BUT YOU ARE A WRITER: ANALYZING FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION COURSES TO FOSTER STUDENT CONFIDENCE IN WRITING

Ailyn Del Rio | Rider University

Students in first-year composition courses sometimes discuss their confidence in academic writing with instructors and tutors, but instructor and student perceptions of first-year writing and student confidence are often separated. Literature in the field of rhetoric and composition does not directly explore or define student confidence in writing. This article uses student perceptions of confidence in writing to find the best teaching practices that foster student confidence in writing in first-year composition. The study aims to discover the effects of various teaching styles on student confidence and provide concrete definitions of confidence. Three "Seminar in Writing and Rhetoric" courses participated in this study. Surveys at the start and end of the semester were administered to students, and interviews with four students and each instructor were conducted. After analyzing and interpreting the data, four categories of confidence emerged: personal belief confidence, emotional confidence, skills-based confidence, and risk-taking confidence. Students also identified classroom activities related to brainstorming/topic discussion, professor feedback, and embedded tutoring as the most helpful in fostering their confidence in writing. With this new knowledge of student confidence, instructors can adapt their pedagogies to include teaching practices that intentionally help students become more confident in their writing.

INTRODUCTION

"Wow, I feel really confident now!"

This was a common remark from students in a Seminar in Writing and Research course at Rider University. As the assigned embedded tutor, I visited class once a week and prepared group workshops so the students would often share their thoughts about upcoming or current assignments with me.

But as the semester progressed, they consistently came up to me after class with an excited smile, saying, "I finally feel confident about my writing!"

To me, this was a strong marker of their progress. As many tutors and instructors know, students do not always start with this level of confidence. Many walk into a first-year writing classroom nervous, timid, and unsure, especially because this course is one of the very

first college-level courses they experience. Some students are gripped with panic, uncomfortable with the idea of talking to their professors, afraid to ask for help, and unable to take risks. Many even insist that they are not writers at all.

The recurring exclamation of confidence fascinated me. Confidence itself is a seemingly abstract concept that I found myself questioning. We say we are feeling "confident" or "not confident," and we instinctively know what we mean, but can we explain it? How does this term relate to the student writing process? Most importantly, how can we change students' beliefs that they are not writers to believing that they are confident writers?

I developed this study to understand better how students become confident over time in a first-year composition course and determine what instructors and tutors can do to support their journey. Most scholars who research the student writing process and composition pedagogy do not mention confidence. If they do, they usually mention it in passing without defining it in the context of student writing. I realized that I would need to develop my own definitions of student confidence to connect student writing experiences to instructor practices.

This article details my experience as I worked to identify definitions of student confidence in writing, first from existing literature in the field and then from my own empirical research. The four categories of confidence that I offer can be developed by utilizing specific teaching practices. The ways that instructors engage with students in the classroom directly impact student confidence in writing in a single semester. Understanding the impact of these categories and teaching practices can bridge the gap between instructor and student perspectives in first-year composition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student confidence is a budding conversation in scholarly texts about the student writing process. Though emerging research aims to explore this concept, confidence is not explicitly defined in most of this research. In addition, not all of this research explores confidence on the student level but instead views it through the instructor lens. This creates a stark contrast between student and instructor experiences with first-year composition, making fostering student confidence in the classroom more challenging. My research found three major threads about student confidence to explore: definitions and understandings of student confidence, teaching practices, and relationships between students and instructors.

DEFINITIONS/UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENT CONFIDENCE

Confidence is generally considered to be an abstract concept that cannot be defined, and this is evident in the ways that most research does not provide a concrete definition or understanding of the term in student writing. In their article "The Novice as Expert," Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz develop the "novice-as-expert" mindset as a framework to help students overcome their fear of failure and learn college writing conventions. Sommers

and Saltz define the elements of this mindset quite clearly, explaining, "freshmen need to see themselves as novices in a world that demands 'something more and deeper' from their writing than high school" (133-134) by "adopting an open attitude to instruction and feedback" with "a willingness to experiment" to"build authority…by writing into expertise," (133-134). However, Sommers and Saltz's article does not explicitly define confidence, even though students repeatedly shared in their survey responses that writing gave "them the confidence 'to speak back to the world'" (Sommers and Saltz 129). Instead of asking students to expand on what they meant by confidence, Sommers and Saltz leave this as a repeating quote.

