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Confidence, the Image of the Writer, and Digital Literacies: Exploring Writing Self-Efficacy in the College Classroom

Maggie Bracey

Western Kentucky University, maggie.bracey222@topper.wku.edu

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CONFIDENCE, THE IMAGE OF THE WRITER, AND DIGITAL LITERACIES:
EXPLORING WRITING SELF-EFFICACY IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Maggie Bracey

May 2012

**CONFIDENCE, THE IMAGE OF THE WRITER, AND DIGITAL LITERACIES:
EXPLORING WRITING SELF-EFFICACY IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM**

Date Recommended April 5, 2012

Jane Fife
Dr. Jane Fife, Director of Thesis

Lloyd Davies
Dr. Lloyd Davies

Peggy Otto
Dr. Peggy Otto

Kinchel C Doerner 21-May-2012
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Contents.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: “Theories on Writing Self-Efficacy”.....	9
Chapter Two: “Writing Self-Efficacy and Digital Literacies”.....	29
Chapter Three: “The Modernist Image of the Writer and 21 st Century Composition: Students’ Views on Writing.....	49
Conclusion.....	77
Appendix A.....	81
Appendix B.....	83
Works Cited	84

CONFIDENCE, THE IMAGE OF THE WRITER, AND DIGITAL LITERACIES:
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Maggie Bracey

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88 pages

Directed by: Dr. Jane Fife, Dr. Lloyd Davies, and Dr. Peggy Otto

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Self-efficacy plays a major role in the way we perceive our abilities to complete challenging tasks and goals. With Albert Bandura's theories of self-efficacy as its theoretical foundation, this thesis explores the ways Bandura's theories apply to writing instruction and how specific cultural forces help shape the way students view their identities as writers. This study gives a focused and detailed explanation of the role writing self-efficacy occupies in education and composition theory, as well as the factors affecting a person's perceived writing efficacy. Additionally, the relationship between self-efficacy and new literacy (Lankshear and Knobel), a term used for twenty-first century forms of digital composition that differ from traditional print literacy, is established and theoretical suggestions made regarding how teachers can incorporate new literacies into writing instruction to promote positive writing self-efficacy. The final chapter defines the image of the writer and the scene of writing (Brodkey), and the ways these beliefs and stereotypes affect the confidence and self-efficacy of student writers. With the image of the writer as inspiration, the study concludes by conducting a survey administered to 109 first-year composition students regarding their personal views on what attributes make a good writer and good writing. This study does not set out to establish concrete, overarching conclusions regarding self-efficacy, digital literacies, and the image of the writer; instead, it creates new points for further inquiry and encourages

teachers to seek out different ways of fostering positive self-efficacy within writing instruction.

Introduction

The chapter outlines The Trail of Tears, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. The Civil Rights Movement and Jim Crow laws. A slow progression through the textbook, he reads to me—each word pecked out like Morse code—the rhythm forced, formulaic, and foreign. As the minutes drag on, his frustration ebbs with each enunciation, and the book’s account of the events seeps into his memory. He begins to pick up the rhythm. I remind him of how he creates beats on desks and counters, like a mock-drum line. “It’s the same thing, with different outcomes. We’re painting a picture with words,” I say. We pass the baton: I read, he reads, I ask questions, he answers aloud—correctly. We repeat the exchange. I see moments of comprehension, when the words—first read on page, then in our discussion—cognitively blend in his mind, and he learns. “He understands it,” I think, and I mentally script the chastising my mother will later get; I’ll reiterate with condescension the reasons why I need not waste my time on senseless practices like helping my brother with homework. It’s a cold-hearted way to begin what I’d reflect back on as my first role as a writing instructor. I could not know, in this moment, that I would devote my graduate years to exploring the reason why a history essay can hurtle my brother into fits of nervousness—why his perception of his abilities outweigh the talents and effort he so clearly possesses.

In the moment, however, my indifference is fleeting. I ask him, “Write down what you’ve read on this worksheet. Answer the questions in your own words,” and his eyes squint, wrinkling around the edges. He desperately inhales, fills his diaphragm, lungs, and finally his cheeks, and presses his breath out through puckered lips. His telling idiosyncrasy: the indicator of apprehension, the action that clues me into what’s going on

inside his crusted exterior. It's the same thing he does when he steps onto the pitcher's mound, insecurities laid bare for spectators—friends, teachers, coaches, family—to see; he rotates the ball in his sweating hand, searching for a hidden pocket of assurance he knows he won't find, but he's trying. A look of uncertainty telling me the disconnection between understanding and performance—from his arm to the plate—seems insurmountable to him. Regardless of the knowledge he possesses and the tools for success I am certain he holds, the creeping insecurities and questions of ability permeating his mind win out. In the battle between efficacy and ability, efficacy—or a lack thereof—manages to hinder my brother's ability to compose like I'm certain he can. Like I'm certain he wants to write, if he believed he could.

This memory, a glimpse into my first attempt at teaching writing over a decade ago, propels me into the murky waters of self-efficacy and students' perception of themselves as writers. Even on the small scale of my childhood remembrance, I recognize the challenges students experience when studying writing, and how they often face two outcomes: writing instruction can either instill within them the drive to persevere through difficult learning practices and assignments, or it can destroy their positive perception of their ability to write. The process of finding the right balance and pedagogy is complicated, and that, paired with the vast array of students that instructors meet in the classroom, can make the writing class a delicate environment. Unlike some other disciplines, where learning can exist on a unilateral plane of instruction, practice, and mastery, learning to write well and feeling confident in that ability blossoms from organic, student-specific factors more fluid than memory-as-mastery subjects in formal education. Learning to write, most importantly, is a social experience that hinges on

interaction and positive reinforcement: the responsibility rests heavily on both students and teachers to keep an open dialog about composition. Merely showing up and occupying a desk for fifteen weeks does not fulfill the requirements of a course as involved as the first-year composition class, a unique place in student development and writing scholarship. First-year composition students *must* step beyond the boundaries of what they know about composition and assess their identities as students, individuals, and ultimately, as writers.

Figuring out where students are in their writing is one of the major challenges composition teachers face; therefore, the overarching goal of this study is to learn more about how students see themselves as writers and feel about their writing. With this knowledge, teachers can better know how to combat low self-efficacy and lack of confidence by implementing curricular changes and altering teaching methods.

Accomplishing this goal, however, requires that teachers gain access to intangible data, to facts and information that are rarely quantifiable: how students think about their own writing. Understanding what factors, both within the academy and in students' personal lives, mold writing students' self-perception in the classroom becomes the nucleus of his study. All avenues for discussion and exploration radiate from this central focus: writing self-efficacy and how students feel about themselves as writers.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a complicated term signifying a basic idea: how people perceive their ability to meet a goal or complete a challenges matters just as much—if not more—than their actual ability (Bandura; Bandura and Zimmerman; Martinez, Teranishi, Kock, and Cass; McCarthy, Meier, and Rinderer; Pajares). Originally an idea confined to social

learning theory and the scholarship of Albert Bandura, self-efficacy theory analyzes the ways individuals see themselves in relation to tasks they face. Bandura describes self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives” (“Perceived Self-Efficacy” 118). Essentially, people’s sense of self-efficacy governs how able and confident they feel in attempting and completing challenges or goals. The applications of self-efficacy scholarship are myriad: the ways people view their own ability to meet challenges matter in work environments, on college campuses, and in elementary and secondary schools. Some discussion of self-efficacy and individual mindsets has shifted away from professional and school environments into personal development and psychology (Dweck), indicating the breadth of the subject’s relevance to our cultural and social climates.

One problem with studying self-efficacy, however, *is* its wide range of relevance: it is exhausting, and ultimately impossible, to understand a person’s overall sense of efficacy in a global sense (Bandura), but it is feasible to pinpoint a specific practice or skill affected by an individual’s perceptions of ability. Since self-efficacy in writing is the nucleus of this study, how students develop their sense of efficacy leads me to three topics worthy of further exploration, research, and discussion. The following three chapters hinge on two basic foci stemming from the ways students identify themselves as writers and the characteristics these students ascribe to different kinds of composition, whether print, digital, oral, or multimodal. Students’ views on writing tasks and the expectations of the composition classroom are key to this study; without input from individuals writing both in and outside of class writing activities, this study would fall

flat and matter little to teachers and scholars. Therefore, all inquiries about self-efficacy discussed here are rooted in learning experiences, either from longitudinal studies from established research journals and books or original research conducted for this thesis in first-year writing classes. Donald Murray says, “the principal discoveries about how people write effectively and how people learn to write effectively should come from within the classroom” (233), and this study echoes Murray’s message that composition research should pull from real students’ experiences and feelings about the climate of the college writing classroom. With this sketch of the “scene of writing” (Brodkey 397), teachers can focus on supporting the writing student—a person who bares her soul and the fruits of her pen to peers she barely knows and a teacher who is often heavy handed with suggestions and close-mouthed with realistic encouragement and one-on-one support. Only by understanding where students are with their writing—how they feel, the environments they inhabit, what forums and genres they write in—can teachers work toward boosting writing self-efficacy in the college classroom.

The study’s first chapter, titled “Theories in Writing Self-Efficacy,” gives a detailed exploration of Bandura’s social learning theory of perceived self-efficacy and explores the facets of efficacy theory most applicable to improving the confidence and capability of writing students. Self-efficacy occupies the heart of discussion, and from that core radiates a web of secondary discussions regarding writing instruction, composition theory, the affective domain (McLeod), and research supporting positive self-efficacy in the classroom. Three factors largely contribute to the chapter’s dialog on writing self-efficacy: locus of control (McCarthy, Meir, and Rinderer 467; McLeod 429), help seeking (Williams and Takaku 2), and motivational mindset, a term I created to

encompass the importance of motivation and perseverance in developing self-efficacy. The goal of chapter one is to familiarize readers with the theories and research behind general perceived self-efficacy, while also introducing terms and concepts specific to writing self-efficacy that are important in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter two, “Writing Self-Efficacy and Digital Literacies,” builds on the theoretical foundation of chapter one and highlights the possibility of using new literacies (Lankshear and Knobel) as a mechanism for fostering positive in-class writing efficacy. New, or digital, literacies are a dynamic topic within composition because of their contemporary, ever-changing place within our twenty-first century society. Through extensive interviews and personal accounts, Deborah Brandt, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Gail E. Hawisher explore the changing definition of literacy and the ways culture, economy, gender, and race help shape what being literate means in a digital world. Using these real-life stories of literacy development, as well as other theoretical approaches and quantifiable studies, this chapter pinpoints the reasons why using new literacies in composition instruction in correlation with traditional print literacies has the potential to increase the writing self-efficacy of twenty-first century writing students. The three specific attributes, or characteristics, of new literacies that could boost writing self-efficacy are the expectations students have about digital composition (Bandura; Pajares; Troia, Shankland, and Wolbers), the prior knowledge and experience of new literacies they bring to the classroom (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and MacGill; Selber), and the social collaboration intrinsic to composing in digital forums (Knobel and Lankshear; Smith). Keeping these three aspects of new literacies in mind, the chapter makes theoretical suggestions of ways to purposefully design curricula that use new literacies to teach

rhetorical theory and composition, while also increasing students' confidence to write in both digital and print forums.

The final chapter, entitled "The Modernist Image of the Writer and Twenty-First Century Composition: Students' Views on Writing," delves into not only students' personal experiences and views on writing, but also how they view the image of the writer, their individual scenes of writing (Brodkey; Cooper), and how out-of-class composition affects students' in-class writing. Cultural and societal forces are important to this discussion: the influence of romantic and modern literary figures on the way students see the ideal writer and writing practices becomes quite evident as the chapter explores what attributes of the writer most affect students' self-efficacy. The attributes most often prescribed to the image of the writer include isolation (Brodkey; Cooper), divine inspiration (Brodkey), and inherent talent (McLeod); these perceived characteristics have a lasting effect on how students and teachers idealize the writing process. The second part of chapter three uses these images of the writer as a gateway into learning about students' beliefs regarding their own identity as writers in the classroom. The final chapter discusses current perceptions of the attributes that make an effective writer and describes the results of a research questionnaire administered to 109 freshman composition students that aims to find out how students feel about their own writing. Through short answer questions and ranking scales that allow students to self-report their own views, the study collects information on students' beliefs about what makes good writing. Armed with this research, the final chapter suggests avenues of inquiry that could lead teachers and composition scholars toward concrete models for improving writing self-efficacy with digital literacies.

The relationship between self-efficacy and digital literacies is open-ended, contemporary, and ripe for study. Future researchers and scholars have an opportunity to dramatically improve the experiences of students who feel incapable of writing at the peak of their ability. While this project does not set out to form definite conclusions on the exact impact of self-efficacy and digital literacy on present writing students, it does strongly suggest that the need for further inquiry is a pertinent and exciting prospect for those devoted to teaching writing at the college level.

Chapter One: Theories on Writing Self-Efficacy

College students must possess mental strength, emotional fortitude, and healthy doses of cultural and social curiosity to blossom in the writing class: they cannot merely master specific skill sets by learning rhetorical strategies and constructing skeletal essays from these theoretical pieces of writing instruction. No, students must *also* believe in their ability to see their writing to completion and stick with it through the rather exhausting composing process. Belief in ability, it seems, can make all the difference to a writing student. Students' perception of their capability is the factor that most influences perceived self-efficacy, a concept first explored by social learning theorist Albert Bandura. Bandura describes self-efficacy as a "mechanism of agency" that controls "people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives" ("Perceived Self Efficacy" 118). Essentially, self-efficacy studies conclude that regardless of the pragmatic, impressive talents and skills a person possesses, if she cannot access those abilities, apply them to a goal, and *believe* the challenge achievable because of her skills set, then no amount of task mastery can traverse the gap between ability and efficacy. Bandura says no topic "is more central or pervasive than beliefs of personal efficacy. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act. Efficacy belief, therefore, is a major basis of action. People guide their lives by their beliefs of personal efficacy" (*Self Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* 2-3). Interesting here is the notion of pervasiveness; when examining an individual's self-efficacy, one delves into an intensely personal corner of an individual's perception of herself, which is both a fascinating and fragile pursuit. The topic is not only applicable to task mastery and active

capability; self-efficacy, at its essence, is an element of humanity—a way of seeing ourselves that we share, however loosely, with those around us.

