious experiences; social persuasion; and physiological and emotional states (Bandura, 2019). In other words, students are more apt to reach their goals if they already succeeded at a task, if they witness someone else succeeding, if they are told by someone of significance that they possess the capability to succeed, or if they find themselves in physiological and emotional states conducive to success.

In regard to *mastery experiences*, they represent the source of information having the greater influence on the representation that an individual can make of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2003). Basically, an effective performance is not only dependent on one's knowledge of procedures and strategies to complete a task, but also on the individuals' assurance that they are the masters of their own actions (Flavell, 1970). For example, if a PhD student successfully published a first article in a peer-reviewed journal, this successful performance will boost their confidence to engage in other publication processes.

In the absence of previous experiences with a specific task, *vicarious experiences* are of particular importance (Takata & Takata, 1976). As such, students will develop self-efficacy by a social comparison of their capabilities with others having completed the same tasks under similar circumstances. Since academic writing is an isolated task in nature, it is more difficult to find occasions for comparisons, hence why academic writing groups represent a favourable environment. In a study conducted by Vincent et al. (2021), participants in academic writing groups gained confidence in their abilities after observing and modelling time management and goal setting techniques used by their peers effectively progressing writing projects.

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[1] In Canada, the term "graduate" relates to study programs at the Master's and PhD levels. Therefore, the expression "graduate studies" is synonymous with "higher education" and "graduate students" include Master's and PhD students. PhD students who have completed a doctoral exam on knowledge acquired during their initial mandatory coursework will typically be called PhD candidates to reflect that they have initiated their doctoral research and dissertation work.

Furthermore, *social persuasion* reinforces self-efficacy if an individual expresses their trust in someone else's capability to successfully achieve a performance. However, the encouragements must come from a person of significance and the expectations must be realistic (Chambliss & Murray, 1979). Throughout PhD programs, students will receive regular feedback from their advisors or committee members, but also from editors of scholarly journals or research funding organizations. According to Kamler and Thomson (2008), PhD students feel apprehensive about critics on their work, which undermines their self-confidence. Therefore, receiving encouragements from peers, in a safe space like academic writing groups, is useful for PhD students to digest feedback in a purely formative manner.

Finally, *physiological* and *emotional states* represent the last source of information influencing self-efficacy in PhD students, especially in the achievement of a task requiring stress management. In a study by Tremblay-Wragg et al. (2020), the authors highlight the importance of selecting the right work environment to facilitate academic writing. In that respect, an optimal setting would have natural light coming in, be deprived of loud noises, be equipped with ergonomic furniture, and offer sustenance options. On the emotional front, Fullick (2021) stipulates that there is an increase in mental health issues experienced by PhD students, such as anxiety and depression. Therefore, Mitchell et al. (2017), propose the development of emotional intelligence as a strategy to enhance self-efficacy.

Methodology

Our research aims at reaching a better understanding of issues associated with the socialization of PhD students to become competent novice scholars by their participation in academic writing groups with their peers. However, this article only covers a portion of the data initially collected in order to focus on the development of self-efficacy by PhD students through social learning. As such, our goal is to understand the studied phenomenon from the representations and comments expressed by participants in our research, while adopting a socio-constructivist approach. Therefore, data collection and analysis methods adhere strictly to a qualitative perspective.

Our instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) is delimited by a learning community established by a non-profit organization that "specializes in creating physical and human environments to facilitate scientific writing" (Thèsez-vous, 2021). The community is composed of 4,000 graduate students engaged in a myriad of academic writing activities. These students come from Canadian universities offering study programs delivered in French, one of the two official languages in Canada. We recruited participants for our study by posting a message on the community Facebook page targeting PhD candidates who had completed their doctoral exam and partaken in academic writing groups on a minimum of three occasions to be able to share a variety of experiences.

We conducted semi-structured interviews averaging 60-90 minutes with 25 PhD candidates. In terms of demographics, the majority of participants identified to the female gender (female=23, male=1, and non-binary=1). Their average age was 34 years old and they originated from seven different countries (Canada=15, France=5, Belgium=1, Madagascar=1, Moldavia=1, and Algeria=1). They represented 12 Canadian universities and 14 scholarly disciplines, with Humanities and Social sciences (Education, Literature, Sociology, Psychology, Philosophy, Anthropology, Law, and Communications) prevailing over hard sciences (Medicine and Environmental Studies). At the time of the interviews, participants had invested an average of 6 years and 9 months in their doctoral program, thus they were able to share significant social learning experiences related to academic writing tasks.

The participants answered about twenty questions covering the aforementioned four sources of influence on self-efficacy: mastery experiences; vicarious experiences; social persuasion; and physiological and emotional states. Then, a content analysis of transcripts was done using a qualitative data analysis software (NVivo12). Data were categorized under three themes: the strategies of socialization to the scholar profession, the development of writing competencies during a PhD program, and the learning experiences materializing in the context of academic writing groups. The findings presented in the next section will focus on the last theme to highlight social learning experienced by PhD students engaged with their peers in academic writing activities.