Similarly, student confidence is often used as a definition of self-efficacy rather than a term to be defined. Bai Li attempts to research confidence in the study, "Research on Correlation Between English Writing Self-Efficacy and Psychological Anxiety of College Students." However, Bai Li defines self-efficacy as "refer[ring] to the confidence of English writers in their ability to perform a particular English writing task" and does not offer any definition of confidence itself (Li 2). Instead, the study concluded that students "lacked self-confidence in their English writing skills and tended to complete writing tasks" (Li 8). While Li has taken an important step in measuring student confidence by using confidence as a definition rather than a term, the meaning and importance of self-efficacy becomes unclear. Other researchers treat confidence similarly, such as Kelsey Hixson-Bowles and Roger Powell's article, "Self-Efficacy and the Relationship between Tutoring and Writing." Self-efficacy has become a popular research topic in writing centers rather than writing classrooms. Hixson-Bowles and Powell make the connection that "self efficacy manifest[s] itself with students' confidence in their writing" for both students and tutors. This study is doing important work highlighting tutors in the liminal space between students and instructors. Although it and others like it still do not define confidence itself. Instead, it relies on exploring the effects of self-efficacy, though they are said to work in tandem.

TEACHING PRACTICES/ ASSIGNMENTS

Some writing instructors try to integrate student confidence into their writing assignments and teaching practices. However, it is not always clear how these assignments and teaching practices build student confidence. Andrea Yelin discusses confidence multiple times in the article "Templates, Rubrics, Models, Oh My!," describing structured assignments to teach rhetorical analysis. Yelin seems to tie confidence to how their students move through the writing process as well, explaining that they hope their students will be able to "draft a polished product with confidence" and "have the confidence…to complete the assignment" (Yelin 40, 42). While Yelin successfully adds student confidence to the conversation, she does not explore it further to see which assignments build student confidence. Instead, she only names it as a desired outcome, and this ambiguity separates the writing instructor from the student. If instructors do not understand what students

need to feel like capable writers, their teaching practices may hinder students from reaching their full potential.

Just as Yelin hoped to see a growth in confidence in their students, Peter Elbow also hoped to see his students gain a better understanding of why writing matters. In his first and nineteenth chapters of *Everyone Can Write,* Elbow discusses his encouragement of using nongraded writing assignments. He aims to create a mix of high and low-stakes assignments, using models such as contract grading and specific criteria for feedback. Elbow believes these assignments and grading strategies help students see the larger significance of their writing, and as a result, students gain the skills they need to develop their writing process. However, he does not conclude that these practices help students develop a stronger sense of confidence in the skills they learn.

TEACHING STYLES/ RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

Some instructors have considered how students' experiences in first-year writing foster a more collaborative and understanding student/instructor relationship. Still, not all instructors consider the impact of understanding student confidence. Sally Chandler explores the impact of anxiety in first-year students in their article, "Fear, Teaching Composition, and Students' Discursive Choices: Re-thinking Connections Between Emotions and College Student Writing." Instead of seeing the reflective analysis they were looking for in their final papers, they received conversion narratives filled with generalizations and surface-level observations. Chandler suspects that her students felt high levels of anxiety as they attempted to complete the assignment, but they do not consider how student confidence fits into this experience. A lack of confidence about tutoring and writing may have influenced their anxiety, resulting in this surface-level work.

David Bartholomae also explores how first-year students feel when they first enter college in his article, "Inventing the University." He explains that some students compensate for their lack of understanding of where they fit in academia by pushing themselves to "sound" academic. Like Chandler, Bartholomae does not take the next step to explain how confidence impacts students' need to perform in their writing. This is partially because Bartholomae references student writing from a placement test instead of writing done in the classroom. As a result, the writing instructor is completely removed from the conversation, and the contrast between Bartholomae's understanding of student performance by "inventing the university" and the actual student writing experience with writing in the classroom is even more evident.

METHODS

At the start of this study, I aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the best teaching practices that foster student confidence in writing in a first-year writing course?
- What teaching styles foster student confidence in writing the most in a first-year writing course?

- How do students think of and define confidence?
- How do faculty think of and define confidence? Are these definitions similar or different to how students define it?