This realization leads us to an important crossroads all scholars must meet when studying efficacy. The overarching nature of the topic appears daunting, particularly because human behavioral psychology sprouts off into myriad veins of exploration. Trying to examine all facets of the idea can overwhelm even the most proactive of scholars, so instead of taking on the challenge of exploring general perceived self-efficacy, the most beneficial way to discuss the topic is through the lens of a specific discipline. For this study, writing will serve as the palette for inquiry and conclusion, and my hopes are to establish clear connections between Bandura’s notion of self-efficacy and writing efficacy in particular, as well as connecting some of self-efficacy’s contributing factors to specific, commonly discussed topics involving the way students see their writing ability. These connections will reveal the importance of cultivating a positive sense of self-efficacy for both teachers and students, particularly in a fluctuating environment like the freshman composition class.

Looking specifically at writing efficacy does not require that we divorce self-efficacy theory from composition and analyze the different subjects individually, because the two overlap often in scholarship. In fact, Bandura explicitly discusses writing efficacy and its powerful relevance to larger learning communities outside of specific writing instruction. He argues that “[c]ognitive development and functioning depends heavily on writing literacy” (“Perceived Self-Efficacy in Cognitive Development and Functioning” 137), which places writing at the foundation of learning. For teachers, students, and parents alike, focusing on students’ perception of their individual composing ability is

pivotal: literacy mastery can inspire positive perceived efficacy, and that is an inspiring thought for both composition teachers specifically and all other teachers who value writing and literacy in their curriculum (which most do). In support of writing literacy, Bandura writes:

All too often promising ideas are mangled, if not massacred, by a deadening impenetrable prose. Research on the development of writing proficiency clarifies how perceived self-efficacy operates in concert with other self-regulatory factors in the mastery of this important skill [...] Enhancement of perceived writing efficacy by instruction raises, through different paths of influence, perceived self-efficacy for academic activities, personal standards for the quality of writing considered self-satisfying, and academic goals and attainments. (“Perceived Self-Efficacy” 137)

This commanding reminder reiterates for teachers the ways literacy competency can change the course of students’ education, but even more pertinent is the idea that “enhancement of perceived writing efficacy by instruction raises [...] perceived self-efficacy for academic activities.” This interrelation between writing and all other academic pursuits creates a startling image for educators and students: Self-efficacy in writing is like a network of delicate sinews swaying with the flux of a student’s confidence; one gust of insecurity, and like spider webs, efficacy collapses, breaking connections between writing and all other disciplines and hindering the student’s ability to succeed in all pursuits, not just writing.

Other empirical evidence supports the importance of writing efficacy on various

intellectual endeavors. Barry J. Zimmerman and Bandura collaborated on a study of writing efficacy in college composition classrooms in which they asked 95 students to complete a 25-question survey regarding their perceived ability in the writing class (849-50). Zimmerman and Bandura concluded: “students' perceived self-efficacy to manage their writing activities predicted their self-efficacy for academic achievement. The more assured students are in their capabilities to structure and communicate ideas and to overrule competing impediments, the more reason they have to believe in their capability for academic achievement” (857). The ability to control the writing process, manage the multitude of tasks involved in composing, and see a piece of writing to fruition factors into a student’s overall success in meeting challenges, even if the goal is not explicitly writing-related. For students to flourish in education, they need to *know* they can complete the difficult learning goals established for them, and instructors need to help them along the way. With this same driving force in mind, composition and education scholar Richard L. Allington calls teachers to action, encouraging them to design assignments and positively reinforce positive perceptions of writing efficacy, so students will identify themselves “as readers, writers, learners; as resource persons for classmates, as engaged learners who can enter and sustain literate and civil conversation” (286). Otherwise, students will enter the university with a major impediment: a belief that they cannot conquer difficult challenges stretching over an extended period of time.

Writing efficacy is not only important to overall academic efficacy; its lack can also eclipse a student’s ability to compose masterful prose. Christi Teranishi Martinez, Ned Kock, and Jeffrey Cass collaborated on an article exploring writing self-efficacy in detail, and, in keeping with Bandura’s premise, describe this specific facet of efficacy as

simply “the belief in one’s own ability to write” (352), a belief that can define “students’ level of motivation, aspiration and academic achievement” (352) just as much as their actual ability. However, of specific interest to the composition field is their second assertion that students’ actual writing ability is of little consequence if they have a negative sense of writing self-efficacy. Ultimately, “higher writing efficacy [will] contribute to better writing performance” (352), which makes the study of efficacy of paramount value to all teachers and students: writing literacy is the nucleus of formal education, and displaying proficiency when composing most certainly affects all other intellectual pursuits. Students must learn to write through drafting, collaboration, and revision, but, and perhaps more importantly, they need to identify those practiced abilities within their own toolbox of skills, and believe in their capacity to successfully use them to meet demanding writing goals.

Fostering positive self-efficacy for teachers, students, and citizens of literate communities is the first summit to reach. Next, the individuals engaged in teaching writing, studying writing, or merely writing for personal fulfillment need to familiarize themselves with the aspects of self-efficacy that affect struggling writing students. As a study focusing on the first-year composition classroom, the subsequent discussion will tailor its suggestions to those in the realm of the college writing class. However, the practical applications stemming from this discussion may benefit students studying at varying levels and in multiple disciplines, instructors incorporating composition pedagogy into their curriculum, and individuals interested in writing self-efficacy. Therefore, the subsequent goal in this study is to examine Bandura’s theories alongside composition scholars who write on and research the specifics of writing efficacy, and use

that knowledge to pinpoint the handful of factors that most often contribute to students' sense of perceived efficacy. Writing instructors can then know what characteristics and factors indicate slipping efficacy in students, and by recognizing the signs, they can help affirm students in their strengths and prevent further disintegration of their efficacious belief.

The cognitive and affective dimensions associated with composition and the writing student complicate writing self-efficacy studies. Susan McLeod so wisely encourages scholars to look at writing as both a cognitive and affective process, meaning students think *and* feel their way through writing; this distinction is critical when examining writing efficacy, because efficacy depends on emotional responses to perceived challenges. Feelings are powerful, and they very easily alter the outlooks of even the most steadfast individuals. McLeod encourages instructors to “think about [students' writing] processes holistically, since that is how they operate” (427). While Bandura says it is not beneficial to look at a person's global sense of self-efficacy, it is equally problematic to see writing as merely a cognitive process; emotion plays a pivotal role in the three factors to be discussed, and should not be overlooked as a lesser factor in efficacy.

This brings us to the three factors that contribute to a person's individual writing efficacy: locus of control (McCarthy, Meir, and Rinderer 467; McLeod 429), help seeking (Williams and Takaku 2), and motivational mindset, a term unique to this study. Though motivational mindset is not a previously-established term, its name and relevance to writing efficacy sprout from the prevalence of two terms in efficacy and composition scholarship: motivation (McLeod 428) and perseverance (Bandura *Self-Efficacy: the*

Exercise of Control 80; Pajares and Johnson 314). By blending the two concepts, motivational mindset exemplifies the way motivation and perseverance, together, affect writing efficacy.

While these three topics appear under differing names and in various contexts within both education and composition scholarship, they contribute substantially to the overall picture of perceived writing efficacy, and blur the line between cognition and emotion—a theoretical blending that forms the foundation of efficacy. An exhaustive exploration of each listed component is not the goal here; instead, these vignettes will help familiarize readers with the essence of each topic, the ways each contribute to perceived efficacy, and how each specifically relate to teaching and studying writing. The following three factors are not the only ones that affect writing efficacy, but they are the components most explicitly relevant to this discussion of writing efficacy and college composition students.

Locus of Control

Like self-efficacy, the term “locus of control” extends well beyond composition studies and occupies a sizeable place in social psychology. The distance between the two disciplines is not as vast as one might think; locus of control is a dynamic factor affecting the way people write and see themselves within a community of writers—especially if that community is twenty-two college freshmen. Their locus of control embodies “general beliefs about whether rewards and punishments in their lives are controlled by themselves or are controlled by external agents such as fate, luck, or other people” (McCarthy, Meir, and Rinderer 467) and can have a crucial effect on the endeavors individuals pursue and the way they view the experiences they have with others. People

with an internal locus of control are more apt to accept responsibility for their actions without hesitation, pursue impressive goals, and see life's encounters as effects of their own choices. On the other hand, individuals with an external locus of control transpose agency away from themselves, and onto other causal factors; they see themselves as incapable of changing the trajectory of their lives and circumstances, and therefore imagine little purpose in seeking goals or assistance.

The college writing student, particularly one feeling bogged down, underprepared, and feeble in her ability to meet the expectations of university-level composition, often allows outside influences to determine the merit of her writing. This type of student is easily swayed by external agents, tends to have an unsteady sense of personal efficacy, and sees herself as a bystander in her own life, a slave to the whims of professors and peers: an all too common image of the writing student. In *Strategies for Struggling Writers*, James L. Collins pinpoints the root of this problem as an absence of an internal locus of control by describing a case study involving a student named "Greg." Here, Collins gives readers a clear picture of the pivotal role efficacy and control can play for students by chronicling a rather telling question Greg asks his writing teacher. Greg says, "Why do I have to do this writing? You know, and I know, I'm going to get a job working with my hands" (26). Greg's view of his writing ability was not formulated from his feelings about writing, but by outside forces: as Collins says, Greg "had a low belief in his identity as a writer because he did not believe in his own agency, his ability to [. . .] control his writing and his life. Greg saw the work he did, both in school and out, as in the control of others" (26) and therefore beyond his locus of control; he saw little evidence that he could change his writing or his circumstance. Greg's experience mirrors

countless other students in writing classes who withhold their frustrations and feelings of futility: students who know what is expected of them, who have the ability to reach established goals, but do not believe in their ability to persevere through the trying, toiling task of writing valuable essays. Writing, it seems, taunts them, beckoning them to a place just beyond the perimeter of their locus of control.

Thus students' low self-efficacy often stems from the lack of control they feel composing and *completing* writing tasks. Writing differs from other learning outcomes and assessments in formal education: with a test, you study, sit for the exam, and await the results. The cycle ends with the presentation of a grade. The writing process never ceases, it seems. Instead, students may need to repeat the process multiple times; discerning when to rewrite, revise, and rethink a writing piece can exhaust even the most ambitious students. For the past several decades, writing instructors have framed and continue to frame their curriculum around a process-based model, like the one outlined in Linda Flower and John R. Hayes' 1981 article "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing." Flower and Hayes, as well as many other composition scholars who support process-based writing instruction, tend to place emphasis on a cyclical way of composing that depends heavily on peer and teacher input and revision. Flower and Hayes compare writing skills developed in this process to "a writer's tool kit [. . .] A process that is hierarchical and admits many embedded sub-processes is powerful because it is flexible: it lets a writer do a great deal with only a few relatively simple processes—the basic ones being plan, translate, and review" (376). The "simplicity" of the writing process seems too subjective for many students, who might see the "embedded sub-processes" and possibilities of multiple revisions as a gunfire from outside forces—teachers,

expectations, comparisons to others' work—that siphon away students' ability to maintain an internal locus of control. These processes may seem basic due to the few short steps involved—plan, translate, and review—but those who write, regardless of skill level, know the process is far from simple.

Process-based writing—a recursive progression through different stages of collecting, drafting, and revising (Murray)—should give students that locus of control and agency when composing an original piece, but with an established cycle comes a paradigm for good and poor writing. These parameters, regardless of their benevolent intentions and usefulness in teaching *how* to compose, can also de-center students' final products away from their realm of control, and allow their work's value to be dictated by others. This idea correlates with Susan McLeod's discussion of writing and locus of control, in which she says, "the notion of locus of control helps us see that their reluctance to revise might be related to something more fundamental—their belief that they have little control over the results of their efforts" (McLeod 439). McLeod's idea, building off the scholarship of Flower and Hayes as well as Bandura's theories of self-efficacy, does help teachers *and* students see why feeling in control of writing—especially their ability and finished product—matters immensely to the freshman composition class.

Of course, it is unreasonable to eradicate instructor and peer evaluation from the writing class; that, itself, would be more counterproductive than a weak locus of control. Outside influence can benefit student self-efficacy, and it certainly plays a major role in developing a sense of control. Frank Pajares and Margaret T. Johnson conducted a study of self-efficacy that focuses on confidence and control development by measuring "self-

efficacy, apprehension, and performance measures” (317) in the writing of thirty undergraduate teaching candidates over the course of a semester. Pajares and Johnson reason that “the development of self-confidence in academic areas is partly a result of teacher feedback and social comparisons, consisting of students' peer feedback about each other's work” (317), which can help cultivate positive feelings of control *if* feedback is constructive. Pajares and Johnson’s findings on outside influence and its relationship to efficacy and confidence reveal a “disjoint between confidence and competence” (324), which they argue could indicate that student’s perception of their ability to control “their growing skills are slow to change in the absence of direct feedback and peer comparisons ... even when the skills themselves may be improving” (324). Through purposeful, constructive feedback, teachers and peers can actually give control back to the low efficacy writer.

Ultimately, students need to maintain a locus of control, and thus a higher sense of writing efficacy, by establishing themselves as the “director” of their writing: the ultimate decision maker, who invests himself in the process of writing, from the first tickle of inspiration to the final revision. As Patricia McCarthy, Scott Meir, and Regina Rinderer say in their essay “Self-Efficacy and Writing: A Different View of Self-Evaluation,” “better writers appear to be more self-directed or more internally controlled. They examine ‘what it is they want to write,’ rather than attempting to please external authorities. They take active control of their writing” (467). Too much outside influence, regardless of its good intentions, may prove detrimental to self-efficacy. Students like Greg are more common than the self-identified “writer,” so instructors must encourage students to take full responsibility for their writing, and to see it through, not because it

will get them a better job or make them wealthy, but because it is within their control to produce their own brand of “good writing.”

