

Unpacking the Value of Writing: Exploring College Students' Perceptions of Writing

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Abstract

This study explored college students' beliefs about the value of writing, their past experiences with writing, and the relationship between students' prior experiences with writing and writing value beliefs. One hundred fourteen undergraduates from a public Southeastern university participated in the study. Using expectancy-value theory as a framework, structural (Saldaña, 2013) and hypothesis (Bernard, 2011) coding was used to analyze student responses. Findings suggested that attainment, utility, and interest value aligned well with student writing value responses. Students noted both positive and negative experiences with writing. Whereas most students discussed the role of good instruction, positive role models, and constructive criticism in their positive past writing experiences, unengaging and daunting tasks were salient memories for students describing negative prior experiences with writing.

Although writing is essential for college and occupational success, students often struggle to produce quality writing. The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress report (NAEP, 2011) showed that one-third of students in 12th grade (20%) scored below proficiency in the areas of expository, persuasive, analytical, and argumentative writing. Moreover, only two percent of students submitted writing that was considered advanced. In a similar report surveying the literacy skills of college graduates of two- and four-year programs, the American Institutes of Research (Baer, Baldi, & Cook, 2006) found that over half of responding students lacked basic writing skills. Considering the importance of writing skills both inside and outside of the classroom, these trends deserve attention.

Little research to date has examined the factors that affect when and why students value writing and the effects of past writing experiences on students' writing beliefs. It is by examining when and why students value writing that we can offer better suggestions for designing instructional settings that encourage student writing motivation and success. In the current study, the reasons students value writing and ways in which students' past experiences with writing shape present feelings about writing tasks and writing value beliefs were explored.

Student Value Beliefs

Despite the importance of developing writing skills, students are less likely to engage in writing tasks they perceive to be lacking in significance (Bruning & Horn, 2000). Expectancy-value theory (EVT), a well-established perspective on student motivation (Eccles, 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), suggests that the value students place on academic tasks often predicts

engagement in such activities. According to EVT, there are four components of task value: attainment value (the needs and personal values that a task fulfills); interest value (enjoyment from performing an activity or interest in the subject or topic related with the activity); utility value (usefulness of a task for personal goals); and cost (perceptions of negative aspects of engaging in an activity, such as effort, time, lost opportunities, fear of failure, and performance anxiety).

Value studies in academic settings are numerous, though the majority of empirical studies of value have been conducted with children and adolescents in the areas of mathematics and science (e.g., Berndt & Miller, 1990; Simpkins, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2006). Findings show that math and science value can predict student cognitive strategy use and self-regulation (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990), grades (Berndt & Miller, 1990), course enrollment (Simpkins, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2006), and future career aspirations (Watt, 2006).

Explorations of student value are less common in studies conducted at the college level, though existing findings show the important role value plays in college student academic decisions, motivation, and success (Battle & Wigfield, 2003). For example, in a study of undergraduates (Bong, 2001), student interest in and perceived importance and usefulness of a course predicted course enrollment and performance. Similarly, Matusovich and colleagues (2010) found positive relationships between engineering students' value beliefs and choices to engage and persist in engineering degrees. Other studies suggest that college student value beliefs predict academic engagement and performance (Bong, 2002; Hulleman, Durik, Schwiebert, Harackiewicz, 2008).

Value beliefs often are shaped by students' past experiences (Eccles, 2009). For example, in a study of talented women studying technology, participants identified technology educational experiences and advanced technology education as important components in their decisions to pursue careers in the field of technology (Autio, 2013). In a similar study exploring male participants' career decisions, findings showed the importance of emotionally supportive and encouraging teacher-student relationships in developing students' technological interest and competence (Autio, 2011).

The Value of Writing

Student values often serve as driving forces for meaningful engagement in writing tasks (Bruning & Horn, 2000). In a number of studies, perceived value of writing is correlated with the writing achievement of students from elementary school to college (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Pajares & Valiente, 1997). Students in upper-elementary grades often perceive writing tasks as useful (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Pajares & Valiente, 1997) and writing continues to be highly valued into high school and college (Shell, Murphy, & Bruning, 1989).