In order to answer these questions, I chose three Seminar in Writing and Rhetoric courses at Rider University to observe once a week. I have chosen pseudonyms for the three instructors: Professor Smith, Professor Rogers, and Professor Anderson. I administered a survey to their students at the start and end of the semester that measured a range of factors, from their definitions of confidence and "good writing" to the specific parts of the writing process that they felt most and least confident in. The survey received IRB approval, and all students gave their consent. The pre-survey received 38 responses, and the post-survey received 35 responses, for a total of 73 responses. Of those responses, 11 pre-survey responses and 11 post-survey responses were from Professor Anderson's class.13 pre-survey responses and 12 post-survey responses were from Professor Smith's class.14 pre-survey responses and 12 post-survey responses were from Professor Rogers's class.

All students who participated in the survey were freshmen. I analyzed the pre-survey responses by compiling the data on a Google sheet and looking for patterns and trends. I used these responses to develop the four categories based on their definitions of student confidence. I coded the additional questions based on student responses, focusing on higher and lower-order concerns, positive, negative, and mixed feelings associated with their writing, whether they had the language to discuss their writing process, and whether they could recall helpful classroom activities. I applied this same coding schema to the post-surveys and my observations of each class. I categorized their helpful classroom activities based on which were similar across all three classes and which were most prevalent in each class.

Of the students who participated in the pre-survey, I reached out to four students to conduct two additional interviews with them based on their responses. These semi-structured interviews also received IRB approval, and all interviewees gave their consent. I asked students to elaborate on how they defined confidence and "good writing" in their surveys, what their writing process was like for their first and last essays, the parts of the writing process they feel most and least confident in, classroom activities that they found most helpful, their professor's teaching style, the types of feedback they receive from their professors, and how confident they felt turning in their essays for a grade. I coded these interviews with the same four categories of student confidence to see how often each category came up in their discussions. I also interviewed each instructor of the three courses at the start and end of the semester. However, this article will focus exclusively on data from the student surveys and interviews.

In evaluating the results of my study, there are some variables to consider that impact the data. All three courses I studied were taught by part-time faculty who have taught at Rider University for at least ten years. Not all of the students in Professor Anderson's class had

English as their first language, and because the course was heterogeneous with both language immersion and writing instruction, this influenced the overall shape of the study. In addition, my positionality impacted the study. My status as an undergraduate student at the time I conducted this research could have influenced how both students and faculty spoke to me.

RESULTS

The first survey question asked students to define confidence in their own words, and I coded these definitions to create subcategories that I linked to confidence in writing. Ultimately, I discovered that students consider confidence in at least one of four ways: personal belief, emotional, skills-based, and risk-taking.

Personal belief confidence is related to the classic saying, "I think I can," as it involves students believing in themselves and identifying as writers. Emotional confidence is about how students feel before or while engaging in a writing task. Students cited feeling comfortable and secure in the classroom when they experience this kind of confidence. Skills-based confidence concentrates on feeling capable enough to practice writing skills and abilities, such as talking about writing, giving and interpreting feedback and comments, and utilizing academic conventions. Finally, risk-taking confidence focuses on students pushing themselves outside their comfort zone to try new ways of thinking and writing, following their curiosities outside the class requirements, and pursuing personal academic interests.

The pre- and post-surveys I administered to the students were designed to measure their perceptions and definitions of various elements of confidence. The questions related to their writing processes, beliefs about themselves as writers, past experiences with writing, and current feelings and experiences with writing. When I interviewed students further, I asked clarifying questions about their survey responses to get more context. I used both the surveys and the interviews with students and faculty to develop the four types of confidence. Breaking down the surveys by each class allows us to see how each one initially perceived confidence in writing with and without each respective instructor's teaching style and classroom practices, as these are variables that can be measured in both the post-surveys and the student interviews.