Help Seeking

A factor of self-efficacy that builds off the idea of locus of control is students’ help seeking behavior when writing, as well as their mindset when asking for assistance. Regardless of the task, for many people admitting the need for help shows weakness—a fissure in their ability to master a particular skill—and thus can serve as a major indicator of a person’s perceived efficacy. Help seeking, like all other efficacious factors, depends on students’ individual “belief about their capabilities” (Pajares and Johnson 317), not necessarily their actual capability; students’ *reasons* for seeking help can tell us more about their efficacy than what they ask. Therefore, if students ask for help because they believe in their ability to grow as a writer, then help will probably strengthen their writing skills. On the other hand, if a student asks for help out of resignation—he no longer wants to put forth the effort, or believes himself incapable of completing the assignment without outside direction—then help seeking can actually debilitate positive writing processes.

Perhaps the most beneficial recent composition scholarship on this subject is James D. Williams and Seiji Takaku’s study published in 2011, titled “Help Seeking, Self-Efficacy, and Writing Performance among College Students,” which examines the help-seeking characteristics of over 100 students in a writing-across-the-curriculum program at a private university in California (7). Important to note, specifically in light of the findings, is that the university did not have an ESL program; no distinction was made between first- and second-language learners, therefore ESL students were “mainstreamed” (7-8) into composition classes. Williams and Takaku observed the

culturally-diverse pool of students over eight years and plotted their help seeking activities through the university writing center to see if “adaptive” help seekers outperform “nonadaptive” help seekers, as well as what effect help seeking has on writing efficacy (6). For this study, students designated as “adaptive” recognize their need for assistance and consequently ask an expert for specific feedback because they “know what kind of help to seek, and whom to ask” (2). “Nonadaptive” help seekers either ask for assistance when it is not needed or avoid seeking help altogether. They do this for two reasons: either they see themselves as capable of achieving goals on their own or they feel unmotivated to pursue outside support (2). The key distinction, then, is not the act of seeking help, which can occur in both adaptive and nonadaptive students, but their *reasons* for doing so. Motivations, paired with final assessments, can shed light on whether or not help seeking and efficacy are related.

Generally, an instructor’s goal is to facilitate self-motivated learning, in which students take responsibility for their education. Williams and Takuku’s adaptive help seekers assume responsibility by visiting the writing center with a specific, productive goal: to boost their writing ability. Of course, receiving a passing grade on the assignment is important, but not the only desired outcome. Adaptive help seekers visit writing centers “based on perceived need” (6), and therefore see assistance as a mechanism for growth, not an immediate patch-job of quick fixes that only distances students further from assuming agency over their writing. In this way, adaptive help seeking does not perpetuate dependency, but instead fosters lasting practices of inquiry and fulfillment, which allows students to figure things out on their own (2).

The findings were simultaneously encouraging and perplexing—Williams and Takaku can marginally support their hypothesis regarding the importance of help seeking as an efficacious factor. Students with native languages other than English had a lower sense of self-efficacy when compared to domestic students, yet these students were far more adaptive in their help seeking and therefore saw drastic improvements in their composition courses when compared to domestic students (12-13). What this means for writing instructors is this: when “appropriate help” (13) is made available, and students make a calculated, purposeful effort to seek assistance to better their ability, they can make sizeable improvements in skill. By seeing this improvement, in grades and feedback, adaptive help seekers can, theoretically, raise their efficacy. Of course, this only works if students possess the drive to seek help with the goal of growing as writers; seeking help does not equate actual improvement. The motivation and frequency of visits played a bigger role in efficacy than the help seeking itself (12-13).

There is another factor affecting help seeking: students’ overestimation of their own efficacy (2-3). Williams and Takaku, as well as McCarthy, Meir, and Rinderer, note some students’ misconception of their efficacy; they believe themselves more proficient in writing than their ability allows. These students will “avoid seeking help even in the face of need” (2) because they see their ability as sufficient enough to bypass assistance. This is a problem for writing teachers: how to model positive help seeking practices. This study should inspire further research; Williams and Takaku’s article is recent, and their study related specifically to writing centers—the scholarship on cultivating help seeking in the classroom is strikingly meager.

Motivational Mindset

So far, each efficacy factor has built upon another; having internal locus of control helps students feel responsible for the outcome of their writing practices, which can help foster adaptive help-seeking behavior. When seeking help for productive, proactive reasons, students feel more capable to work through the taxing writing process—a cyclical chain of writing, revising, and rewriting. Therefore, having a motivational mindset is essential to writing efficacy; if students believe their essay complete after the first draft, an instructor's suggestion to revise can destroy their sense of efficacy, especially if they had little motivation from the beginning to compose their very best writing. Motivational mindset combines characteristics of motivation and perseverance, two terms that are often discussed together, though they are not synonymous. A motivational mindset embodies an individual's cognitive, purposeful decision to use her intrinsic drive to press through challenges and pursue goals to fruition. Motivational mindset requires both motivation and perseverance: one must keep a high level of motivation to persevere through trying tasks. Without a motivational mindset possessing both of these qualities, students will have a difficult time fostering a positive writing efficacy.

Like locus of control and help-seeking behavior, motivational mindset is defined by a student's "inner impulses or drive towards some goal" (McLeod 428). The key word that crops up often in efficacy scholarship is this notion of "inner." It is nearly impossible for a teacher to see into the personal efficacy of a student; we have assessments to help define students' capability, but we know little about their motivation. However, Frank Pajares, along with multiple other self-efficacy scholars, encourages teachers to keep in

tune with their students' self-efficacy, because through close observation teachers can learn more about how to spur their students toward excellence. Pajares says that teachers will "be well served by paying as much attention to students' perceptions of competence as to actual competence, for it is the perceptions that may more accurately predict students' motivation and future academic choices" (568-69). The concept of paying attention to perceptions of competence is at the heart of self-efficacy studies and is particularly applicable to writing students, who often define their sense of competence from what they see in their peers and instructor.

Even when instructors are aware of their students' perceptions of competence, cultivating a motivational mindset and positive self-efficacy remain two of the most difficult challenges a writing teacher faces. Students often start with a high level of motivation, but balk when they realize the hard work it takes to grow as a writing student. Again, scholars encourage teachers to acknowledge the stipulations of formal writing instruction, but to focus purposefully on "internal features of motivation, not those external forces like grades, teacher pressure, peer comparison, or career goals" (McLeod 429). Similarly, Zimmerman and Bandura address the uphill climb teachers have when facing low motivation and dwindling perseverance, particularly in a process-based instruction classroom. The two authors mention several possible causes: "writing activities are usually self-scheduled, performed alone, require creative effort sustained over long periods with all too frequent stretches of barren results, and what is eventually produced must be repeatedly revised to fulfill personal standards of quality" (Zimmerman and Bandura 846). Interesting here is the idea that writing practices are performed alone, driven totally by the self, and conducted over long periods of time. Zimmerman and

Bandura's observation seems to reinforce students' inclination to keep their efficacy and motivational mindset completely internal. This outlook on the writing process chips away at writing students' belief that they can succeed in composition. Of course, certain aspects of writing flourish when kept internal; an inner locus of control can help students maintain a sense of responsibility over their writing. However, the common image of the writing process as a series of activities conducted in isolation can prove detrimental to novice college writers.

Does the paradigm of the writing class help foster this tension between expectations and students' motivation to meet those goals? Students see writing as an act done in isolation, but the composition process can occur in collaboration—writing can be structured as a conversation. I wonder: if goals, motivation, and hard work were explicitly discussed as necessary components of writing, would students feel more apt to put forth the effort? If teachers were more emphatic with how much work writing should be to produce valuable prose, but also how rewarding the skills and competence can prove in all facets of life, would students be willing to change their motivational mindset, and subsequently see their efficacy differently?

There are writers and theorists trying to remedy this perennial issue, and an interesting take on motivational mindset actually comes from outside of composition studies, yet directly applicable to the writing student, and college students in general. Efficacy studies encourage us to not look at efficacy as an overarching characteristic, but to see the interconnectedness of different efficacies in a holistic manner. We look at students' motivational mindset for clues as to how much they are willing to give, and how flexible and persistent they will be in meeting that goal. This notion of mindsets

comes directly from Carol S. Dweck's book *Mindsets: The New Psychology of Success*, in which Dweck plots the differences between a fixed mindset and growth mindset, and what those designations can mean for the human mind's ability to see goals to fruition (6-7). Fixed and growth mindsets hinge on several important differences, but essentially, a person with a fixed mindset believes her "qualities are carved in stone" (6), whereas a growth-minded person bases her view "on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts" (7). Growth mindsets allow for flexibility and expansion; growth-minded individuals believe that "although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience" (7). Dweck, like Bandura, writes for the general psychology and behavioral science field and does not explicitly address composition. However, her ideas do relate to the issue of motivational mindset, which factors heavily into perceived self-efficacy. Dweck particularly addresses intrinsic ability throughout her book, and she gives a charge to individuals battling self-doubt in "inspired" fields, like art and writing. She says: "*just because some people can do something with little or no training, it doesn't mean that others can't do it (and sometimes do it even better) with training* [Dweck's emphasis]" (70). Dweck speaks particularly to those fixed mindset individuals, who display characteristics of low self-efficacy. These individuals are more likely to believe "someone's early performance tells you all you need to know about their talent and their future" (70)—a way of viewing ability that discourages seeking help and persevering through trying tasks like the multiple revisions required for standout writing. Similarly, encouragement seems the best place to start—by presenting writing as a rewarding process and skill, not just for

academic pursuits but as a tool for success beyond the halls of the university, teachers can help students absorb a different motivational mindset: one that sees the process as worthwhile. It is certainly an idyllic thought, but one worth entertaining, particularly in a twenty-first century global economy, in which all students can benefit from cultivating self-promoting, versatile skills.

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Self-efficacy helps define people's willingness to challenge their ability, set lofty goals, and pursue those goals until they conquer them. For the sake of all writing students, the topic cannot and should not be ignored by writing teachers: all students possess some perception of their efficacy, and cultivating a positive view of that efficacy should be a goal of all instructors. Bandura says even people with proficient skills "can be easily overruled by self-doubts, so that even highly talented individuals make poor use of their capabilities under circumstances that undermine their beliefs in themselves" (*Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* 37). Writing students, at some point or another, will face a challenge they believe too sizeable to conquer; teachers should take personal responsibility to promote positive efficacious behavior by encouraging students to strive for "a resilient sense of efficacy" that "enables [them] to do extraordinary things by productive use of their skills in the face of overwhelming obstacles" (37). However, writing teachers cannot create perfect efficacy practices for all of their students, and regardless of how devoted instructors are to propagating efficacy among students, this is one of the largest challenges a teacher can face. Instructors must first *choose* to value their students' efficacy, and work tirelessly to create a composition curriculum and environment that highlights the benefits of writing, and writing well, both in the

classroom and beyond. The role of the student, then, is not ignored: personal responsibility and motivation are at the heart of positive efficacy. Thus, the characteristics and contributing factors that mold incoming composition students are the best places to start when examining writing efficacy and the college classroom.

Chapter Two: Writing Self-Efficacy and Digital Literacies

Keeping with the previous discussion on self-efficacy, the purpose of this chapter is to examine how students' writing efficacy affects how they compose and see themselves as writers in the world of twenty-first century composition. It would be misguided, and ultimately impossible, to ignore the influence of technology on the writing student. Therefore, the following chapter will explore what characteristics comprise the term "digital literacies" and the ways these literacies intersect with writing efficacy. The ultimate goal is to encourage composition instructors to incorporate new, digital writing opportunities into their classes. By doing so, teachers can create comfortable, collaborative environments to combat low writing efficacy, while simultaneously preparing their students to participate in digital composition.

In 1993, Seymour Papert predicted, with striking accuracy and foresight, the future trajectory of adolescents' relationship with digital literacies in the coming decades. Papert said that the upcoming generation had embarked upon "an enduring and passionate love affair with the computer" (Lankshear and Kobel 114), and in order for educators to keep up with the whirlwind of change that would accompany this ardent marriage of youth and technology, they would need to incorporate contemporary modes of composition into their pedagogy (114). Papert could not have predicted how true his words would prove. Saying the past twenty years ushered in an age of technology and digitalization seems understated; as Cheryl C. Smith states, students at every level of academic study "are likely to have had their minds and writing styles influenced by technology" (36), and this trend amplifies with each passing moment. We live in the digital age—a historic moment in which nearly two-thirds of American teenagers access

the Internet daily, and over one-third go online multiple times per day (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and MacGill 7). Digital composition is not merely a mode of communication: it is *the way* people communicate. Why, then, are some English departments and composition instructors slow to incorporate digital literacies into their curriculum, especially if students tirelessly use these writing skills outside of the classroom? There are countless possibilities, ranging from not seeing a need for change to not recognizing the benefits of using digital literacies in traditional composition courses. Though the trend within English departments does seem to privilege print over digital literacies, it is important to note that some universities, like the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and the University of Kentucky, an institution that has a separate program to house composition called “Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Media,” are reevaluating the way they teach composition and address digital literacy—and other institutions are following suit.

The implications of this question affect teachers, scholars, and students alike. Teaching and learning academic writing in an era with infinite communication possibilities can overwhelm both instructor and student. Academic writing as a universal “set of basic, fundamental skills” meant to teach students how to master writing for “other college courses and in business and public spheres after college” (Downs and Wardle 553) can distance students from writing to the best of their ability; though these skills theoretically have real-world applications, students see little practical use for these “academic writing” skills beyond assigned projects and papers, because in their life beyond the classroom, digital literacy *is* the way people are writing. Merely mastering academic discourse is not enough to be considered “literate” anymore. Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle capture the essence of this struggle among academic literacies,

functional literacies, and critical/ cultural literacies (Selber 41; Lankshear, Gee, Kobel, and Searle 139) when they wonder “*which* academic writing—what content, what genre, for what activity, context, and audience” (556) are English departments asking instructors to teach in a twenty-first century classroom? The question is valid for those teaching, but for students, it is paramount: how can students feel comfortable in their ability to communicate in these “multiliteracies” (Murphy 286), and thus have a high sense of writing efficacy when encountering these writing situations, when English instruction privileges academic, print literacies over digital ones? The difficulty here is defining these new, digital literacies and the ways technology has altered the definition of what it means to be literate. The best place to start, then, is with the term “new literacy”: how it differs from traditional notions of print literacy, as well as what roles new literacies play in the lives of college writing students, particularly regarding writing efficacy.