What then drives the value students place on writing? Reflecting on his own experiences as a writer, George Orwell (2000) wrote, "I do not think one can assess a writer's motives without knowing something about his early development." Indeed, students' past experiences with writing likely influence the ways in which they value writing, though research has yet to make this connection.

To our knowledge, only one other study to date has examined college student writing values. In a study of 118 undergraduates, Jones (2008) found that students' perceived value of reading and writing positively related to course grades. However, value was quantitatively measured with only two items, and related findings were presented as "informal" (p. 219) and "exploratory" (p. 231). In the discussion of his findings, Jones (2008) calls for further research in this area.

To create meaningful and engaging assignments for their students, instructors should consider students' perceptions of the characteristics that contribute to valuable writing tasks. With a better understanding of student writing value, instructors may be better equipped to convey the importance of academic writing in higher education and therefore, better capable of guiding students through academic writing tasks.

The current qualitative study explored three overarching questions: a) When and why is writing valuable to college students? b) How are students' present feelings about writing influenced by their past experiences? and c) How do students' past experiences with writing relate to the ways in which they value writing?

Methodology

Participants

One hundred fourteen undergraduates from a large Mid-Atlantic university participated in this study. Participants were recruited from introductory English and teacher education courses. Approximately 80% of participants were female. Students ranged in age from 18 – 39 ($M = 20.68$, $SD = 2.94$). Approximately 55% of the participants were Caucasian, 18% were African American, 7% were Latino/Latina, 8% were Asian, 1 % were American Indian, and 9% self-identified their ethnicity as "Other." Approximately 2% of participants chose not to disclose ethnicity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place via an online survey. Participants answered focus questions, "When is writing valuable to you? Why is it valuable?" and "How have your past experiences with writing affected your present feelings toward writing tasks?" Participant responses were not limited by character, word count, or time. Student responses varied from no response, to a few words, to 2 – 3 sentences or phrases. Online surveys were completed by participants in the setting of their choice and course extra credit was given for participating in the study.

A phenomenological qualitative investigation was conducted to explore the perceived experiences of student participants (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis was an iterative process using structural (Saldaña, 2013) and hypothesis (Bernard, 2011) coding. That is, both data- and theory-driven codes were used. Student writing value responses and past writing experience responses were first coded separately, then coded responses were merged for the purpose of considering possible differences in student values and experiences.

In the initial phase, authors independently read participant responses in their entirety to become familiar with the data. Responses were re-read and each reader noted reoccurring ideas. Next,

researchers met to discuss initial codes for writing value and past writing experience responses. Using constant comparative analysis of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), connections, contrasts, and comparisons between codes were explored to ensure that codes covered all data and were mutually exclusive. Final structural codes for both value and past experience student responses were co-determined by all authors. All data was re-read and coded by two authors using final codes. Structural codes for writing value and writing past experiences were then grouped as themes. It is important to note that students often included several reasons for valuing writing as well as listed several different types of prior experiences with writing in their responses. Accordingly, it was possible for each student response to align with multiple codes.

Findings

The current study explored the following research questions: a) When and why is writing valuable to college students? b) How are students' present feelings about writing influenced by their past experiences? and c) How do students' past experiences with writing relate to the ways in which they value writing?

When and Why is Writing Valuable to College Students?

Seven themes emerged from the value data: 1) Writing is important for communicating and documenting ideas and for informing and persuading others (46% of responses; hereafter referred to as "Communication"); 2) Writing is valued for learning and doing well in school (45% of responses; hereafter referred to as "Academic"); 3) Personal writing involving choice is valued over academic writing (27% of responses; hereafter referred to as "Choice"); 4) Writing is useful for organizing thoughts (23% of responses; hereafter referred to as "Organization"); 5) Writing is valued as a form of artistic, creative, or emotional expression (22% of responses; hereafter referred to as "Expression"); 6) Writing is a necessary skill for my current or future job or career (11% of responses; hereafter referred to as "Occupation") and 7) Writing is a pragmatic, necessary, and useful skill (9% of responses; hereafter referred to as "Useful").