Results

Our findings revealed that PhD candidates will increase their writing self-efficacy through social learning (exchanging, observing, modelling) when participating in academic writing groups. Since the data analyzed to produce these results were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants to our study were asked to draw from past experiences. Although this may be considered a limiting factor in our study, Van der Maren (2010) considers that "when interviews require participants to invoke long term memory, the recollection does not restitute the past, but rather reconstruct the past based on the current recollection of the past with a view toward the future [translated]" (p. 132). As such, participants identified under pseudonyms below shared their respective experiences about when they used to organize academic writing activities with their peers in public places (cafes, libraries, coworking spaces, museums, parks). Even though we have also gathered their perspectives on virtual experiences with online academic writing groups, these results are not included on this article.

Mastery experiences

According to Bandura (2019), when students are convinced that they possess the capacity to succeed, they will both persevere in the face of adversity and bounce back more quickly from challenging situations. Therefore, successes contribute to increase self-efficacy, whereas failures will

reduce it, especially if these failures occur before the individual was able to develop beliefs in their capacity.

The findings to our study reveal that PhD candidates who gained experience with academic writing while completing a master's degree, were more confident with drafting similar types of documents during their doctoral studies. In that regard, Gabrielle mentioned that: "...early on during my Masters, I had the chance to be a member of research teams, therefore I prepared grant applications for myself, but also for a number of research projects [translated]." These previous experiences allow for PhD candidates to learn about the norms and practices of various academic writing processes.

Once admitted to their PhD programs, students can secure Research Assistant (RA) contracts that can also be formative, as they provide opportunities to gain experience with various academic writing tasks. When describing how she benefited from the supervision of professors during such contracts, Diane recognized: "in the capacity of RA, I acquired competencies. There were two professors, in particular, who taught me a lot by highlighting incoherencies in the way I was writing, and by providing me with tips to become more effective as a writer [translated]".

Additionally, mastery experiences can come from PhD students taking risks on their own, for example, by delivering communications in various scientific forums involving the submission of conference proceedings. Considering that the doctoral journey is an ideal time during which students should test their communication skills, Anabelle indicated: "We must practice expressing ourselves in public, even if we don't like it. Ultimately, practice makes perfect! The first time you may fail, but the second time will go better. Who knows, the first time may even go very well [translated]."

The development of self-efficacy can occur over time, with the improvement of performances once their outcomes stabilize. As long as the individual does not perceive reaching a plateau as a limit to personal capabilities, but rather consider it being a sign of mastering the actual task. Although the above examples of mastery experiences did not come from the participation in academic writing groups, they are key to PhD students gaining confidence in their writing abilities, then being able to model these successful behaviours for others to observe or replicate.

Vicarious experiences

The ultimate achievement during a PhD program remains the dissertation defence and even if it seems far down the road for some students, witnessing a peer reach this milestone can represent a vicarious experience. When describing the impact of attending one of her colleagues' defence, Olivia mentioned: "I needed that moment, to attend a dissertation defence of someone who was not 100% satisfied with what he had done, but still managed to complete the work. Then, I told myself: 'This could happen to me. I may defend my dissertation one day.' It gave me the energy to carry on [translated]." In this case, the participant was able to compare her capabilities to the ones of her colleague

because they were often participating in academic writing groups together.

On the contrary, witnessing peers struggling can also have an influence on self-efficacy, especially if it is assessed that it is in a comparable situation. Considering alarming dropout rates, Charlotte recognized: "...we see PhD students giving up, so obviously you tell yourself, if one person out of two drops out, why not me? I am not necessarily facing the most favorable conditions to succeed [translated]." Again, this statement was expressed by this participant recollecting the unfortunate situation of a peer she used to write in the company of, being aware of his personal circumstances that she considered to be similar to the challenges she was also facing with her writing projects.

Nevertheless, the normalisation of challenges faced by the majority of PhD students is essential to avoid the negative impact that adverse experiences can have on the entire doctoral journey. In that vein, while discussing the process of peer review when submitting a manuscript to scholarly journals for publication, Isabelle contrasted: "...in writing cafes, among friends, I hear someone say, for example, 'My article was rejected'...it is unfortunate, but it is not discouraging, because it happened to me as well, it happens all the time [translated]". Through shared experiences, PhD students can act as peer support by encouraging each other when facing comparable challenges, thus limiting the impact that unsuccessful performances can have on one's self-efficacy in the long term.

Social persuasion

When it comes to social persuasion, as previously mentioned, feedback must come from a person of significance to have an influence on self-efficacy. In the case of PhD students, it is usually other students who are further along in their study programs, as explained by Florence: "In general, I think that you can help others who have more experience than you do, but in my situation, I know that I benefited more from individuals who were ahead in their journey than the opposite [translated]."

