(https://www.univie.ac.at/en/)   ▶ **Infopool better teaching**

▦ Perceived Self-Efficacy

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Overview

1. Introduction

This article discusses perceived self-efficacy regarding university-level learning (and teaching) and introduces measures teachers can use to facilitate a sense of achievement among students[1] and thus promote the self-efficacy of both students and teachers.

The term self-efficacy (or also: perceived self-efficacy, self-regulation, perceived competence) describes a person's conviction that he or she can successfully master demanding situations using his or her own capabilities. An essential aspect of this is being in c**ontrol over one's own actions** and **one's belief in being able to influence events in a positive way.**[2]

Encouraging self-efficacy is a promising tool for helping students and teachers develop their inner potentials.

2. What is Self-Efficacy?

Self-efficacy describes our perception or optimistic belief (faith, non-objective criteria) of being able to successfully master a task on the merit of our own competencies, i.e. being able to control our own behaviour regarding goals that we have set ourselves.[3]

The more competent *we feel*, the more challenging the goals we will set for ourselves, and the greater the effort and endurance we will demonstrate in reaching these goals. The following (first-person) statements help characterise this concept:[4]

> ■ - *"Challenges don't scare me since I can always rely on my skills."*
>
> ■ - *"When a problem arises, I can overcome it on my own."*
>
> ■ - *"I believe I can even handle unforeseen events."*

Research has shown[5], that a high level of self-efficacy is a **decisive tool for successful learning** (performing), and as such constitutes a crucial determinant of academic performance. Overall, research has also shown that a high level of self-efficacy protects us from fear and stress while at the same time positively affecting us before, during and after performances.[6]

It is significant to note that people with higher levels of self-efficacy **perform better at the same skill and knowledge levels** than people with lower levels of self-efficacy:

> ■ They make better use of their cognitive skills
>
> ■ They set more challenging goals for themselves.
>
> ■ They are capable of adequately evaluating their own successes and failures.
>
> ■ They demonstrate a high level of commitment.
>
> ■ They have a higher tolerance for frustration.

3. Sources of Self-Efficacy

Successful learning is directly linked to high levels of self-efficacy. Low levels generally result in experiences of helplessness and powerlessness[7],despite potential courses of action. Bandura determined four sources that contribute to the development of self-efficacy:[8]

3.1. Mastery Experiences (Own Experiences)

The most important source for self-efficacy is **experiencing successful achievements** because it continually reinforces people's beliefs in their own capabilities. People with high levels of self-efficacy tend to set themselves challenging goals, and approach these with confidence, because of their **positive performance expectations**. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to imagine positive and successful future scenarios than people with lower levels. In doing so, they add to their repertoire on how to overcome challenging situations. Subsequently, this will prevent stress and anxiety[9] and in turn enable a clearer focus on the task at hand, thus facilitating successful performances.

Once a high level of perceived self-efficacy has been achieved, it cannot be undermined by individual failures. Furthermore, failures will not lead to disappointments as easily in individuals with high levels of self-efficacy because they regard failures as linked to variable factors.[10] Appropriately interpreting what is success and what is failure is thus a critical aspect of self-efficacy:

Ascribing successes to one's **own capabilities** greatly benefits one's sense of motivation:

> ■ *"I was successful because I am highly capable."*
>
> ■ *"I can set myself even higher goals and I will do well again the next time!"*

Ascribing failures to **variable factors** such as low effort or unfavourable conditions also benefits one's sense of motivation:

> ■ *"I didn't prepare sufficiently; that's why I received poor feedback. I can improve myself by preparing better."*

Ascribing failures to a lack of (unchangeable) capabilities often leads to less motivation and as a consequence to further failure (or "missed opportunities"). Eventually, this reaction may lead to the development of the "illusion of incompetence." [11]

3.2. Vicarious Experiences

Along with our own experiences of success, **observing other people's successful actions** has also proven effective. The effect of vicariously experiencing successes and failures on a person's self-efficacy depends on the perceived similarity of the social model. Furthermore, slightly higher achievements of the models have a bigger impact than much higher achievements *(e.g. student teachers who observe teachers who they identify with, and whose experience they can properly assess and use for themselves)*.