Components of expectancy-value theory (EVT; Eccles, 2005) were represented in students' responses to writing: attainment value, interest value, and utility value. As aforementioned, attainment value describes how important one perceives a task to be and how consistent that task is with that individual's sense of self, interest value refers to engaging in a task for the enjoyment experienced while doing the task, and utility value includes the perception of the current and future use of engaging in a task (Eccles, 2005; Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). Attainment, interest, and utility value often serve as the reasons students engage in academic tasks, whereas cost perceptions (i.e., student beliefs about the negative aspects of a task) more likely predict reasons students choose to not engage in tasks. As such, we did not anticipate student responses to align with cost aspects of EVT.

Attainment value. One theme, Expression, was categorized as attainment value. All student responses in this category related to personal expression. Some students noted writing as a valuable creative outlet. For example, one female senior commented, "As an illustrator, I find writing useful in expressing both the ideas and intentions of fine art works and in the development of stories and characters." Similarly, a female freshman noted, "Writing is valuable

because it exercises my creativity and fluidity of thoughts.” Other students recognized writing as a vehicle for expressing emotion. A female sophomore explained, “Writing is valuable to me when I do not have anyone to talk to ... I write what’s on my mind on paper.” Another female freshman stated, “Writing is valuable to me when I need to put my thoughts onto paper, which allows me to express how I feel at that moment.” Many student responses seemed to identify the therapeutic nature writing. For example, a female senior noted, “I think that sometimes writing can help me feel better.” A few student responses identified writing as a valuable tool for both creative and emotional expression. One female freshman identified writing as valuable “when it allows me to express my emotions I otherwise might not be able to and when I can create a story or character who expresses something I am passionate about.” Another female senior also commented on the emotional and artistic value of writing, “[Writing] helps me get my thoughts out. [Writing is] poetic to me.”

Interest value. One theme, Choice, was categorized as interest value. All responses in this category referenced the value of choice in writing topic or opportunities to write about personally meaningful topics. Words and phrases such as, “care,” “without restrictions,” and “interesting” were common across student statements. For example, one female freshman responded,

It really does depend on what I’m writing. I value writing the most when I’m writing a narrative or creating a story. I even have fun when I’m writing about a topic that concerns me. But when I have to write about something I genuinely have no interest in, I feel the actual writing ~~is writing~~ is much more difficult, it’s harder to focus, and it’s harder to develop ideas for [the topic].

Similarly, another female freshman commented, “I think [writing] is most valuable when it is something that I have personal involvement in or it is my ideas or I am free to write whatever I want.” Many student responses in this theme devalued academic writing, particularly graded academic writing. One female senior explained,

Writing is most valuable to me when I’m writing on my own free will. I enjoy writing when there isn’t an assignment to it ... It’s valuable because I won’t be graded on my thoughts and no one can judge me.

Another female freshman commented,

Writing is valuable to me when I’m expressing my personal thoughts or writing about something I feel strongly about. It is valuable to me because it actually holds personal meaning, I’m not just doing it for a grade, I’m doing it because I really want to get my point across.

Utility value. Five of the seven themes were categorized as utility value: Useful; Communication; Organization; Academic; and Occupation.

Useful theme. Out of all the themes, student responses in this theme tended to be more general in nature. For example, a female junior answered that writing is valuable “in everyday life. Writing notes, papers, and reminders is what I do every day.” A female senior also replied generally,

“Writing is valuable to me when it is necessary.” Student responses in this theme also referenced specific writing tasks more often than other themes. Tasks included, “notes,” “lists,” “thank you cards,” and “emails.”

Communication theme. Student responses related to this theme also tended to be fairly unspecific. The majority of student comments in this theme broadly described the value of writing as a form of general description and communication. Example responses include: “[Writing] is valuable because it is a form of expression that allows others to understand what you believe and why” (female freshman), and “writing is valuable when you need to articulate your ideas and beliefs about a certain topic” (male sophomore). Many student responses in this theme also identified value in writing to persuade or inform others. For example, a female sophomore noted, “writing can be used to persuade, enlighten, or bring joy to readers.”