Scholarship cites three reasons why utilizing new literacies in teaching writing can benefit composition students: the evolving expectations students have for what comprises writing (Bandura; Pajares; Troia, Shankland, and Wolbers), their prior experience communicating digitally (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and MacGill; Selber), and new literacy’s focus on social interaction and collaboration when composing (Knobel and Lankshear; Smith). These three factors make incorporating new literacy important for students because research, like Amanda Lenhart, Susan Arafeh, Aaron Smith, and Alexandra Macgill’s PEW Internet Report titled “Writing, Technology, and Teens,” shows that students see the need for writing in their future, but they do not know exactly what abilities they need in order to master the writing challenges they will most certainly encounter beyond college (42, 44). Thus, new literacies are a dynamic topic for academic

conversation that teachers and scholars need to incorporate into the broader discussion of self-efficacy and composition. Establishing a place in academic scholarship for digital literacy should encourage instructors to interweave digital writing skills with traditional first-year composition practices like reading nonfiction essays, writing research papers, self-evaluating one's own writing and the writing of classmates, and working in group settings. Pulling from multiple literacies and technology builds on past knowledge and experience—because students write often in digital forums—and encourages social interaction and collaboration, which has already been established as a touchstone of positive self-efficacy.

We reach the culminating question here: how can the benefits of using new literacies also improve the writing efficacy of our students? It is clear that the reasons for incorporating new literacies into college composition classes—the social aspect of digital composing, the collaborative nature of new literacy practices, and students' familiarity and comfort with technology—complement some of the suggestions social learning theorists make for improving self-efficacy. Introducing new literacies alongside print literacies would also help strengthen the following “weak spots” in writing efficacy: students' understanding of their “outcome expectations” and “efficacy expectations,” using prior experiences to master new tasks, and allowing productive, confidence-building social interaction among students (Troia, Shankland, and Heintz 72). By utilizing digital settings students are familiar with, teachers can build off the level of competency students have in new literate environments. Digital composition spaces encourage social interaction and feedback that can make students feel less isolated in their writing process, and therefore more efficacious when composing within their

culture; they also help students master skill sets that will most certainly matter in their future, which research proves is a major concern and a desired learning outcome for students in writing classes (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and Macgill 42).

A working definition of new literacy alongside the meaning of self-efficacy established in the previous chapter is the next step in discussing the two disciplines together. “New literacy” emerged as an important term when digital communication and technology began testing the boundaries of what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century. There are several terms comparable to new literacy: digital literacies, twenty-first century literacies, technological literacies, silicon literacies, and computer literacies, among others (Eyman 184); these differences are in name, but not necessarily in meaning. Essentially, these new literacies grow from the “traditional” notions of literacy, but they change with the difference in medium; because digital composition is “enacted in new media spaces,” new literacies are “multimodal” (187), always changing, and capable of being personalized to the individual communicating through them. A common misconception of new literacies is that technology, namely word processing and researching information with the Internet, is what changed the definition of literacy (Knobel and Lankshear 7); where before writers read books and wrote with pencil and paper, now they are scrolling through the World Wide Web for research, while simultaneously typing and editing an essay. While these practices differ from traditional notions of composing, they are still rooted in print literacy. Advancements in processing and publishing contribute to the present era of digital composition, but according to new literacy scholars Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, these factors do not create new literacies. What does comprise a new literacy is whether or not the practice or medium

“enables people to build and participate in literacy practices that involve different kinds of values, sensibilities and procedures” than traditional print literacies (7). In short, a new literacy must have a different *ethos*; these literacies are intrinsically collaborative, resist having a central author, tend to have a level of social awareness, and require active participation from multiple contributors (Knobel and Lankshear 9, Lankshear and Knobel 27). Composing on a computer does not always change the nature of the literate practice, but it can, and what Lankshear and Knobel are proposing is the need for evaluating the purpose and process behind composing with technology. If an individual composes with a word processor in a digital space that allows for instant response from multiple readers around the globe—a blog post is an excellent example of this practice—then that act involves new literacy skills. The accelerated communication and response alter the literate practice altogether, and the innumerable audiences and outlets for acquiring information through readers’ responses give new literacies a feeling of constant transformation. However, the same individual could use a word processor to compose using more traditional print literacy skills. The way technology helps shape the *ethos* of a literacy task is a formative characteristic when defining new literacy.

Even though the “new” in new literacy implies an absolute break from “old,” perhaps outdated definitions of literacy, there is still an undeniable connection between print and digital literacy that should not be ignored, especially when discussing writing efficacy and how individuals view their ability to write. Students spend the majority of their writing classes working with print literacies, yet outside of the classroom they compose, abundantly and with confidence, in new literacies. Writing teachers must understand the differences between print and new, if only to bridge the gap between what

students expect and believe about writing, and how the beliefs they bring into the classroom alter their perceived efficacy when participating in writing activities and assignments.

Thus, the gap between literacy and writing efficacy exists in part because of the changing definition of being “literate”—the different sets of skills and values that construct new literacy. Students can be print literate, but struggle with new literacies. At the same time, students may feel capable writing in digital forums, while print literacy appears tired and outdated to them. Historically, the general definition of literacy was being able to read and write; literacy was a term almost exclusively associated with what Deborah Brandt describes in her book *Literacy in American Lives* as “discrete linguistic and scribal skills such as sounding out, spelling, or semantic fluency” (3). Brandt describes how categorizing literacy as “a decontextualized skill, neutral, self-contained, portable, a skill that can be acquired once and for all and used and measured transparently without regard to contextual conditions” (3-4) represents a “narrow, technical approach” (4), which drastically downplays the importance of an individual’s social, economic, cultural, and intellectual circumstances. The new century has changed the way people view literacy: it has evolved into a whole set of different abilities contingent upon context. With this evolution, a tidal wave of new literacies that transcend the one-dimensional, “narrow” span of print literacy emerge as important foci for teachers of writing and reading. In *New Literacies*, Lankshear and Knobel discuss the shift from print to digital literacy and how that alters what comprises a literate person: “‘literacy’ has extended its semantic reach from meaning ‘the ability to read and write’ to now meaning ‘the ability to understand information however presented’” (21). Lankshear and Knobel

agree with Brandt that being literate comprises more than reading and writing; a literate person is capable of deducing meaning from multiple forms of communication, is able to participate in focused conversations, and transforms herself and her world through language (21). Literacy in the twenty-first century requires that individuals go beyond printed texts and long-established modes of composition to master new mechanisms for communicating that incorporate collaboration and the impact of social issues and pressures. At present, literacy is undergoing constant fluctuation and metamorphosis. Print literacies are of value to the twenty-first century student, but they are not the only paths to reading, writing, and learning with proficiency. New literacy involves reading print texts and writing academic essays, but one must read culture, society, and technology, too.

Expectations

Understanding the differences between print and new literacies and establishing the definition and values of new literacy are key goals for teachers, but even more important is learning how student-writers see their literacy practices. After all, their perceptions of how composing works in digital spaces dictate what writing challenges they pursue, what they value, and ultimately what gets written in the rising “Age of Composition” (Yancey 5), in which writing and creating are more prevalent than ever beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Students’ expectations of what it takes to master new literacies are at the heart of this exploration. An excellent example of student views on new literacy comes from Douglas Eyman’s survey of a college writing and technology course, in which he asks his class to define digital literacy (185), which is another term

synonymous with new literacy. The responses conclude that students generally see digital literacy as the

transference of traditional literacy practices (reading and writing), to new media [. . .] digital literacy is ineluctably tied to text-based literacy practices. However, digital literacy goes beyond the textual, and includes the effective use of symbolic systems, visual representations of language, and digital object manipulation. (186)

While this list is not exhaustive, new literacies include spaces like social networking and social media, blogging, micro-blogging (sites like Twitter), digital communication (text messaging and email), as well as interactive video games and online communities among innumerable other literacies that are materializing at this moment (Knobel and Lankshear 6). Simply put, any mechanism or forum existing to construct meaning in a digital space for a specific audience can be categorized as a new literate practice. This definition, created and agreed upon by Eyman's college writing students, shows how composing in digital spaces grows from the traditional reading and writing valued in the composition course, yet also takes a step out of academia and into society. The expectations of what it means to write, and write well, are different for students writing in new literacies, and expectations of what it takes to master a task and fulfill the requirements for successful writing practices create a cross-section between digital literacy and writing efficacy.

Self-efficacy depends almost entirely on people's perception of their ability; some people with a high self-efficacy believe themselves far more proficient at a task than their actual skill level, while others may have all the ability needed to complete a challenge, yet their low sense of efficacy inhibits their drive to pursue goals and meet recognized

expectations. These “misjudgments of self-efficacy” (Bandura *Social Foundations of Thought and Action* 398) contribute to the way people view what they are capable of accomplishing, which in turn helps determine the expectations they accept for a task. Expectations can come from personal goals, paradigms established by a teacher, or peers for whom a level of mastery at certain tasks will prompt acceptance into “the group.” Gary A. Troia, Rebecca K. Shankland, and Kimberly A. Wolbers reemphasize Bandura’s belief that a person’s expectations of what comprises good writing can matter as much as the assignment itself; this set of expectations is a foundation of self-efficacy theory. Once again, the holistic nature of self-efficacy complicates the human inclination to pick one scapegoat cause, while pushing other factors to the margins.

Outcome expectations affect efficacy, but they also function amidst several other contributing causes, particularly personal beliefs about what it means to be “able,” as well as past performance (Pajares *Self-Efficacy Beliefs in Academic Settings* 558-60). Efficacy is grounded in the expectations that come with a task, and the beliefs regarding one’s ability to meet those expectations: an individual is typically “concerned not with the skills one has but with judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses” (Bandura 391). Troia, Shankland, and Wolbers expand on the importance of expectations by narrowing what kinds of preconceived notions affect efficacy: “self-efficacy beliefs comprise both outcome expectations, which are beliefs that particular actions will lead to desired outcomes, and efficacy expectations, which are beliefs that one is capable of performing those actions to achieve goals” (72). The notion of expectations is key, particularly when marrying new literacies and self-efficacy: new literacies come with a different set of expectations for what constitutes mastery of writing

skills, how assessment works, and for what purpose and audience students are composing. Individuals with low writing efficacy sense a divide between their actual ability and the belief that they can meet established expectations associated with an assignment.

How can new literacies help alleviate the strain of expectations on students who struggle with writing? The implications for using technology to enhance writing instruction and foster positive efficacy are broad, mainly due to the dynamic nature of new literacies. The field is constantly changing, which makes pinpointing definitive solutions to contemporary problems difficult. Research, scholarship, and experience all say the same thing, though: students are generally familiar with a vast array of digital composition, even if they do not personally write in digital spaces. Some students blossom in digital settings, while others are only minimally accustomed to writing in this fashion, so teachers should first get to know the level of mastery students have with new literacies. Once instructors come to understand the importance of students' competency in digital settings, they can use prior experiences to help facilitate positive writing practices. Instead of setting writing expectations and asking students to meet them, teachers should consider using technology as a common ground, if students feel confident in that pursuit. Ideally, instructor and pupil together would generate and discuss ideas about what it means to write as a twenty-first century college student. As teacher and writer Catherine A. Civello suggests, "we are teaching a 'wired' generation" and teachers should essentially "'move over' and learn from and with young people in a mutual quest for knowledge" (93). We should share the reins and create new expectations of writing assignments that build from new literacies, bridging academic writing with "the rich,

multi-mediate environments of the home and neighborhood in which [students] have become interactively ‘literate’ with their world” (91). Suggestions include using new literacies for examples of rhetorical devices, supplementing readings from digital media as a part of a nonfiction, print-based assigned reading, or having an online discussion forum serve as a means of modeling the caliber of thought and preparation expected of students during class interactions. Students may see these activities as an instructor’s attempt to include their interests and proficiencies in the learning process, which gives them a level of control and participation in the writing class. No longer passive writers pursuing writing goals that are divorced from their world, students can understand and meet their own outcome expectations, because they helped establish the effort, knowledge, and skill required to create and discuss a competent piece of writing.

Prior Knowledge and Experience

Another crucial tie between new literacy and self-efficacy is the prior knowledge college students have with digital composition, and how these past experiences can increase their writing efficacy when attempting new challenges. Scholarship shows teenagers and college students are writing for social networks, blogs, and digital settings more than ever, yet they do not see these acts as “writing” (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and MacGill 44). Strikingly similar is students’ view of academic writing: 73% of students believe that their technological communications have no effect on the caliber of their writing in the classroom (44). According to Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and Macgill’s PEW Internet Report, writing students believe that knowing how to write well is an important skill to master (42), yet the same teenagers do not see electronic communication, like text messaging and social media, as writing (ii). Ultimately, teens and scholars do agree that

“[t]he impact of technology on writing is hardly a frivolous issue because most believe that good writing is important to [. . .] future success” (ii), but the fragmentation of print and new literacies undoubtedly alters students’ writing efficacy; the distance between the two hinders their ability to see technological communication as writing practices they have mastered. Even though students compose with purpose and for an audience (regardless of the “academic” nature of the writing) many of these students see themselves as incapable of producing writing of value, because the writing they practice every day is not done in an academic environment yet. Prior mastery experiences—or moments when students felt like they were successful at meeting a challenge or task—are valuable in fostering positive self-efficacy, and college students are certainly masters of digital communication.

Writing teachers should work toward pursuing self-efficacy growth for their students by connecting “new” literacies with established pedagogy to create curriculum that intentionally builds on previous experience. This is not an easy task, and as Stuart Selber states, writing teachers have the unique job of helping students “negotiate the multiple and contradictory discourses in which they will be implicated as writers and communicators” (485). What Selber advocates is a writing class with students’ interests and experiences at its core—a form of scaffolding that allows college writers to start with what they know, and build from that knowledge base. Academic writing, with a mixture of print and new literacies, will create assignments students perceive as practical uses of their intellect and purposeful applications of their writing skills, because most of them will write in these digital media every day, for school, work, and personal communication. Perhaps students who experience a negative sense of writing efficacy in

classes that focus purely on print literacy would welcome an upswing of positive efficacy if new literacies were incorporated into their first-year composition course?