Table 1: Student Definitions of Confidence

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey	Faculty Interviews	Student Interviews
Personal Belief Confidence	**Smith: 6** **Rogers: 7** **Anderson: 3** **Total: 16**	**Smith: 9** **Rogers: 7** **Anderson: 7** **Total: 23**	Smith: 15 Rogers: 1 Anderson: 3 Total: 19	Lisa: 7 Zara: 7 Michael: 2 Dave: 7 Total: 23
Emotional Confidence	Smith: 5 Rogers: 0 Anderson: 1 Total: 6	Smith: 0 Rogers: 2 Anderson: 1 Total: 3	Smith: 10 Rogers: 2 Anderson: 3 Total: 15	Lisa: 7 Zara: 2 Michael: 5 Dave: 2 Total: 16
Skills-Based Confidence	Smith: 2 Rogers: 5 Anderson: 7 Total: 14	Smith: 3 Rogers: 3 Anderson: 3 Total: 9	**Smith: 10** **Rogers: 5** **Anderson: 23** **Total: 38**	**Lisa: 15** **Zara: 36** **Michael: 17** **Dave: 11** **Total: 79**
Risk-Taking Confidence	Smith: 0 Rogers: 2 Anderson: 0 Total: 2	Smith: 0 Rogers: 0 Anderson: 0 Total: 0	Smith: 7 Rogers: 0 Anderson: 2 Total: 9	Lisa: 4 Zara: 21 Michael: 14 Dave: 3 Total: 42

Table 1 tracks how many times students and faculty mentioned aspects of confidence in writing that naturally map onto each of these categories. In both the pre- and post-surveys, most students' definitions of confidence fell in the personal belief confidence category across all three classes, and more student definitions aligned with this category in the post-survey. 16 students originally wrote about personal belief confidence, and this increased to 23 in the post-survey. Across both faculty interviews, faculty members mentioned aspects of skills-based confidence the most, discussing this category a total of 38 times. This was also true across all of the student interviews, as each student spoke about aspects of skills-based confidence the most, discussing this category 79 times.

Table 2: Student Recollections of Helpful Classroom Activities

	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
Had Helpful Classroom Activities	Smith: 5 Rogers: 3 Anderson: 5 Total: 13	**Smith: 9** **Rogers: 8** **Anderson: 8** **Total: 25**
No Helpful Classroom Activities	**Smith: 8** **Rogers: 11** **Anderson: 6** **Total: 25**	Smith: 3 Rogers: 4 Anderson: 3 Total: 10

In addition, I also asked students to identify any classroom activities that have helped them before and after taking Seminar in Writing and Rhetoric. Table 2 tracks how many students could identify helpful classroom activities and how many did not. In the pre-survey, most students could not recall any past helpful classroom activities, with 25 out of 38 students responding this way. In the post-survey, the majority shifted to 25 out of 35 students recalling helpful classroom activities from the course. The data seemed to flip between the two surveys for this question.

Using the four types of confidence I identified from the pre-surveys (personal belief confidence, emotional confidence, skills-based confidence, and risk-taking confidence), I developed a framework to explain how students move through different levels and types of confidence throughout their first semester of first-year composition. I consider this process to be a cycle that continues throughout a student's time in college. Each time they reach another level of confidence, they become stronger writers and thinkers. Each of the four types of confidence informs one another at every stage of the framework. While one might be more prominent in a particular stage, all of them are influential and strengthen a student's overall confidence in the college writing process.

DISCUSSION

PERSONAL BELIEF CONFIDENCE

Once students arrive in the college writing classroom, they grapple with personal belief confidence. Student definitions of confidence that fit into this category differ slightly between the pre- and post-surveys as their sense of identity shifted throughout the semester. In the pre-survey, student definitions cite having a "belief in yourself to perform a certain task," "believ[ing] you can do something or you are something," and being "sure of yourself in ev-

ery move and decision you make." However, in the post-survey, student definitions explain that "confidence is the feeling that a person has when they believe they are able to do or achieve something," "confidence means having certainty," and "[h]aving confidence means you believe in yourself all the time and believe that you can actually do it." This type of confidence mapped onto an overwhelming majority of student definitions from both surveys.

At the start of the semester, students appear to fit two types of personal belief confidence: performers and novices. Performers enter college without a strong belief in their writing identity, and novices enter college with a developing belief in their writing identity. By the end of the semester, regardless of how students initially identified, they were able to identify as "writers."

Some students find that they need to "perform" in the writing classroom by rethinking their vocabulary. Michael, a student from Professor Rogers's class, started as a "performer." He defined confidence as "be[ing] ready and prepared" in both surveys. At the start of the semester, they felt the need to adopt an advanced vocabulary for his first essay. They said, "I think professors have way bigger vocabularies here, and I feel like I want to meet their standards and match them. So I'll find myself researching words when I'm writing down essays or finding synonyms for words that I've never even said before." Michael felt intimidated by the idea of college professors and their usage of language, so this discomfort fueled his decision to update his vocabulary. Not only did they focus on adhering to Professor Rogers's guidelines, but they also "performed" as a member of academia by attempting to measure up to Professor Rogers by utilizing more advanced language.