Organization theme. Student responses in this theme recognized writing as a useful tool for visualizing and rearranging ideas into a coherent message to the reader. For example, a female sophomore noted the value of writing

whenever I need to organize my ideas or clarify them to myself. Because it allows me to lay them all out, sort through them, and make decisions on the ideas that are important or the ideas that link with another.

A senior student personally shared that writing is most valuable “when I need to express myself to others and I have a difficult time articulating my thoughts orally.” Other students similarly commented, “It is easier to organize thoughts on paper than it is to organize thoughts within my own mind” (female sophomore), and “It is helpful to see all of my ideas written out ...it serves as a great starting point” (female sophomore).

Academic theme. Many students believed that writing fostered their learning and understanding. A female senior shared, “Writing is valuable to me when I’m learning as I’m writing. I don’t like writing on topics I’m overly familiar with because I feel like it’s a waste of time.” Other students found writing useful for communicating their understanding to their instructors. For example, one female sophomore responded, “In order to get my ideas across to the professor, I believe writing is necessary.” Student responses in this theme often recognized writing as an important component in completing course assignments and achieving good grades. In fact, nearly 30% of student responses in this theme referenced “grades.” For example, a female senior student commented, “[Writing] is valuable to me when there is a grade attached to the paper. It is valuable because I want a good grade.” A male senior shared a similar sentiment, “Writing is valuable to me when I need to do an assignment to get a good grade. It is valuable because I want to do well in my classes.”

Occupation theme. Many student responses in this theme referenced documents necessary for securing employment. These included, “job application,” “resume,” and “personal statement.” Some students explained how writing related to their current jobs. For example, a female freshman described how writing related to being an artist, “Writing is valuable in my case to talk about the art that I am producing.” A female sophomore shared her current use for writing, “At my job, I need to write customers and it’s best to sound as professional as I can.” Some students

recognized the role that writing likely will play in their future careers. For example, one male senior commented on the usefulness of writing in “conveying my ideas to my ... future employers.”

How are Students’ Present Feelings about Writing Influenced by Their Past Experiences?

Seven themes emerged from the experience data: 1) Positive past experiences and positive present feelings about writing; 2) Negative past experiences and negative present feelings about writing; 3) Good instruction, positive role models, nurturing instructors, and receiving constructive criticism (hereafter referred to as “Instruction”); 4) Positive writing experiences in AP, IB, and Honors classes (hereafter referred to as “Honors”); 5) Investing effort, hard work, and practice (hereafter referred to as “Effort”); 6) Uninteresting, unengaging, or daunting writing tasks (hereafter referred to as “Unengaging”); and 7) Past struggles or challenges with writing (hereafter referred to as “Challenges”). Past writing experience themes were categorized as either positive or negative valence.

Student responses were first coded as either positive or negative for past experiences with writing and either positive or negative for present feelings about writing. Many students (33%) described both positive past experiences with writing and positive present feelings about writing. For example, one female sophomore commented, “My past writings have made me enjoy writing more and made [writing] come a lot easier to me than ever before.” A male sophomore shared, “My past experiences have only encouraged my writing ability and strengthened it.” Some students (13%) described negative past experiences and the negative influence these experiences have had on their present feelings toward writing tasks. One male sophomore commented, “My experiences with writing on dull topics that I have not chosen give me a dislike towards writing. As of now, my overall feeling is that I really do not like writing.” A female sophomore shared, “In high school I didn't like to write and never really had the best grades when it came to writing. So now I don't like writing.” Only three (3%) participant responses were coded as positive past writing experiences and negative present feelings about writing. Only seven (4%) participant responses were coded as negative past experiences and positive present feelings about writing. Approximately 47% of student responses did not clearly indicate past experiences as either positive or negative.

Positive past experiences with writing. To further analyze this question, participant responses were analyzed to identify specific themes of students’ prior experiences with writing. Positive past experiences with writing themes included: Instruction (mentioned in 16% of student responses); Honors (mentioned in 5% of student responses); and Effort (mentioned in 8% of student responses).