An excellent example of utilizing students' prior writing experiences to build efficacy are digital composition forums meant for personal opinion and argument throughout the course. Venues like blogs, Tumblr, Facebook, or Twitter could function as relevant, familiar examples used alongside traditional writing instruction to teach students abstract rhetorical concepts like purpose, audience, *ethos/pathos/logos*, as well as voice and stance. These concepts are best taught alongside actual writing—writing that students understand and identify with. Smith expresses the need for new literacies in teaching these abstract concepts when she says, “[s]tudents are using internet forums and tools in their personal lives and often understand the dynamics of online writing space better than academic ones,” which makes them more inclined to benefit from learning new, abstract concepts when their learning is “grounded in their own experiences” (46-47). This method of using prior experience goes beyond concepts: students should write and create in these media, too. Teachers can assign students to create their own blog or message board, initially for class purposes, where they could respond to their thoughts on readings and discussions; these informal writings would provide inspiration for longer, more formal pieces of writing done for a final grade. The difference between writing a short response essay by hand or with a word processor and using one of these digital composing settings is the sense of mastery and experience: even if students do not blog or use social media outside of class, they can see how writing and technology transcend both their school and private lives, which helps alleviate the feeling that the writing assignments they encounter are of little importance after instructors assign the final

grade. When students are masters of prior experiences, the positive efficacy from those tasks carries over into new writing experiences, making pursuing challenging goals more feasible and rewarding.

Social Collaboration

The third way new literacies can increase writing efficacy is through the social and cultural interaction encouraged in digital writing spaces. New literacies, like blogs and social networks, exist to create dialog; these spaces would flounder without input from readers, writers, critics, and bloggers who feel passionate about and take interest in their larger world. NCTE former President Kathleen Blake Yancey, reporting on 21st century writing and methods for instruction and focusing on the changes literacy underwent through the turn of the century, notes “the social nature of writing” as a “central feature in the new models of composing emerging now” (4). New literacy forums transition away from the stereotyped image of the writer in solitude—even if the text is inherently personal or opinion-based—and emphasize the benefits of collaboration.

The common goal of the first-year writing course is preparing students to participate in the infinite conversations blossoming around them: teachers work tirelessly to empower “students as cultural critics with valued opinions,” who see writing as a mechanism for discussion, debate, and change (Smith 46). High-caliber conversations cannot occur in solitude, and new literacies help alleviate the need for social interaction and feedback. Zimmerman and Bandura’s theory on writing in isolation reemerges here as a key factor in new literacy and self-efficacy (846); encouraging students to see

writing as a social, cultural activity done in correlation with other writers, research, and multiple audiences will undoubtedly nurture positive writing efficacy.

Personal composition forums, like blogs, Wiki sites, and social networks, are relatively new forums for writing that allow students to get their thoughts and opinions down in concrete form, while also providing an audience pool that extends beyond just their teacher. For example, other students and, depending on the parameters established around the composing space, even readers beyond the classroom can look at what students have written and comment on their ideas. The inherent switch from composing in isolation—alone, pecking at a lonesome keyboard without outside influence and opinion—to a forum contingent upon social interaction is what makes new literacies such an exciting composition option for students with low writing efficacy. Cheryl Smith describes, with concision and poignancy, the reason why digital spaces like blogs can benefit students lacking writing confidence:

First-year composition courses—small, intimate, intensive, and built around drafting and revision—are particularly well-positioned to use error as a tool for helping students come to terms with its role in writing and learning [. . .] [A]s an online arena where error, language play, and invention are not only accommodated but actively incorporated, blogs are a surprisingly straightforward way to negotiate the tensions of error. They add a new platform for writing that increases opportunities for student-driven expression, facilitate and energize the process of collective brainstorming and peer review, stimulate creativity and class community,

and supplement more traditional platforms for writing without supplanting or detracting from them. (37)

Smith's discussion pinpoints the very reason blogs can benefit students with low writing efficacy: the forum builds off traditional writing instruction, but incorporates error and imperfection as a tool for teaching writing as a process that requires perseverance and solicits mistakes. Mistakes are part of the process—a necessary part of the process—and blogs help reiterate this key lesson. The collaboration and group influence encouraged by blogging also help students feel less alone in the process—when students can see peer writing and discuss assignments and ideas with one another, they can demystify academic writing and compose with more ease and fluency.

Much of what composition instructors want to teach their students to “do” when writing is to construct meaning from the surrounding world and to see writing as an act steeped in collaboration, questioning, and exploring. Composing with new literacies, like blogs and digital forums for discussion or debate, can be flawed and fragmented, but they can also be “interactive, powerfully creative, mentally challenging, and intellectually transformative” (Smith 37). Difficulty is not the goal; however, challenges are at the heart of efficacy. We want to set sizeable goals for our students and give them the tools to see those goals to fruition. Whether students are inspired by an essay, article, video clip, class discussion, or lecture, teachers want their students to create meaning from these social experiences. Students should not fear trying something new or innovative—they should see that as the desired outcome. New literacies provide this outlet, and give students the opportunity to join a community of writers working toward similar goals.

Promoting collaboration and conversation increases input, timely feedback, and ultimately, a positive perception of writing on the part of students.

Potential Challenges

Theories of new literacy and self-efficacy are not without their problems and need for further research. There are perpetual dead-ends in terms of concrete findings and it is difficult to get a panoramic view of the historical present, though that is essentially what digital literacy scholars are attempting to do—they hope to gain reflective, critical understanding of a moment happening in real time. The nature of new literacy studies is foundationally difficult; by the time an article or study can go through the process of publication, new forms of technological communication and composition have already outdated the “cutting edge” scholarship. Thus, the goal with this analysis is not to make new, breakthrough conclusions, but rather to forge connections between what scholars are saying about new literacies, what students say about their experiences with digital literacies, and reasons instructors who may be considering using these literacy practices to improve the writing efficacy of composition students.

A second concern is a lack of research that makes concrete connections between digital literacy and self-efficacy. There is hardly any discussion of ways to improve writing efficacy by utilizing new literacies. However, sizeable scholarship does exist in relation to traditional print literacy and self-efficacy, (Bandura “Perceived Self-Efficacy” 137), and with the ever-changing status of literacy and composition, it is reasonable to conclude that new literacies can have the same effect on self-efficacy as print literacies. Thus, the apparent void of conclusive research on digital literacies, paired with the lack of new self-efficacy scholarship in recent years, could answer why so few composition

scholars are talking about the issue. The small sample of conclusions made by scholars are relevant and reliable, but more research and some historical distance from the moment is needed to make objective conclusions on just what new literacies can mean, and will continue to mean, to people occupying these technological spaces. Finally, and this claim grows less from research and more from reflecting on diverse experiences in multiple classrooms, which makes it mere observation and opinion: using technology as a novel means of watering down curriculum to get students interested, but not educated, is not a productive way of incorporating new literacy. For students to buy into new literacies as meaningful writing experiences, technology and digital spaces should be introduced only after clear learning objectives and a definite purpose for using the approach are established in the minds of both teacher and student.

One thing is certain: new literacies occupy an evolving, exciting place in composition studies. Students write everyday: They text message, email, use social media, blog, and participate in interactive video games; yet many college writing students experience crippling moments of low self-efficacy in their academic writing. For instructors and English departments that value positive writing efficacy in the classroom, weaving new literacy in with print literacies is a prospective way to combat the long-lasting negative effects of low writing efficacy on students. Teachers can set students on a different trajectory by building from their strengths and interests, and future research should continue on how new literacies might affect efficacy, and in the meantime teachers can build off their students' prior knowledge, experiences, and comfort level with technology and digital communication to create writing assignments that value collaboration and social interaction. Research projects like Andrea Lunsford's Stanford

Study of Writing, which looks at over 15,000 submissions of college writing over the course of the past fifteen years, are excellent examples of scholarship that show how digital literacies are not detrimental to students' mastery of print literacies; in fact, studies increasingly show that any writing, regardless of media or message, can be good writing if it helps students establish their rhetorical situation and understand how to convey meaning clearly.

Teachers can also instruct their classes on the different forms of literacy, as well as appropriate ways to compose in different forums. After all, composition is based on defining an audience and purpose—two rhetorical devices needed for writers to understand the expectations of the assignment. Incorporating blogging, social media, and digital composition, along with the theories that define what these things are and why they matter, can give students a sense of clarity that demystifies academic writing. There is no fault in giving students practical skills that are translatable across academic disciplines and writing settings, but most importantly, students need a solid sense of writing efficacy in their lives, both in and outside of the classroom. Reaching this goal requires perseverance and flexibility. Teachers may need to break the divide between academic/ nonacademic, personal/ public, and print/ digital in the twenty-first century college composition classroom—which seems like a small price to pay in exchange for a rising generation of self-assured, capable writers who pursue challenging goals and master a multitude of literacies, both “traditional” and “new.”

Chapter Three: The Modernist Image of the Writer and 21st Century Composition: Students' Views on Writing

“Our approaches to language and literacy as often as not keep us from deep understanding of differences and problems—and possibilities.” Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*

I remember the first walk I took to my honors freshman composition class in 2006. The air was sticky hot and thick with moisture, the signature feel of an August morning in middle Tennessee, but the haze surrounding me felt inconsequential compared to the uncertainty rising inside my skin. I am not a writer, I thought. I am not a writer. The mantra echoed on repeat, mimicking the rhythm of my footsteps on the sidewalk. Drowning in my thoughts and grasping for composure as I crossed the street and began the ascent to the humanities building, I realized I had a choice: I could either turn around, walk back to my dorm, and drop English 1010, or, I could give it a go. The second option was risky and I knew it—intellectual challenge was not yet within even my extended realm of comfort—but something pulled me, goaded me to keep walking even though my desire for safety pleaded with my feet to stop moving. I decided to try this writing thing out, yet the tickles of insecurity still irritated and taunted me as I reached the glass door to the building. My reflection glared back at me as I pushed through the handle, my face coming to a point around my mouth—the tension concentrating there, waiting for me to say something, anything, to hush the whisper telling me I would never make it through this semester.

It's important to note that I have yet to quiet this whisper. Stifle and ignore, well, I can do that, but eradicating it altogether does not happen for me. Six years later and the whispers still poke and ridicule my confidence when I let them grab even a little hold on

my own self-efficacy. This moment, though, stands as a touchstone on my timeline as a writer: the first of many such identity crises. Self-efficacy, or low self-efficacy, reared its ugly head, and I've fought it ever since.

English 1010 was the first writing class—the first class, really—of my college years. I can remember how crisp the paper felt between my fingertips and how heavy the pen seemed as I wrote “Maggie Bracey” down on the attendance sheet the professor passed among us. Throat tight from holding my breath, I raised my hand only slightly when the professor called on me and scanned the room for the face belonging to a name on her list. Feeling lonesome at the far end of the conference table, open seats on either side, this seventeen-year-old version of me reeled from the jarring reality of leaving my family and going off to school. Waking up, opening my eyes and seeing the concrete, peeling walls of dilapidation I was supposed to call home was not what I imagined when I envisioned growing up and finding myself at a university. My passions were elsewhere, my heart broken and homesick for the familiar, and I was terrified of not meeting the expectations I imagined were standard for college writers. Before—that is, before I got here—I was the writer: the writer in my group of friends, the best writer in class, the person who gave away her assistance on English papers like chocolate candies at Halloween: tokens of my affection for those in need. I never failed at anything before, but for the first time I dreaded the work to come—the effort, the sharing, the criticism. The people around me, though, with all the different faces, clothes, hair, voices—the separate individuals creating the student body—they looked like writers. The image of the writer—the image I constructed as I waited for class to begin—emerged fully formed from my deepest insecurities and meager understanding of what goes into producing

works of substance. With headphones blaring music, they scribbled unconsciously in their notebooks, ignoring one another as if it were their right—how would I ever compete? Rocking awkwardly in a stiff office chair I would occupy for the next fifteen weeks, surrounded by these images, no, these epitomes of writers, I had never felt more out of place or less able to meet the challenges ahead.

I retell this memory not to highlight my own insecurities, but to show how one student's first-year composition experience highlights feelings and assumptions that are not only common, but epidemic in the college writing class. What students think and feel about writing are of equal importance, and, as I have established in the previous two chapters, the way students feel about themselves as writers—their sense of personal self-efficacy—can push skill and ability to the fringe. Feelings take over, and as McLeod states, “[o]ne does not have to watch freshmen at work to know that writing is an emotional as well as a cognitive activity—we feel as well as think when we write” (426). Composition teachers stand at an eerie crossroads in a student's education: they instruct students about a discipline steeped in skill, intellect, emotion, and self-exploration. They foster writing that challenges, hurts, heals, and frustrates—often simultaneously. Students seek guidance on how to write, revise, and edit, but they want to know, too, how they should feel about their writing. Linda Brodkey says, in “Modernism and the Scene(s) of Writing,” “most students construe writing solely in terms of their teachers” (414), which means that teachers should be aware that the way they depict the image of the writer with their students and how they evaluate student writing can shape students' beliefs regarding writing. Teachers' influences are key to the importance of fostering positive self-efficacy and understanding the effort and skill needed to write well.

This chapter has two goals: to show how students' perceptions regarding the image of the writer, or the unattainable ideal, can affect the way they see their identities as writers and their ability to write, and to explore what types of writing they participate in outside of class and how those activities help mould their perception of beneficial writing practices. The first segment examines literature focusing primarily on the modernist image of the writer (Brodkey 399), what characteristics accompany this cultural projection, and how this image not only shapes the way students see the writer, but the act of writing itself (Cooper). Spotlights in this chapter are the student and the affective domain (McLeod 426), a shift in focus which moves away from self-efficacy theory and composition curriculum to highlight how feelings and assumptions shape student confidence—a component of self-efficacy discussed briefly in previous chapters. Students' perceptions of their ability and how they feel about themselves as writers are at the heart of my entire exploration; looking closely at the image of the writer created by decades of literary, cultural, and societal stereotypes allows for rich commentary on what kinds of effort and practices affect students learning to write, and how these assumptions either include or exclude students from feeling capable of meeting the challenges of first-year composition.