With Professor Rogers's guidance through one-on-one conversations throughout the semester, Michael learned to see the value of being intentional with his vocabulary. In their final interview, they reflected on their newfound writing process and explained, "I do enjoy revising. I like going back and changing it after the fact and making sure it's strong and adding whatever words I think would fit in better." Before, Michael used complex language to fit their perceived "standard" of academia. Now, they enjoy the process of finding more effective words, and they mentioned that Professor Rogers "pointing it out really showed [him] that [they] shouldn't use it as an excuse and maybe [they] could just add more of [their] own" words to make their ideas "stronger." In addition, Michael is also developing their identity as a college writer because of these conversations with Professor Rogers. In his pre-survey, they claimed to be a "fair writer" because of their background in "poetry and storytelling." While they identified as a writer then, the word "fair" indicates that they were still unsure of that identity. In their final interview, they explained, "I actually feel so much better as a writer. Like, I wouldn't say I'm a good writer, but I'm a better writer." This shift is crucial, as Michael is now more assured in their writing identity but still thinks there is room for improvement.

On the other hand, students with a background in writing academic essays use their

previous experiences to help them identify as writers, making them "novices." These students adopt parts of Nancy Sommers's "novice-as-expert" theory to combine their previous writing knowledge with an open mind toward learning college-level writing practices. Zara, a student from Professor Smith's class, defined confidence as "believing in yourself despite what people may think" and "accepting that [some people] don't like you and being confident anyway." They have an extensive background in essay writing that they referenced in their first interview when they said, "I've been writing essays for like since fourth grade, but I use this outline that I was given in sixth grade…I found it to be really helpful." Zara explained that they continued to use this outline for the first essay in Professor Smith's class and that it helped in conjunction with the skills taught in the course. By combining her previous writing strategy with what they learned in class, Zara matches Sommers's "novice-as-expert" mindset.

Zara's writing abilities and identity as a college writer grew significantly by the end of the semester. After Professor Smith's discussions about the limitations of the five-paragraph essay, they learned to embrace the freedom of college writing. Zara explained, "I think I just got stronger in terms of my, I guess, like structure, because I think in high school, we were just so used to that structure of like the five-paragraph essay and, you know, use one source per paragraph." While this structure and outline helped her assimilate to her college writing course, now they do not need to rely on it. They noted, "in college, like, we're just kind of given more flexibility…I really like that flexibility." Zara's writing identity has become so strong that they are starting to focus more on what they like about college writing and less on merely completing an assignment.

By the end of the semester, both Michael and Zara had become more confident in their abilities as writers. They each discovered the value of their own selves, ideas, and interests and are learning to apply these to academic writing. Their newfound confidence in their personal beliefs has also impacted their development of the other three types of confidence.

EMOTIONAL CONFIDENCE

While students are solidifying their writing identities, they also develop an emotional confidence in the classroom that impacts their feelings about writing. I identified survey responses and interview topical chains as emotional confidence when students mentioned "comfort" and "feelings" in their definitions. In the pre-surveys, student definitions of confidence that fit this category cite "being comfortable in your own skin" and "having a carefree mindset." In the post-surveys, however, student definitions explained, "Confidence is the feeling of being powerful" and "Being comfortable and secure in who you are." This idea of comfort in writing is directly impacted by students' experiences in the classroom. For students to eventually feel comfortable in their writing process, they need to feel comfortable enough in the classroom to experiment and make mistakes.

The teaching styles of writing instructors directly impact the emotional confidence

students experience. There is no "correct" style, but each style informs how comfortable students feel in the writing classroom and the teaching practices that work best for the students. Zara defined Professor Smith's style as casual, relaxed, and open-minded, and this style allowed them to engage in class discussions and feel more comfortable asking questions. They enjoyed the class discussions about assigned articles because they got to hear different opinions about the material. They recalled that the class "would talk about different aspects of it, and I'd be like, oh, I didn't think of it that way," and as a result, "that just gave me…a broader perspective about, you know, what it is that we're trying to like communicate in our in our essays." In my observations of the class, Zara was a very active participant in these discussions. Zara not only saw the significance of the class discussions regarding the assigned essays, but they also felt comfortable enough to join the writing community in the course. Professor Smith's casual personality and teaching style influenced his students' comfort overall, which is also true of Professor Rogers's style.