Instruction theme. Many student responses in this theme referenced previous experiences with positive role models and good instruction. One female senior described the role her family played in her development as a writer, “I have a very strong background in writing. My dad always wrote a lot to help him with his stress and anxiety. I picked up my first journal when I was seven and I’ve been filling them up since.” A female sophomore shared her experience, “I was very fortunate to have teachers and parents who greatly supported [writing], thus making school and learning enjoyable. This foundation allowed me to challenge myself and to try and

perfect my writing.” Other students commented on the power of instruction in instilling writing value. Specifically, careful feedback from instructors seemed very important. One female freshman described this in detail,

When I was younger, I got a lot of positive feedback on my writing, which gave me the confidence to pursue it. As I got older, I received more critical evaluations which [made] me determined to improve my writing.

Honors theme. A few students identified positive prior experiences in specific high school courses. In all cases across this theme, students noted greater confidence in themselves as writers as a result of this preparation. For example, a female sophomore shared, “I feel confident in my writing. I have taken AP classes before college which I feel have prepared me for entry-level writing.” Similarly, one male freshman commented, “I’ve had a very good high school writing education (honors and IB classes), which has prepared me for my current level of writing assignments.”

Effort theme. When describing their past experiences with writing, many students reflected on the time and effort they have personally invested in their writing. A female freshman shared, “I have always had to write [in] most of my classes so having prior practice with writing helps me to feel more prepared for new writing assignments in the future.” Although all student responses in this theme related to effort, some students reflected on the positive role of persistence in the face of challenge. One female freshman shared,

My past experiences with writing have affected my present feelings toward writing tasks by making me better at writing. The more I write the more I understand how to better organize my thoughts but not without suffering. I still don’t enjoy writing but the more I learn the more I enjoy it.

A female senior shared a similar sentiment, “My past writings have affected me because with each paper I have grown as a writer. I am not the best writer in the world, but I have a positive outlook on each paper I start.”

Negative past experiences with writing. Negative past experiences with writing themes included: Unengaging (mentioned in 19% of student responses); Challenges (mentioned in 11% of student responses).

Unengaging theme. Unfortunately, several students commented on the negative role prior experiences with unrewarding or intimidating writing tasks have played in their present perceptions of writing. Many student responses in this theme outlined specific characteristics of writing tasks perceived as unengaging, including: forced writing; assigned topics with little choice; and inauthentic writing tasks. One female sophomore commented, “I used to really enjoy writing for fun, in terms of creative writing. Once it started becoming about the papers the teacher assigned me, it became more of a chore.” Similarly, a female senior described her experience, “Research papers make me want to cry. I hate all the silly, rigid rules.” Anxiety was echoed in this student’s statement, “[Writing] tasks make me feel like I don’t have a chance.

They become so long and convoluted that it becomes impossible to do without making multiple mistakes” (male freshman).

Challenges theme. When students recalled their previous experiences with writing, many referenced the difficulties they have faced. Some students commented on general writing difficulties, “I do not especially enjoy writing because I have had experiences with getting stuck. This can be a time waster and can sometimes make me dread the entire process” (female senior). Others discussed the process of organizing their writing as a challenge. A female junior described her experience, “It's hard to organize my thoughts sometimes which makes it hard to write.” Many students shared how their struggles affected their beliefs in themselves as writers. For example, a female sophomore stated, “I have had trouble with organizing my thoughts ... This makes me insecure about how well I will do in many writing assignments, especially long papers. I find that I waver off course in my writing.” Another female junior shared,

I feel mediocre about my writing. If I sit down and solely focus on nothing but my subject, I am usually able to come out with a 'B' paper. It has always been difficult to get my ideas in order and convey my point.

Some students related their challenges and lack of confidence to feelings of stress. For example, a female senior commented, “I have never been the best writer and to this day it stresses me out when I have a big paper due.”

How Do Students' Past Experiences with Writing Relate to the Ways in which They Value Writing?