The second portion of this study builds on the theoretical foundation established in chapters one and two, namely the prevalence of digital literacy practices in student life and the importance of confidence as a component of self-efficacy. The research emerging from these interests focuses on collecting data from students about their views on what makes good writing, as well as what out-of-class writing practices they participate in, how often, and how relevant this writing is to in-class composition. Much evidence

supports the argument that using new literacies and digital composing forums in the composition classroom could help encourage positive writing self-efficacy, because students are familiar with these methods of composition and would feel a sense of mastery, ownership, and familiarity when writing in these spaces (Troia, Shankland, and Heintz; Lankshear and Knobel). A conclusive verdict is not yet out on the quantifiable evidence in favor of using digital literacy to foster positive writing self-efficacy; however, teachers should continue seeking insight into how students view writing and the writer. The ultimate goal is not to reach conclusions, but to participate in the current, theoretical discussion within the composition field on digital literacies, students' perceptions, and writing self-efficacy.

Cultural Images of the Writer

The writer occupies a strange role in academic culture, particularly for students: at first, the image of the writer seems more like a cultural persona that, for varying reasons, students see as alien because they cannot identify with what the writer “does” to produce words on the page. However, the writer’s image may have a more profound impact on self-efficacy and writing confidence than one first assumes: the character that students envision as the “writer,” Marilyn Cooper says, is “transmitted through pedagogy” and “influences our attitudes and the attitudes of our students toward writing” (365). Assumptions about the writer prototype trickle down from teacher to student and alter the way students see themselves, their ability, and ultimately, their own writing self-efficacy.

Cooper’s vision of the writer is as a solitary individual “isolated from the social world” (365): an artist who “works alone, within the privacy of his own mind” (365). Brodkey paints a similar picture, only she envisions the entire “scene of writing” (397),

saying her mental image of the writing tableau includes “a solitary writer alone in a cold garret working into the small hours of the morning by the thin light of a candle” (396). This image of the writer is pointedly an “artifact of literary modernism,” a glass-cased “scene of writing” depicted “as a thoroughly modern romance” (397) that eradicates all the nuanced struggles of the real student-writer and exemplifies all the values of a literary tradition—a spot on the timeline of English literature that cherishes inspiration, the pursuit of the individual, the solitude of creative genius, and an air of elitism that drives a wedge between gifted artists and the people around them (Murfin and Ray 307). This modernist image of the writer correlates closely with Cooper’s: both highlight the characteristics engrained in students’ minds as the writer archetype—a historical, literary goddess who serves as an example for what constitutes a writer in the English class.

I have my own, personal image of the writer. It may have a more contemporary flair than Cooper and Brodkey’s, but it captures the same sentiment: I see the writer, dressed in disheveled, wrinkled clothing because she has little time for the frivolities of fashion, sitting isolated at a lonely cubicle tucked away in the library’s 7th floor stacks. She pecks away at her laptop keyboard with a steaming cup of to-go coffee by her side, and the only light shines forth from the soft glow of her laptop. Wired with headphones in her ears, the writer works—undisturbed by the surrounding world.

Several common themes emerge from these three accounts of the image of the writer: isolation (Brodkey, Cooper, Rose), divine inspiration (Brodkey), and inherent talent (McLeod). These themes emerge from research within composition and English studies and are founded on the belief that writing students look to others—especially teachers and fellow students—for cues regarding what constitutes good writing practices:

developing their writing-self is an act of cultural and social synthesis. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gale E. Hawisher explore the development of literacy during the twentieth century through personal interviews, paying particular attention to the “*cultural ecology*” of writers (31). As we learned in the previous chapters, literacy and self-efficacy cannot exist in a vacuum—students’ beliefs about what constitutes literacy emerge from a “complex web of social forces, historical events, economic patterns, material conditions, and cultural expectations” (31). The prevalent assumptions made about the writer grow from students’ cultural ecology: how they perceive writing based on their teachers, peers, and environmental forces can have a powerful effect on the way they see themselves in comparison to the image of the writer.

Isolation

The first key characteristic of the archetypal writer is isolation, or the feeling that all good writing happens without assistance or collaboration. Brodkey uses the phrase “the writer-writes-alone” (399), to evoke several important assumptions regarding the equilibrium between action and ambiance—a balance of the act itself and the surrounding scene—that a person must maintain for the writing to come. The belief that the best writing occurs in the absence of communication is one of the most debilitating assumptions made by students: it shifts the importance of collaboration and community to the back burner and spotlights those few, famous, and often fictitious artists that made the garret so famous—and so hard for students to replicate (Brodkey 399). Both Brodkey and Cooper look at how the expectations of solitude and isolation sculpt students’ views on what practices produce high caliber prose. Brodkey in particular argues that all writers, regardless of mastery-level or acclaim, are “influenced by the scene of writing, namely,

that all of us try to recreate a garret and all that it portends whether we are writing in a study, a library, a classroom, or at a kitchen table, simply because we learned this lesson in writing first” (397). This re-creation of the quintessential writing scene—the lonely garret of the modernist artist—gets handed down through literature and academic culture with viral fortitude; whether or not writing teachers encourage the modernist scene of writing, its perpetuation in the minds of students reveals a deeply engrained assumption by people in general that masterful writing happens alone. In the model of the modernist writer, the other practices common to the writing class—discussion, freewriting, brainstorming—merely prepares the writer for her time in the garret: this solitude is where the real writing happens.

It is important to note that composition and literary scholars, alike, combat the hegemony of this image of the writer and the scene of writing. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose describes his students’ inclination to keep their writing quiet and hidden from their classmates; no one wants to reveal what they wrote because the process is messy and unique. However, Rose challenges writers to revel in the process of writing and share their challenges with peers because much like fingerprints, no two writers’ words reach the page through the same process: budding writers benefit from collaboration and conversations about what goes in to writing. Rose comments on his students’ resistance to sharing their writing struggles, saying, “[w]riting and reading are such private acts that we forget how fundamentally social they are: We hear stories read by others and we like to tell others about the stories we read; we learn to write from others and we write for others to read us” (109). Cooper echoes Rose regarding the social nature of composition by saying that writing is not just a means of transcribing knowledge, but a mechanism for

learning: “language and texts are not simply the means by which individuals discover and communicate information, but are essentially social activities, dependent on social structure and processes” (366) that cannot occur in the garret. The problem with the isolated image of the writer and the scene of writing lies in its exclusivity; as Brodkey says, looking at writing from this exclusive, solitary perspective “encourages the reification of one moment in writing *as* writing, by excluding all other moments” (400).

Whether or not all students buy into this writing hierarchy is important: the tradition within the composition class of seeing one writing process as inherently better or more fruitful than another limits what students will attempt with their own writing. Melanie Kill describes the process students go through as they integrate themselves into the rhythm of the writing course and absorb the practices privileged in their new academic environment. For the novice writer, “it is by engaging in the generic actions and interactions that are valued in particular [writing] communities that we perform and develop identities appropriate to the places and spaces we want to occupy” (217). As students learn to write, they look to their surroundings for cues regarding how to start, what to write, and where to go with what they have: they need companionship and encouragement as they sort through what “being a writer” means, whether that identity is imposed upon them by general education requirements or whether they seek out the role for personal fulfillment. Most importantly, students should learn to discern functionality from idealism. The garret and “scene of writing” described by Brodkey and Cooper is an artifact literary nostalgia that appears romantic to the outsider, until she becomes an insider, steps within the isolated cell, and feels the weight of solitude. Without companionship, the writer calls upon inspiration—the second major characteristic of the

image of the writer, and the attribute that devalues the effort and perseverance necessary for good writing.

Divine Inspiration

The modernist idea of the writer as “a Genius” sets up the image of an inspired being blessed with the gift of composition (Brodkey 407). This superiority, or divine inspiration, implies that those identified as “good” writers are not only singled out in the garret of composition, where they compose without interaction, but are also elevated above those who are not writers. Cooper describes the writer’s gift—his power, so to speak—as “a form of parthenogenesis” in which the writer produces “propositional and pragmatic structures, Athena-like, full grown and complete, out of his brow” (366). In this scenario, “the writer is viewed not as a participant in writing, but as a recipient of written language” (Brodkey 399)—a vessel through which fully formed, masterful language flows.

Brodkey and Cooper’s discussions on divine inspiration create a picture of a writer who is less a composer and more a transcriptionist, feverishly scrawling down fluent, inspired language gushing from the mind of the creative genius. This characteristic of the modernist writer is problematic because it creates unreal expectations in students’ minds regarding what the process of writing should look and feel like. Real writing—student writing—doesn’t happen instantly, in one swift, heavenly act of transcription, but many students believe writing should work that way. There are several reasons why this divine inspiration view of writing is alive in the writing classroom, but the one most pertinent to this discussion is the student’s desire to write one draft—one perfect draft—and ignore the revising and editing that are foundational to the process-based writing

instruction prevalent in composition classrooms since the 1970s (Murray). McLeod connects the preoccupation with divine inspiration to students' locus of control, an aspect of writing self-efficacy discussed extensively in chapter one. Students with an external locus of control are often reluctant to revise, and McLeod says their resistance to revision "might be related to something more fundamental—the feeling that they have little control over the results of their efforts" ("Some Thoughts About Feelings 429). A student who internalizes the assumption that good writing comes from inspiration and only the elite are gifted with the ability to write often battles an external locus of control, and consequently may experience a low sense of self-efficacy. A belief in divine inspiration as an attribute of the writer goes hand-in-hand with the final characteristic: the assumption that good writing occurs from either inherent talent or hard work.

Inherent Talent

Inspiration and locus of control lead to my final point regarding the image of the writer: the pronounced polemic between talent and effort in the mind of the writing student. The idea of privileging talent over effort dates as far back as classical Greek and Roman theories in rhetoric; philosophers and educators like Isocrates, Aristotle, and Cicero believed "natural ability" (Bizzel and Herzberg 35) the most important attribute needed to produce a great orator and rhetorician. Contemporary scholars, like Brodkey and Cooper, explain the privileging of natural ability through the scene, or ecology, of writing. In these environments, writers either have inherent talent or they put forth much effort to make up for the lack thereof: composing becomes a game of "all or nothing" for the writing student. Composition and English scholars have much to say on the talent versus effort debate and its effect on writing instruction and teachers' perceptions of the

ideal writer. One interesting way of dealing with the issue surfaces in Susan McLeod's article "Pygmalion or Golem? Teacher Affect and Efficacy." McLeod's scholarship intersects with the modernist image of the writer when she says, "the popular understanding is that writing ability is not something one can improve but is a stable entity—you either have it or you don't" (379-80). This innate ability, or talent, is perhaps the most parasitic characteristic associated with the cultural image of the writer, because it incorporates both of the previous characteristics—isolation and divine inspiration—while also turning a student's critical eye inward. While the other characteristics involve a student's environment, the battle between talent versus effort requires students to look within themselves and their sense of self-efficacy to evaluate their most basic motivation for writing: do I have it, or not? This divide leads to exciting topics for research when scholars and teachers pose these questions: what percentage of students see writing as an act of talent or effort, and how do these beliefs reinforce the cultural image of the writer, the expectations of teachers and peers, and, most importantly, the image students envision of themselves as writers? Exploring these inquiries into students' beliefs could provide teachers with ways to build curricula and establish a class ethos that encourages effort, confidence, collaboration, and positive self-efficacy.

What's Next?

Each of these characteristics—isolation, divine inspiration, inherent talent—stands out as an important figure in the cultural ecology of the writer (Brodkey; Cooper; Self and Hawisher). However, without contemporary input regarding how these images and assumptions affect real student self-efficacy and beliefs, the image of the writer remains abstract—not grounded in the individual perceptions of students struggling to

find their identity in the writing class. The possibility of using new literacies as mechanisms for both writing instruction and improved self-efficacy is the premise of the previous chapter, “Writing Self-Efficacy and Digital Literacies,” and the overlap between that discussion and the present one suggests that by looking at *both* students’ beliefs about the image of the writer *and* how they compose in digital venues, teachers can learn more about their students’ views of themselves in particular and literacy in general. This knowledge is crucial for instructors seeking to improve student confidence in various writing environments. Selfe and Hawisher comment prolifically on the relevance of research concerning perceptions of new literacy and beliefs about writing. They believe, as I do, that “everyday literacy experiences [. . .] can help educators, parents, policymakers, and writing teachers respond to today’s students in more informed ways” (24); these are the most important outlets for teachers to exert their time, energy, and enthusiasm. What I am proposing, then, is a re-examination of students’ beliefs regarding the image of the writer and out-of-class, digital literacy practices. These different topics are brought together because the most beneficial composition research analyzes specific writing practices within the wider cultural moment they inhabit. As Brandt says, to gain helpful insight into students’ writing beliefs, teachers must pursue:

fine-grained explorations of out-of-school literacy practices [because these inquiries] provide educators with conceptual tools for bridging between the resources students bring to school and the different literacy practices they must learn to control [. . .] By expanding the perspective on literacy, by treating it fundamentally as cultural and contextualized, these studies democratize the worth and importance of all literacy practices. (8)

Our students live in a digital age—writing happens faster and reaches infinitely more people: writing teachers must keep up with the pace of their students and the landscapes of the present cultural ecology. Brodkey’s writing encapsulates this need for constant exploration and inquiry regarding writing. She says:

[t]o see writing anew, to look at it from yet other vantage points, we must re-read an image that we have come to think of as the reality of writing. It is not enough to say that it is only a picture, for such pictures provide us with a vocabulary for thinking about and explaining writing to ourselves and one another. (399)

The next step, then, in this perpetual re-evaluation of the image of the writer is to learn, first-hand, what students believe about their own writing—in-class, out-of-class, in print, and within twenty-first century composition forums.

