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Book Review: Fostering Self-Efficacy in Higher Education Students

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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 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.

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 thus is “a belief worth cultivating in our students” (p. 31).

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 the context-specific nature of self-efficacy beliefs, will not have its challenges. At different points in the book, the author proposes shifts in either thinking or practice. One of these is a shift from thinking of predetermined (i.e., fixed) *abilities* to 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 focuses on how slight adjustments or shifts in ordinary classroom practice, rather than radical change, can foster students’ self-efficacy beliefs. 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 that 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 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; it also draws heavily on Barry Zimmerman’s work (spanning

1989 to 2011) on self-regulation. After broadly setting the context of higher education, 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 the reader want to explore further. These chapters cover 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 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 that have proven effective in the situations presented. It also offers readers space to explore different aspects of their own experience and contexts created by occasional “thinking about it” interludes; this is 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 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 into which readers can dip when needed, and which they can adapt to a range of teaching situations.