Finally, student writing experiences were explored within writing value themes. That is, each value theme was isolated to explore student experience responses specifically related to that theme. Looking across both value and experience themes, the majority of students reported both positive past experiences with writing and positive present feelings toward writing tasks (see Table 1). The Instruction positive experience theme and the Unengaging negative experience theme aligned well with several value themes: Expression (attainment value); Choice (interest value); Useful (utility value); and Academic (utility value). Alignment percentages are available in Table 1. Although the Occupation value theme (utility value) also aligned well with the Instruction positive experience theme, Challenges was the most salient negative experience theme for this value category. The Communication theme (utility value) aligned well with Instruction and Effort positive experience themes and the Unengaging and Challenges negative experience themes. The Organization value theme (utility value) aligned fairly equally across all positive and negative experience themes. Example corresponding participant responses for value and salient experience themes are available in Table 2.

Discussion

College students—and younger students alike—often ask themselves, “Why should I care about this academic task?” According to expectancy-value theory (EVT; Eccles, 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), students use the answers to this question to make decisions about the level of involvement they want to invest in tasks. Classroom research has provided strong evidence of the

power of the student value beliefs in determining learning achievement (Sun, Ding, & Chen, 2013), though the majority of research to date has focused on K-12 students in the areas of math and science (Berndt & Miller, 1990; Simpkins et al., 2006; Wigfield, 1994). Findings from the current study extend prior research by exploring college student value beliefs and prior experiences in the specific domain of writing, and by exploring the relationships among student writing beliefs and experiences.

Student Writing Value Beliefs

Within the framework of EVT, attainment, utility, and interest value aligned well with student writing value responses. Attainment value, or the ways in which a task aligns with a student's sense of self, was supported by the Expression theme. Within this theme, students discussed the role of writing as an outlet of creativity or emotion. Social and personal identity is often tied to attainment value and individuals often seek out opportunities to confirm their identity and see more value in tasks related to their self-image (Eccles, 2005). As such, students with responses related to this theme likely inherently saw themselves as writers.

Five of the seven writing value themes corresponded with utility value—student beliefs about the current and future use of engaging in tasks. Utility value themes included: Useful; Communication; Organization; Academic; and Occupation. Across student responses throughout these themes, students discussed ways in which they used writing or the intentions of using writing in the future. Utility value is often particularly salient in late adolescence and adulthood as individuals consider the value of tasks in relation to career and long-term goals (Eccles, 2005). Students often are more willing to put more effort into their studies when they perceive the subject to be of value to their future goals (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004). Specifically, studies have shown that students who perceive tasks as instrumental for reaching their current and future life goals use more deep-level learning strategies and are more academically motivated than students who perceive tasks as less instrumental (Lens & Decruyenaere, 1991; Lens, Simons, & Dewitte, 2001). Brophy (1999) suggests that instructional planning be guided by worthwhile purposes and goals; and communicating these purposes and goals to students can facilitate student value and motivation.

Interest value, or the ways in which a task is perceived as enjoyable or interesting, was supported by the Choice theme. Within this theme, students discussed the powerful role meaningful choice played in their value beliefs. Student responses in this category also often undervalued uninteresting, academic tasks completed only for a class grade. Similar to attainment value, interest value is often linked to specific activities related to characteristics of one's sense of self, such as temperament, personality, and motivation (Eccles, 2005). Situational factors, which can often influence student academic interest, are typically under the control of instructors (Bergin, 1999). Studies have shown personal relevance, familiarity, and novelty to be positively related to student interest (Hidi, 1990; Hidi & Baird, 1986).

Influence of Student Past Experiences with Writing on Beliefs and Values

The current study also explored the influence of college students' prior writing experiences on their current perceptions of writing tasks. Overall, more students had both positive past

experiences with writing and positive current beliefs about writing, although a few students noted both negative prior writing experiences and negative current writing beliefs. When considering students' positive past experiences, students discussed salient memories of good instructors, influential role models, specific course experiences, and their personal investments of effort. Students also discussed unengaging or overwhelming tasks and memories with challenge and failure as negative prior experiences with writing.

Certainly, our experiences give us a lens from which we view future events (Eccles, 2009). EVT emphasizes the powerful influence success and failure can have on student value perceptions (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In line with EVT, our findings suggested many ways in which students' past writing experiences played into their current beliefs about writing. In general, experience with effective instruction and choice seemed to be meaningfully related to student writing value beliefs.