Prior to submitting her first proposal for a communication in a scientific conference, Tania remembered receiving encouragement from a peer during an academic writing session: "When I was feeling insecure about my project and thought that communications were inaccessible to me... at the end, my proposal was accepted without any modification, but it is thanks to her that I dipped my toe in the water, if you will [translated]." In this example, the imminent nature of the task at hand may have played in favor of the participant being persuaded of her capacities to succeed, since she was able to visualize short term gains. As for Helen, her self-efficacy was enhanced by supporting one of her peers who was in the process of writing a scientific article: "I was encouraging him to use a metaphor in the introduction of his paper to hook readers in... he thought that it was a great idea... I felt good because it made me realize that I possess this talent...to offer advice on the work of others [translated]." This participant went as far as transposing this boost in self-efficacy to her future

employment opportunities, stating that realizing she was capable of advising her peers would make her a competent university professor.

Physiological and emotional states

The somatic information on which students will rely to evaluate their capacity to successfully complete tasks become indicators of performance, especially when reacting to demanding situations (Bandura, 2019). In this respect, physiological indicators may include breathing, muscular tension, perspiration, heart beats, and digestion. As for emotional indicators, individuals can assess their moods, fatigue, anxiety, excitement, focus, and concentration. All in all, it is a matter of knowing if what is being physically or emotionally experienced is unusual and can be controlled. According to our results, several PhD candidates are motivated by deadlines, when these targets become positive stressors, as described by Lucie: "In general, I work a lot better under pressure, so I will progress my work significantly if I have a meeting with my advisor or a deadline for an article or the faculty informs me that I must submit before a set date [translated]". In the context of academic writing groups, participants to our study mentioned developing connexions with peers leading to collaborative work, such as co-authoring scientific articles, also implicating deadlines required to be collectively met.

Unfortunately, with an increased number of graduate students suffering from mental health issues, regulating their situation to continue feeling that they are up to the task is essential to avoid falling into the trap of doubting one's capabilities. Facing this unfortunate situation, Roxanne explained that: "This year, I had issues with my medication, therefore it became my priority to resolve this situation... because it greatly changed the way I was seeing things or the way I was functioning [translated]". Considering how demanding PhD programs can be, being in optimal physical or mental health can make a difference with successfully advancing writing projects.

When realizing that her peers experienced similar challenges with academic writing, even though they seem to be progressing well from the outside looking in, Elizabeth stated: "It allowed me to temper my performance anxiety, and focus on enriching the content under development, instead of obsessing over the time that it was taking me to complete the work [translated]." PhD students are recognized to have perfectionist tendencies that will skew their perception of quality work and, by the same token, their required capabilities to achieve unreasonable standards (Single, 2010).

As previously described, there are many other physical or emotional factors that come into play when discussing PhD student's self-efficacy. In order to limit the length of this paper, we focused on presenting results related to physical and mental health, stress, and anxiety that predominantly surfaced from our data analysis.

Conclusions

Throughout their journey, PhD students benefit from multiplying interactions with other novice and seasoned scholars, since doctoral programs constitute an opportunity for socialization to the scholar profession. According to Kornhaber et al. (2016), the combination of collective and reflexive experiences facilitate the integration of academic writing norms and practices. Therefore, academic writing groups offer developmental experiences, both formal and informal, contributing to the professionalization of PhD students wishing to belong to the world of academia (Rickard et al., 2009). As for Murray and Newton (2009), they explain that constructive exchanges taking place between members of academic writing groups represent invaluable support for participants facing common challenges within a community. In this regard, minority groups that remain disadvantaged in terms of professional opportunities, such as women working in certain fields of research, seem particularly drawn to these developmental strategies for networking (Faulconer, 2010; Wollast et al., 2018). Since the majority of our participants identified to the female gender, our research findings provide a greater understanding of how women learn from each other to become competent scholars.

Social learning between peers that is occurring in academic writing groups contributes to enhancing self-efficacy in PhD students by providing them mastery experiences and vicariant experiences, as well as opportunities for social persuasion in environments favourable to physical and emotional states. PhD students with enhanced self-efficacy will be able to tackle academic writing projects of increasing difficulty henceforth perceiving these tasks as interesting challenges. It is also expected that with greater self-confidence, PhD students will approach writing projects with a collaborative perspective, not always feeling as if they must prove themselves in relation to their peers, which in turn should temper the unhealthy competitiveness of graduate studies.

Overall, this article presented findings with a view of recommending valuable strategies to develop academic writing competencies through social actions led by graduate students. The implementation of such initiatives, in conjunction with institutional support, is recommended to increase successful outcomes for graduate students to curb dropout rates in the context of higher education. Future research efforts should focus on social learning in virtual writing groups to ascertain if the benefits of exchanging, observing, and modelling can materialize digitally.

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