3.3. Social Persuasion

Verbal encouragement (*"You can do it!"* or as self-encouragement *"I can do it!"*) can also contribute to raising one's level of self-efficacy. It is most effective if the encouraging individual is perceived as especially trustworthy, credible, and an expert in his or her field. The encouraging, motivating feedback of an experienced mentor or by someone in a well-prepared coaching situation can be supportive to this end. Verbal encouragement that is deemed incredible, however, is immediately perceived as discouraging, and can lower one's level of self-efficacy.

3.4. Physiological and Emotional States

Physiological and affective conditions can influence one's level of perceived self-efficacy. During exams physical states (conditions such as sweaty palms, nervous tremors, or heart palpitations) are often interpreted as signs of potential failure, which has implications for one's perceived self-efficacy.[12] It is possible to learn to interpret these physical sensations differently through practice (e.g. instead of telling yourself *"I am nervous and anxious"* tell yourself *"I am tense and thus alert and perceptive")*.

4. Practical Advice: Strengthen Students' Perceived Self-Efficacy

The following methods will help you reinforce your students' convictions that their successes are based on their own abilities and efforts.[13]

Practical Advice

4.1. How to Set Goals

- Formulate specific course objectives in order to be able to make performance improvements visible, which will help dissuade students from giving up. General objectives (e.g. *"You can do it!"*, *"Make an effort!"*), however, are not effective.

- Regularly remind your students of the course objectives.

- Structure the learning material in manageable learning outcomes and communicate these to the students, since achieving smaller partial goals increases the chances of experiencing successes.

- Motivate your students to measure their successes in small learning and development steps.

- Encourage your students to set goals for themselves (long and short-term). Self-imposed goals are often more ambitious than externally-imposed goals and are pursued with a greater sense of commitment. These goals should be concrete, attainable, and yet challenging. You can, for example, motivate your students to come up with individual study plans.

- When possible, allow your students to participate in the design of the learning process. This could, for example, include areas of focus that the students set themselves, letting students freely choose topics for writing assignment, or allowing them to choose their preferred presentation format on a subject. This offers students a good opportunity to practise setting their own goals

- When introducing new subject matters, give your students simple and manageable tasks ("warm-up items") so that they begin the learning process with a sense of achievement, and are able to build up self-efficacy from the very start.

- As you dive further into the subject (and as your students' levels of self-efficacy improve) give your students more difficult tasks — not just to drive the learning process forward, but also because difficult tasks provide you with more information about your students' individual achievement potentials.

Practical Advice

4.2. Make Student Successes Visible

- Make your students' learning progresses visible by offering constructive and concrete feedback.

- Motivate your students to come up with approaches and strategies for solutions either verbally, graphically or in writing to foster systematic approaches to tasks and thus raise potential learning successes.

- Learning success can also be represented using visualisations of learning progress.

- Let your students evaluate how successfully they attained their goals. Reflecting on past successes and failures encourages them to appropriately interpret successes and helps practise how to deal with failures.

- Encourage your students to tell themselves: *"I am capable of acquiring this knowledge"* as opposed to: *"If one studies the necessary material, one can pass the exam."* The fundamental difference between these two viewpoints is that the first statement contains a clear first-person reference and thus represents perceived competence as opposed to the second statement, which merely represents the expectation of a consequence. This helps you steer your students' attention towards assessing their own agency.

4.3. Practical example

Students who do **not participate** in seminar discussions, never contribute to the conversation, or are very nervous during presentations, do not necessarily lack abilities. One reason for this behaviour could be a **low level of self-efficacy.**[14]

How can you as an instructor help students who have low levels of self-efficacy develop their own potential?

- Support your students to actively experience their successes. Individual tasks (set small goals!) help students have successful experiences.

- Help your students to properly compartmentalise assessment situations through respectful and concrete feedback: Remind your students that they are not being evaluated personally, but that the situation is.

- Strengthen your students' trust in their own capabilities by not questioning their fundamental potentials for performance, even in the case of setbacks.

- Inform your students about learning techniques and problem-solving strategies in order to expand their capabilities and agency.

5. Reflect on Your Own Self-Efficacy as a Teacher

As a teacher you can also use strategies for raising your level of self-efficacy. Educational research[15] has shown that the decisive aspect of good teaching practice lies in instructors' **convictions** that they can get through to their students: "Perceived self-efficacy can be interpreted as equal to perceived resonance: The perception of being able to reach the world and make it speak through your own actions."[16]

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