Instructors—in college and K-12 classrooms alike—might consider several strategies to encourage student writing value. Academic discourse may be new to students, and as such, instructors might consider examining student writing to determine where individual student challenges exist and demystify the process for students through explicit instruction (Bartholomae, 1985). Additionally, NCTE (2008) recommends that writing tasks are holistic, authentic, and varied. Fernsten and Reda (2011) discussed low-stakes writing tasks as an effective instructional strategy to help students meet the challenges of academic writing. Low-stakes writing assignments differ from high-stakes writing assignments in that they typically do not have much effect on student grades. Low-stakes writing tasks often include quick writes, letters, freewrites, think pieces, or early drafts (Elbow, 1997). With these types of tasks, students generally are prompted to reflect about and share their thinking related to course topics and assignments. Low-stakes writing assignments may encourage students to not only see themselves as writers, but also see another use and value of writing—as a tool for thinking.

Author's notes is a specific low-stakes writing assignment that provides students the opportunity to see themselves as writers (Fernsten & Reda, 2011). In this activity, instructors generate questions for students to consider and write as related to their draft of final writing product. Example questions might include: “‘What went well in this piece?’ and ‘Where do you think readers might get stuck or need more information?’” (Fernsten & Reda, 2011, p. 178). Considering questions like these may push students to think about their writing as well as their thinking, encouraging students to be more metacognitive and self-regulated in their writing.

It also is important for college instructors to avoid limiting what George (2012) described as the expressive potentials of students by allowing them to use personal narratives and multiple modalities of expression. Student autonomy is often considered a central human need (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Students need writing activities that they enjoy, as well as authentic and meaningful assignments that will give them opportunities to feel successful as writers (Gambell, 1991). As suggested by our findings, providing students with opportunities for choice and autonomy in their writing may allow students to see writing as more valuable and empower students to feel more motivated to write.

Most students who believed writing to be important to their current or future employment (Occupation) discussed positive prior experiences with writing, though those with more unpleasant previous writing experiences recalled memories of challenge and struggle. Realizing the influence of writing on their current or future occupational success, but facing past and perhaps current writing struggle may present a frustrating conflict for students to overcome. Providing students with explicit instruction as well as resources for seeking necessary help, such as the writing center at the university (Alexitch, 2006), may provide students with the tools and support to be more successful in their writing.

When considering the role past writing experiences played in student beliefs of writing as a valuable means for visualizing and organizing ideas, student responses varied across both positive and negative experience themes. These findings are in line with writing self-regulation literature. Organizing thoughts and writing are self-regulation skills that can be taught as early as first grade (Author, 2013) and through adulthood (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997), though this skill can be challenging for students to learn and often requires substantial effort (Graham, Harris, & Troia, 1998). Studies have shown that explicit instruction detailing the process of organizing ideas and writing can improve adult student writing motivation and performance (Berry & Mason, 2012; MacArthur & Philippakos, 2013).

Limitations

These findings represent perspectives of college undergraduate students who were willing to share their perceptions and experiences. As such, we attempted to address potential volunteer bias by including all students enrolled in recruited class sections and offered all participants extra credit. Response bias, whereby participants provide perceived “desirable” responses, was another potential limitation of the current study. We attempted to address this concern in two ways: (1) we included a relatively large sample to help ensure a range in perspectives and experiences; and (2) we provided an online open-response format to enable students to be honest in their responses. Although collecting data online may have allowed students to be more open in their responses, this data collection method did not allow us to ask follow up questions to student responses. Though these limitations may impact the generalizability of our findings, future research might use the results presented here to develop surveys or interview protocols to gain deeper insight on student writing experiences and beliefs.

Conclusions

All experiences exist along a continuum, whereby each experience grows out of other past experiences, and experiences then influence further experiences (Dewey, 1938). When considering prior academic experiences of students, momentum is certainly at play. That is, students with several salient negative academic memories likely will require just as many (if not more) positive academic experiences to tilt the “experience scale.” The findings of the current study illustrate the powerful influence past experiences with writing can have on current writing perceptions and beliefs. When instructors take the time to discuss and acknowledge students’ writing value beliefs and prior experiences with writing, they can validate students and are afforded the opportunity to design effective instructional strategies relevant to both their course and students.

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