Background and Rationale for the Study

Up to this point, self-efficacy, digital literacies, and the image of the writer have functioned to move my study toward an ultimate goal: to understand what predispositions and emotions students bring into the writing class and how those feelings shape the way they view their ability to write. A multitude factors contribute to this perception, and each environmental and cultural stimulus, however inconsequential it may seem, can influence the perceived self-efficacy of the writing student. The development of self-efficacy, confidence, and literacy hinge on perception and feeling; often composition theory focuses heavily on the cognitive implications of student writers and how their minds work through the process of learning to write. However, another facet to writing development carries equal weight in the discussion of writing-efficacy: the affective

domain, or the emotional realm within composition (McLeod; Brand). Susan McLeod explores in detail this domain and its impact on both student and teacher efficacy (“Pygmalion or Golem?” 380), while also highlighting the anxiety, motivation, and beliefs most commonly discussed in tandem with the writing class (“Some Thoughts About Feelings”). The aspects of the affective domain I am most interested in are students’ beliefs, because, as McLeod says, students bring to the classroom “a great many beliefs about writing which diminish their perception of their own skills as writers” (429), and I am convinced that these beliefs—about ability, the image of the writer, writing practices, and what factors create good writing—are the most important place for teachers to start when trying to improve the self-efficacy and confidence of their students.

A major problem arises when looking at students’ beliefs: abstraction. It is difficult to quantify the nuances of belief and feeling, and I have felt the weight of that issue from the project’s beginning. To combat this uneasiness I limited the amount of information I sought to gain: instead of looking at students’ entire perception of the writer and writing, I focused on the information essential to the global issues of confidence, self-efficacy, and digital literacy. I asked five questions—three required short answers and two asked students to choose the option that best fits their viewpoint—that I hoped would elicit information regarding what students value in terms of their writing experiences and the cultural moment they inhabit. I was most curious to see what beliefs students hold about what comprises good writing—does it come from talent, effort, or both, and how do students’ perceptions of talent versus effort alter the way they see themselves as writers? In my research I am only marginally what percentage of students see writing as an act driven by talent or effort. More important to me is the connection

between the question of effort versus talent and the ways students see themselves as writers: good, bad, or average.

With that specific interest in mind, I established two explicit goals from the study's beginning. The first one grows from my overarching interest: self-efficacy. This main topic, particularly writing self-efficacy and the affective domain (McLeod), ignited my curiosity regarding how students see themselves as writers and how that vision either bolsters or stifles the level of confidence they bring to the university classroom. My second goal grew from a discovery I made while researching digital literacies as tools for college-level writing instruction. I became increasingly aware of the minimal scholarship devoted to ways digital literacies could benefit students within the fields of composition, writing studies, and literacy studies. As stated earlier, I am excited by the potential advantages of incorporating technological literacy into composition curricula, particularly for teachers looking to improve the confidence and self-efficacy of students who feel less adept using print literacies but have some knowledge of digital writing forums. Thus, I saw a need within the field that demanded attention, and I agree with Selfe and Hawisher that:

we really know very little about how and why people have acquired and developed, or failed to acquire and develop, the literacies of technology during the past 25 years or so. Nor do we know how historical, cultural, economic, political, or ideological factors have affected, or been affected by, peoples' acquisition and development of these technological literacies.

(2)

Writers like Brandt and Selfe and Hawisher highlight the importance of placing literacy research within the context of the cultural moment, and that is the goal, on a much smaller scale, of my research.

Following McLeod's assertion that students bring a multitude of feelings, assumptions, and prior experiences to the writing class, I ask students to identify their beliefs regarding what makes good writing. The three major questions—"does writing stem from effort or talent," "do you consider yourself a good writer," and "what characteristics do you assign to the image of the good writer"—comprise the questionnaire's first section. The second portion of the study asks students to report how frequently they participate in a list of out-of-class writing practices, as well as how important they see these practices to developing in-class writing. This portion of the study is founded in the possibility that new literacy forums and practices have potential to bridge the gap between students' prior knowledge (Bandura; Smith) and new information taught in the writing class. In exploring digital literacy and the image of writer, I accept the challenge of navigating through a topic that is developing moment-to-moment—the task at hand requires flexibility and willingness to ask questions knowing the answers may not yet be attainable. Brandt's words from "Accumulating Literacy: Writing and Learning in the 21st century" reverberate as I sort through the knowledge gained over the course of this project: "while at one time literacy might have been best achieved by attending to traditional knowledge and tight locuses of meaning, literacy in an advanced literate period requires an ability to work the borders between tradition and change, an ability to adapt and improvise and amalgamate" (660). Writing teachers, most of all, need these tools of adaptation when they face their students. The best way to prepare for the

uncertainty of twenty-first century literacy and composition is to learn as much as we can about our students: the ultimate objective is to know what individuals think about writing and how their own practices affect the composing they do in the classroom.

When preparing the questionnaire used in my research, two main sources contributed to the study's overall design and execution: Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and Macgill's study conducted for the PEW Internet Research titled, "Writing, Technology, and Teens," and Selfe and Hawisher's longitudinal study of twenty individuals and their life experiences with digital literacy in *Literate Lives in the Information Age*. Both of these texts have been introduced and discussed already, but their value to my study is immeasurable and merits further explanation regarding why these studies were so pivotal to my project.

For the second portion of the questionnaire, the PEW research project was the best example of the different digital literacies I wanted to pinpoint in my final two questions. Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and Macgill collected data by asking students to identify, from a list of writing practices, which forms of writing they participate in and how often (11-12). I built my questions about digital literacy around the foundations established in this report and drafted eight literacy practices most pertinent to students' beliefs regarding writing: posting statuses to Facebook, writing on a blog, writing in a journal (either electronic or paper), sending and responding to text messages, creating computer programs, posting updates and comments to Twitter, communicating through email, and creative writing. I also devised a number scale for students to indicate how often they used and how useful they saw digital composition practices.

While the PEW report contributed to the framework of the questionnaire itself, the *ethos* of my study relied on Selfe and Hawisher's text. In the spirit of Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, Selfe and Hawisher seek snapshots of twenty individuals' paths to digital literacy to paint a landscape of the cultural moment. I too look at students' environment—what their culture signifies as good writing and what kind of writing they attempt based off social and academic conditions—to understand how they participate in the discourses around them and how those conversations form their view of themselves within their world.

Finally, a scientific hypothesis did not seem appropriate for this type of research; instead of testing a theory, I shed all assumptions and take students' perceptions and beliefs at their base value, in hopes of gathering raw information for teachers who want to build their curricula around improving the confidence and self-efficacy of their writing students.

Methods

Data were collected at Western Kentucky University over the course of six separate procedures. To obtain a sizeable pool of participants, I contacted all English faculty, part-time instructors, and graduate assistants currently teaching a section of English 100 and asked any of them interested in assisting me in my research to contact me through email. Following an encouraging response from the department, I scheduled class times with each instructor and began administering the questionnaire to each of the six English 100 classes participating in the study. The survey, titled "Confidence, the

Image of the Writer, and Digital Literacies”^{*} took approximately ten minutes to introduce, administer, and collect, and each procedure took place within the first fifteen minutes of class. Of the 109 participants in the study, sixty-four were female (59%), and forty-five were male (41%), and all were over the age of eighteen. Most students answered every question, though some participants were unsure of their ACT scores or GPA and left those questions blank. Additionally, some students did not give a definitive answer to question two, which asks the student to explain whether or not she beliefs herself a good writer. However, the majority of the participants completed the survey in its entirety.

Results

The data gathered from the questionnaire prove both fascinating and messy. This project set out to make connections between different beliefs—about the writer, good writing, out-of-class writing practices, and new literacies. However, I learned much more about how students see their entire identity within writing as opposed to compartmentalized views on each of these separate subjects: students have a clear vision of how they see themselves as writers, and that perception seems most influenced by the way they feel about the writing they produce, whether the writing is assigned for class or created outside of school.

Perhaps the most surprising result of the study was students’ “talent vs. effort” belief. I mentioned earlier I was most interested in the connection between students’ perceptions of themselves as writers and whether they viewed good writing as a result of talent or effort. Based on the characteristics of the image of the writer as described

^{*}To see the questionnaire in its entirety, refer to Appendix A.

earlier, I suspected that a sizeable percentage of students would believe writing grew from talent—an assumption that the research negated. The questionnaire’s results show that fifty-six participants (51.3%) believe good writing is the product of effort; only eighteen students (16.5%) see writing as a product of talent, and thirty-four (31.2%) believe good writing stems from a combination of both.

Even more fascinating is the connection between the “talent vs. effort” belief and participants’ perceptions of their personal identities as writers. Question two asks students to tell whether or not they see themselves as good writers. Of the 107 students who answered both questions, fifty of the students (46.7%) responded yes, they saw themselves as good writers; thirty-four (31.7%) answered no, and twenty-three (21.5%) believed themselves average writers. This result is encouraging, but poses questions for further inquiry. Teachers want their students to feel confident writing, and numbers that show a high level of confidence is exciting for teachers; however, it also brings up the problem of having a false view of self-efficacy: if students are unclear on the expectations and responsibilities established for an assignment, they may feel a sense of confidence that overstretches their capability to complete the assignment. Though this is not always the case, future research could look specifically at false senses of efficacy in students by comparing their views of themselves as writers against previous performances in academic settings.

The next interesting finding comes from combining the results of questions one and two: the research shows that out of sixty-eight participants (63.6% of the study’s participants) who answered either yes or no for question two, thirty-four (50%) answered “effort” for the first question and “yes” for the second, which represents the majority of

the study's student participants who clearly identified themselves as either "good" or "bad" at writing. Sixteen students (23.5%) answered "effort" and "no," ten (14.7%) answered "talent" and "yes," and four (5.8%) answered "talent" and "no." These findings were quite surprising. I felt certain that students would give a more ambiguous answer regarding whether or not they saw themselves as good writers: this was not the case. The majority (63.6%) answered this question with a concise "yes" or "no." The remaining thirty-nine participants (36.4% of the study's participants) identified themselves as average writers. These students are the ones I became most interested in studying, because they are the students in flux: the ones most easily swayed by their sense of efficacy. Students who answered "average" were overwhelmingly more likely to see writing as a result of both effort and talent, which suggests that students with a less polemic view of the image of the writer also take a neutral stance when evaluating their own ability. This level of flexibility is promising for teachers, because students who have a more fluid definition of "good writing" and a less concrete image of themselves as writers are more likely to change the way they see their own self-efficacy based on the instruction they receive. For example, students who answered "average" usually qualified their answer with some stipulation regarding an assignment or the class they were currently taking: many said they felt like good writers in high school, but writing in college shook their confidence. Their self-efficacy is malleable because they are still forming their identities as writers; these students most in need of instruction can develop a positive self-efficacy, because, unlike the other sixty-eight who had a concrete perception of themselves as writers, these students are unsure—which leaves them open to try new challenges and to change the way they see their capability to write well.

Regardless of the high percentage of students who reported effort as the source of good writing, when participants were asked what attributes they ascribe to the “good” writer, thirty-five students, or 33.6% of the entire study, listed imagination and creativity as characteristics they associate with good writers. This number is intriguing: only ten students (28.7% of the students who listed creativity and imagination as attributes of good writing) of the thirty-five identified talent as the foundation of good writing. Nine of the students (25.6%) identified effort as the foundation and creativity/imagination as the key attributes, and the remaining sixteen (45.7%) who identified creativity and imagination as attributes also believed writing stemmed from effort and talent. What’s fascinating about these results is the high percentage of students who saw good writing as a product of effort and talent: these students were more likely to list several attributes alongside creativity and imagination, which mirrors their belief that natural ability and effort form the good writer. As for the students who identified either effort or talent, the results are split almost evenly, which is perplexing because one might expect that students who see writing as a product of effort would negate the importance of creativity and imagination: this is not the case. Maybe this is an example of the image of the writer influencing students’ perceptions of what makes good writing—even if they believe writing comes from effort, they still hold on to the modernist image of the writer. In addition to creativity and imagination, grammar/spelling/mechanics were the next highest reported attributes (twenty students, or 18.7%), followed by effort (twenty students, or 18.7%), vocabulary (fifteen students, or 14%), and vivid detail (ten students, or 9.3%). These characteristics reveal a balance between talent-based and effort-based attributes.

The second section (questions four and five) asks students to circle the answer that best represents their views on out-of-class writing and digital literacy practices. For question four, the participants rated, on a scale of one to five (one being least helpful and five being most helpful), the usefulness of out-of-class writing practices on in-class composition. Of the options given, “creative writing” received the highest rating: of the 106 students who answered this question, seventy-four (69.8%) ranked creative writing as a five on the scale, twenty-seven (25.5%) circled four out of five, and only five students (4.7%) ranked creative writings as a three or below on the scale. The out-of-class writing practice with the next highest ranking was “writing in a journal,” with eighty-eight participants (82.2%) rating this practice as a four or five on the scale. “Sending and receiving emails” emerged as the third highest ranked practice, with sixty-one answers (57.5%) of four or five on the scale.

The data for question four shows students’ strong and seemingly collective idea of which out-of-class writing benefits school composition. With this result in mind, teachers might assume that students who believe that practices like creative writing and writing in a journal can benefit academic writing would participate in those practices to improve their in-class writing skills. However, this assumption does not prove true in the answers students gave about their actual out-of-class writing practices. Only thirty-nine students (36.8%) reported writing creatively daily or weekly; the majority—sixty-seven participants (63.2%)—said they practice creative writing one or two times a month, rarely, or never. The same trend holds with writing in a journal: ninety-nine students (92.5%) reported they wrote in a journal one to two times a month, rarely, or never, leaving only six (5.6%) who journal regularly.

