

When Feedback Helps and Hurts: Undergraduate Writing Self-Efficacy, Learned Helplessness, and Faculty Intentions in Written Feedback

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Abstract

Written instructor feedback is intended to support student learning, yet students do not always experience feedback as clear, actionable, or motivating. This mixed-methods study examined undergraduate students' writing self-efficacy and learned helplessness in relation to recent instructor feedback on a writing assignment, while also exploring faculty perspectives on feedback purposes and practices. Quantitative data were collected from 36 undergraduate students who completed measures of writing self-efficacy and writing learned helplessness. Descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, normality testing, and correlational analyses were conducted. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six faculty members who regularly provided feedback on undergraduate writing. Faculty interviews were analyzed thematically to contextualize students' motivational outcomes through instructors' reported intentions and decision-making. Findings indicated excellent internal consistency for both measures and a significant negative association between writing self-efficacy and learned helplessness, suggesting that students with stronger writing confidence tended to report lower helplessness-related responses. Faculty described feedback as relational, developmental, and improvement-oriented, yet also identified tensions between instructor intentions and student reception, particularly when feedback was unclear, overwhelming, inaccessible, or unused. Together, the findings suggest written feedback is not merely an instructional practice, but an affective and motivational experience shaped by students' confidence, prior writing histories, workload, perceived capacity, and access to support. Implications are discussed for designing feedback practices that are clear, supportive, and responsive to students' motivational needs in undergraduate writing contexts.

Keywords: Writing Self-Efficacy; Writing Learned Helplessness; Instructor Feedback; Student Motivation; Higher Education