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Book Review: Fostering Self-Efficacy in Higher Education Students

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Abstract

What is self-efficacy, why is it worthy of attention in higher education, how are self-efficacy beliefs linked to teaching and learning excellence and what is "excellence" anyway? These are some points of discussion found in the first few pages of Laura Ritchie's book, directing the reader towards strategies in later chapters that are drawn from real-life situations aimed at helping the practitioner recognise and apply principles for building strong self-efficacy beliefs in their students. The author argues that the impact of self-efficacy on learning is "fundamental to everything" (p. vii); she writes from her years of teaching and research in higher education, and as a recipient of a UK National Teaching Fellow award.

Keywords

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by Laura Ritchie, Palgrave Teaching and Learning series (2016)

What is self-efficacy, why is it worthy of attention in higher education, how are self-efficacy beliefs linked to teaching and learning excellence, and what is 'excellence' anyway? These are some points of discussion found in the first few pages of Laura Ritchie's book, directing the reader towards strategies in later chapters, drawn from real-life situations aimed at helping the practitioner recognise and apply principles for building strong self-efficacy beliefs in their students. The author argues the impact of self-efficacy on learning as "fundamental to everything" (p. vii) and she writes from her years of teaching and research in higher education, and as a recipient of a UK National Teaching Fellow award.

The predominant argument is that self-efficacy beliefs determine how and to what extent people will persist in a task; undertake more challenging tasks; be creative in their use of resources; think strategically; or seek out possible solutions before giving up. In short "self-efficacy is a personal belief, but it affects the choice of task, the effort committed and outcomes achieved" and as such is "a belief worth cultivating in our students" (p. 31), for all the above reasons and more.

Should you be tempted to think that building self-efficacy is the reserve of particular types of students, or can only occur in particular class sizes – think again. The author is careful to point out that strategies to build self-efficacy will be effective regardless of student diversity and class (or lecture) size. However, this is not to say that the dynamic nature of classrooms coupled with context-specific nature of self-efficacy beliefs, will not have its challenges. At different points in the book, the author proposes shifts - either in thinking or practice. One of these is a re-think of predetermined *abilities* (i.e. fixed), to that of boundless *capabilities* in which acquiring new skills and engagement in learning can be developed over time. This shift in perspective allows the trajectory of positive learning experiences to be entertained, and planned for. Indeed, much of the book's discussion hones in on how slight adjustments or shifts in ordinary classroom practice can foster students' self-efficacy beliefs, rather than through radical change. This promotes a sense of 'do-ability', without glossing over the challenges that the ever-changing nature of learners and learning bring. The benefits of fostering self-efficacy beliefs are argued for all – through cycles of positive, 'safe' learning experiences which influence the next situation – and demonstrated through effective strategies used in authentic cases. However, to those whose disciplines are largely theoretical or text-based, some scenarios and strategies may seem somewhat removed from their reality, as performing arts features significantly more so in the case studies and vignette examples.

The rationale for cultivating self-efficacy in higher education is underpinned by Albert Bandura's seminal *Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioural change* (1977) and subsequent works, drawing heavily also on Barry Zimmerman's work on self-regulation spanning 1989 to 2011. After setting the context of higher education broadly, Ritchie presents a rationale for fostering self-efficacy beliefs, based on solid theoretical perspectives (Chapters 1 and 2). The remaining chapters expound the praxis of self-efficacy through recognisable classroom scenarios, systematically aligned to the literature, should you want to explore further. The topics covered in these chapters are: effective communication (Chapter 3); self-regulation and awareness of the learning process (Chapter 4); and the influence of class learning experiences (Chapter 5). Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the trajectory of

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self-regulation strategies and self-efficacy beliefs for students as they prepare to leave formal education, and for the teacher (i.e. the reader) to engage in a "culture of learning" through continuing professional development.

For readers not familiar with the concept of self-efficacy, this book provides a concise explanation, together with theoretically based rationales, real-life classroom scenarios and strategies, which have proven effectiveness in the situations presented. It also offers the reader space to explore different aspects of one's own experience and contexts created by occasional "*thinking about it*" interludes - congruent with the author's belief that creating reflective 'space' (both intellectual and physical) is beneficial for encouraging deeper engagement in learning.

Those readers familiar with active learning processes will find much overlap throughout this book. Apart from confirmation of good practice, it does provide incentive to consider a more deliberate approach to building positive self-efficacy, particularly for the benefits as argued, which extend beyond immediate learning to lifelong learning. With self-efficacy in the spotlight, other ways of thinking about classroom practice come to the fore. This may include greater insight into the cyclical influence that one learning experience (positive or negative) has on the next, in light of the context-dependent nature of self-efficacy.

Even if this book may not present anything strikingly new, it does pull together as a well-articulated, practical and theoretically sound resource for the higher education practitioner, and adds to a growing interest on the impact of self-efficacy in higher education. Ritchie's book is one in a series by Palgrave on Teaching and Learning, which is broadly pitched at those "who care about teaching and learning in higher education" (p. ix). With this mandate, the book delivers a range of practical strategies for fostering student self-efficacy beliefs from which the reader can dip into when needed, and adapt to a range of teaching situations.

author manuscript