The only practice that emerged as both a beneficial and routine out-of-class writing practice for participants was sending and receiving emails: ninety-six students (90.6%) reported using email either daily or weekly, ten students (9.4%) said they communicated through email once or twice a month, and no students reported rarely or never using email. This is undoubtedly due to the necessity of checking email for messages from professors regarding coursework, class meetings, and student-specific issues and inquiries. However, what proves interesting is students' belief that email, a digital literacy practice, helps improve the more traditional, academic writing required in the college composition class: email is the one digital forum students saw as beneficial to improving print literacy. Other practices that the majority of participants reported using daily or weekly were updating statuses on Facebook, text messaging, and posting to Twitter, but most students ranked these practices as either a one or two on the "beneficial to in-class writing" scale, which makes these practices less striking for the teacher looking for ways to bridge helpful out-of-class writing with in-class instruction. One final point: texting was the one component of the questionnaire that produced a unanimous response. All 106 students who responded to the question of how often they send and receive text messages reported that they communicate through text messaging daily, which is an astounding observation considering that the population of students I surveyed were wildly split on most other questions regarding both the image of the writer and out-of-school writing practices. Nevertheless, seventy-seven of those participants (72%) said text messaging rated a one or two in terms of being beneficial to in-class writing, which suggests they see little usefulness for texting as a tool for college instruction.

The time has come to consider incorporating text messaging specifically into composition instruction as a model for teaching the traditional rhetorical situation and abstract ideas like identifying audience, thinking about purpose, and constructing an argument. This type of project could benefit from scholarship like Lunsford's work with the Stanford Study of Writing, which has archived over 15,000 pieces of digital writing since 2001 and provides fascinating insight into the effect of digital writing practices on print literacy—an effort that Clive Thompson cites in a 2009 article for *Wired* magazine as both positive and astounding. Thompson says, “the proliferation of new forms of online pop-cultural exegesis [. . .] has given [students] a chance to write enormously long and complex pieces of prose, often while working collaboratively with others.” Additionally, Thompson notes that out of all the pieces of student writing Lunsford collected, not one used “texting speak” in an academic essay, which shows that students are keen to the nuances of rhetorical situations—a skill some teachers underestimate in their students because too often teachers' definitions of writing differ from the definitions students create for themselves. Lunsford's study, and any future projects that may grow from this interest, should encourage teachers to think about ways to use new literacies (even text messaging!) as tools for composition instruction. Seeing digital writing as the death of print literacy is an inaccurate and shortsighted way of looking at the future of writing instruction.

Discussion

Based on the literature exploring the image of the writer (Brodkey; Cooper), I had assumed that students would have their own concrete perception of what characteristics good writers possess. More pointedly, I believed students saw good writing as a result of

talent, not effort. This belief emerged from my personal experience, as both student and teacher, as well as research conducted for this entire study. It seemed feasible that the study's participants would possess a similar set of views. My assumption was incorrect: the vast majority of students negated the idea that good writing grows from talent, which is an encouraging discovery for writing teachers. If students believe in the value of effort, then they are more inclined to possess an internal locus of control (McLeod), and thus understand that learning to write well demands personal responsibility and energy. The participants, however, did show signs of possessing at least some residual beliefs mirroring the modernist image of the writer, specifically when they noted creativity and imagination as the two most powerful attributes of a good writer. However, this answer could be the result of students imagining one genre of writer—perhaps the fiction writer—and privileging that form above other, more academic images of the scene of writing (Brodkey). To get at the heart of what freshmen composition students believe about multiple types of writing, further research must delineate the different forms of composition and understand how students believe proficiency is gained in these different genres.

The results of questions four and five suggest a promising symbiotic relationship between using email and the improvement of in-class writing skills as reported by participants. Teachers should pay attention to their students' views about what is beneficial *and* relevant to their lives both in and out of the classroom; by making writing instruction practical and building on students' prior knowledge and mastery (even using those writing practices students noted as prevalent parts of their lives, but seemingly not beneficial to their school writing), teachers can use new literacies to improve their

students' writing skills and foster a positive sense of self-efficacy. Writing instruction and literacy are components of larger social contexts and cultural ecologies; when teachers should their curricula to give students confidence and feelings of capability when writing, they create a mindset that benefits their students both immediately and in future composing situations.

Finally, this study gives no definitive conclusions on the relevance of digital literacies for writing instruction, or the effect of modernist images of the writer on students' confidence and self-efficacy. Further research, with more participants and extensive methods for gathering information, is necessary before an exhaustive critical conversation can occur on these topics. Instead, this study serves as a jumping-off point—a theoretical inquiry that poses a topic in want of further discussion. New ways of incorporating students' strengths and relevant interests into composition curricula should help teachers of writing toward the goal of forming life-long learners who value the importance of writing well and feel capable of pursuing challenging, unfamiliar writing tasks—whether for school, work, community, or their own personal interests.

Conclusion

This thesis highlights the importance of fostering positive self-efficacy within writing instruction; it also suggests that teachers view their students' writing self-efficacy as a key factor in how they approach designing curricula and establishing a class *ethos*. Each chapter focuses on students' perceptions of writing and themselves as writers, but this study has a second, implicit goal: to improve teaching self-efficacy by bringing the topic to the forefront of composition discourse. I have paid much attention to the writing student, but self-efficacy and confidence matters for the teacher, too: instructors feel the strain of low self-efficacy, whether they experience it themselves or they see its effect on their students. Writing can burden teachers with the same insecurities and questions that plague many students.

The best way, then, to conclude this broad, theoretical conversation on writing self-efficacy and the ways it affects teachers *and* students is to remember that everyone, regardless of talent, effort, perseverance, or confidence develops a distinct sense of writing self-efficacy. While efficacy changes from one person to the next, developing a solid understanding of what factors most often affect a person's perception of their ability can benefit individuals in whatever pursuits they attempt. A sense of efficacy is not only specific and contingent upon a person's sense of self—the task at hand is equally as important in determining self-efficacy. To improve self-efficacy and make others aware of its importance within composition instruction, we must remember that it is best determined on an individual basis. Instead of looking at a classroom full of confused students or a faculty meeting full of disillusioned instructors, Megan Tschannen-Moran, Anita Woolfolk Hoy, and Wayne K. Hoy remind us that each person has a distinct sense

of self-efficacy, and, depending on the task at hand, an individual's sense of efficacy can vary wildly from one skill to the next. Writing is the focus here, and therefore we cannot divorce composition from a general discussion on efficacy because "[s]elf-efficacy is distinct from other conceptions of self, such as self-concept, self-worth, and self-esteem, in that it is specific to a particular task" (210). The more aware that teachers become of their students' perceptions of themselves as writers, the better equipped they are to create an environment that encourages pursuing new goals and trying challenging things. The teacher sets the tone of the classroom. But self-efficacy scholarship, particularly Bandura's work, encourages teachers to evaluate and nurture their teaching self-efficacy in tandem with their students' writing self-efficacy. While Bandura suggests that people analyze self-efficacy by looking at clear-cut tasks performed by specific individuals, we should also see the writing class holistically: by focusing on the task of writing and working toward improving students' self-efficacy for that skill, teachers can boost their own teaching efficacy by remaining in touch with their students' feelings about assignment expectations, their perceptions of what makes good writing, and their understanding of how much effort and energy writing well requires. This thesis provides encouragement to teachers who may not see any benefit from gathering information on their students' views: with that knowledge, teachers can not only improve their craft—they can feel more capable and confident as leaders in the classroom.

The writing class can stimulate intellectual prowess, but it can also confuse and discourage students from attempting new pursuits if they see writing well as a skill out of their reach. An instructor's role in instruction is not only to establish an assignment—we must also foster an environment and build relationships with our students that show them

we are on their side. How students perceive themselves in the writing class merits serious thought and research from the composition field. This project provides strong arguments for recognizing writing self-efficacy as a dynamic facet of a student's overall development and experience in the college writing class. Writing is a skill that spills over disciplinary and career boundaries: in a twenty-first century world requiring multiple kinds of literacy to excel in most fields, feeling capable communicating through writing—whether in print or digital form— and learning even newer forms of composing is an attribute college students need.

I pursue self-efficacy research because I still wake up every morning and feel like I am unqualified to hang the sign saying “writer” around my neck and walk into a classroom of students who feel some of the same emotions I experience (often): uncertainty, confusion, lack of confidence. These feelings are human, universal, and transcend disciplines, classrooms, and individuals: we all develop a sense of self-efficacy for each skill we practice. Writing self-efficacy is no different: in fact, writing self-efficacy helps shape overall academic success—or failure. By improving the confidence and capability of writing students, teachers also mutually benefit from the improved ethos and positive environment that emerges when they value students' perceptions of their identities as writers and the caliber of writing they create.

Further Research

I mention throughout this thesis the need for further research on self-efficacy, and that suggestion remains strong in light of the ever-changing composition field. With countless new ways to communicate, and a fluid definition of literacy, scholars in the twenty-first century should seek connections between writing self-efficacy and new

literacies if only to educate themselves as much as possible on ways to use digital composition and technology as a tool for improving a student's ability to compose in multiple media—and feel confident in that practice. Additionally, exploring how the image of the writer affects students' mindsets and expectations could present fascinating scholarship. The benefits to teachers could be impressive as well; by plotting the image of the writer along a cultural timeline, researchers could learn what factors contributed to the stereotype tied to this image, and thus find ways to disassemble the construct of the writer—the benchmark for comparison that oftentimes keeps students from feeling capable of writing well—and to encourage positive self-perception among students.

Possibilities for future research sprout organically and involuntarily from this project, and I encourage anyone interested in self-efficacy, digital literacy, and the perception of the writer to explore and experiment with new ways to understand this topic—and then share it with us.

APPENDIX A

**Image of the Writer/ The Effects of Out-of-School Writing on School Tasks
Questionnaire**

The following questionnaire asks you to provide some information about yourself, as well as your thoughts regarding the image of the writer and out-of-school writing practices. Please, do not write your name down at any point during the questionnaire to ensure your anonymity.

Gender_____

High School GPA_____

ACT Composite Score_____

ACT English Score_____

1. Do you think good writing comes from effort or talent? Explain your choice.

2. Do you consider yourself a good writer? Why or why not?

3. In your opinion, what attributes make a good writer?

4. Do you see any of the following out-of-school writing practices as helpful in your school writing tasks? Rate how helpful you see each task, with 1 being the least helpful, and 5 being the most helpful, by circling the number that best represents your answer.

Out-of-School Writing Practices _____ Least Helpful.....Most Helpful

Posting status updates to Facebook	1	2	3	4	5
Writing on a blog	1	2	3	4	5
Writing in a journal, either electronic or paper	1	2	3	4	5
Sending and responding to text messages	1	2	3	4	5
Creating computer programs	1	2	3	4	5
Posting updates and comments to Twitter	1	2	3	4	5
Communicating through email	1	2	3	4	5
Creative writing	1	2	3	4	5

5. In which of these practices do you participate? Circle the answer that best represents how often you participate in each writing practice.

<u>Out-of-School Writing Practices</u>	<u>Frequency of Participation in Writing Practices</u>			
Posting status updates to Facebook	Daily	Weekly	1-2 Times Per Month	Rarely/Never
Writing on a blog	Daily	Weekly	1-2 Times Per Month	Rarely/Never
Writing in a journal	Daily	Weekly	1-2 Times Per Month	Rarely/Never
Sending and responding to text messages	Daily	Weekly	1-2 Times Per Month	Rarely/Never
Creating computer programs	Daily	Weekly	1-2 Times Per Month	Rarely/Never
Posting updates and comments to Twitter	Daily	Weekly	1-2 Times Per Month	Rarely/Never
Communicating through email	Daily	Weekly	1-2 Times Per Month	Rarely/Never
Creative writing	Daily	Weekly	1-2 Times Per Month	Rarely/Never

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Document

Project Title: Co-Occurrence, the Idea of the Writer, and Digital Literacies

Investigator: Maggie Bracey, Department of English, Western Kentucky University, 1906 College Heights #11388, Bowling Green, KY USA; Phone: 270-745-6896; maggie.bracey222@wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a study conducted through Western Kentucky University. You must be 18 years old to participate. The University requires you give consent to participate in this study. A basic explanation of this study is described below. Please read the explanation in its entirety and discuss any questions you may have with the administrator. Your completion of this survey implies your consent. If you have any later questions regarding this study, you may contact the investigator, Maggie Bracey, at 270-745-6896 or maggie.bracey222@wku.edu.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project: Benefits of the Study: This questionnaire is designed to look at your thoughts about what attributes and practices characterize a writer and good writing. It also looks at what effect out-of-school writing tasks (Facebook posts, blogging, Twitter updates, journaling, creative writing, emailing, text messaging, creating computer programs) has on school writing tasks and how you think your own out-of-class writing practices affect your school writing tasks. Knowing this information can help teachers and researchers gain knowledge about students' perceptions of what makes a good writer, especially regarding whether talent or effort is more important to good writing, and helps teachers understand how students see out-of-class writing practices in relation to school writing tasks. Additionally, instructors can use the knowledge gained from this study to adjust their teaching methods to incorporate lessons and activities that encourage higher confidence levels in writing students.

2. Procedure Explanation: There is one document included below. The questionnaire *Idea of the Writer/The Effects of Out-of-School Writing on School Tasks* asks about your ideas on what characteristics are consistent with the image of a writer and what attributes contribute to good writing. You will also be asked to rate the helpfulness of a selected pool of out-of-class writing practices on school writing tasks on a scale from 1-5. The final question will ask you to circle the answer that best represents how often you participate in the selected out-of-school writing practices. You will read each question and respond by either answering, with a short, written, response or circling the appropriate answer. No other notes or information will be required of you. After you have completed the questionnaire, please return it to the person administering the questionnaire.

3. Discomfort or Risks/Confidentiality: There are no discomforts or risks associated with this questionnaire. It merely asks you about your ideas on writers, good writing, and out-of-school writing practices. No identifying information will willingly be given to a second or third party individual. Additionally, your name is not requested at any point during the questionnaire as a way of ensuring your anonymity.

4. Refusal/Withdrawal: Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to through Western Kentucky University. If you encounter a question you would rather not answer, you may leave it blank. At any point during this study, you are free to withdraw your participation with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to foresee all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable precautions have been implemented to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Your continued cooperation with the research implies your consent.

DR. JAMES WYTHORN, JR., PRESIDENT, WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
180 UNIVERSITY BLVD., BOWLING GREEN, KY 40301
IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT THE RESEARCHER AT
P. 270-745-6896 OR maggie.bracey222@wku.edu

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