Like Zara, Michael also saw a positive shift in his emotional confidence because of Professor Rogers's teaching style. They defined Professor Rogers's style as an engaging "freeform vibe." While reflecting on the course mid-semester, they explain that Professor Rogers is "cool with, like, comparing stuff to real life and trying to give you a life lesson in his little lectures, and hit those in a few jokes." Professor Rogers's relaxed style is also evident in my observations. Most of his lectures involved casual conversations with the students, and they often encouraged students to share their personal experiences and interests as they relate to class topics. Professor Rogers's casual and "freeform" style, combined with their choice to allow students to share personal anecdotes, created an engaging environment.

Zara and Michael both became more comfortable with their writing once they felt comfortable in the classroom. In both of their experiences, their professors fostered a sense of collaboration in the classroom. Engaging with students as writers and discussing ways to strengthen their work helps affirm their budding writer identities. As a result, giving students an environment that helps them feel safe builds both their emotional and personal belief confidence.

SKILLS-BASED CONFIDENCE

Once students feel comfortable in the classroom and build a rapport with their instructors, they are able to learn, practice, and adopt writing skills through developing their skills-based confidence. In the pre-survey, student definitions of confidence that match this category focus on "know[ing] what you're doing by practicing or other means," being "ready and prepared," and "feel[ing] able enough to complete a task." Student definitions in the post-survey shifted slightly, as students explained that "Confidence is when an individual feels that their own skills and capabilities are at a high enough level to fulfill a certain task," "Going into something knowing you can do well," and "know[ing] a topic to the full extent and be willing to explain it if necessary."

While definitions across both surveys focus on "knowing" and having a strong ability, students at the start of the semester explained this from a distance—as if they did not feel capable of being successful college writers. In the post-surveys, however, students were able to provide specific action steps toward completing something with confidence.

Students in Professor Rogers's class especially found that his integration of media in his teaching helped them apply the concepts and skills they learned in class. For most of the major essay assignments, Professor Rogers showed TED Talks in class and asked the students to discuss them as a large group. This classroom activity was mentioned the most in the survey responses for Professor Rogers's class. In the post-survey, one of the students said, "The TED Talks that we [analyze] have highlighted effective ways of speaking and conveying a message to me" that "can also be applied to written assignments." Michael added to this, saying the five claim types of "fact, definition, cause, value, policy" were "just stuck in [their] head." After developing this skill, they remarked, "I can use this myself." Michael not only learned these concrete skills of argument and rhetoric; they also learned how argument and rhetoric are relevant to real-world issues, and seeing why these skills matter made them more inclined to adopt them into their own writing process.

In addition, Professor Rogers' focus on discussions of lower-order concerns with Michael during his one-on-ones with him supported Michael throughout his writing journey. Michael explained that most of Professor Rogers's comments and suggestions were about "expanding more on what [he] meant" and "add[ing] more [descriptive] words," as Professor Rogers thought that they "had way more to give and [they] were holding back" from saying what they meant. They shared this anecdote about his usage of specific vocabulary:

> My point wasn't strong enough, and I wanted to use words that pushed it harder. So, like I used words that may not fit like, I used massacre when maybe it's not a massacre. Or a revolution, well, maybe it's not a revolution. Usually he didn't mind that I used those words. He actually encouraged it. It's just that he thinks I could have found better places in my essay to put them and just better uses for those words. And I think him pointing it out really showed me that I shouldn't use it as an excuse, and maybe I could just add more of my own.

This moment relates back to Michael's original experience with performance and "inventing the university." Before, Michael felt like they needed to use higher-level vocabulary to match his professor's standards. Now, Professor Rogers's feedback has helped Michael move past that mindset. They are learning that choosing effective vocabulary and using it to prove their arguments is a skill they can continue building for their own benefit.

Professor Anderson's approach to class activities also involved large class discussions. Students in their class found that the class brainstorming and topic development activity they led for each of the four essay assignments

was especially helpful. They opened a spreadsheet and asked students to name topics they were interested in writing about, leading to a class discussion on each topic. Students mentioned this activity the most in their post-survey responses and discussed how it helped them come up with ideas for each essay, saying that "Brainstorming the topics has helped" them "fig[ure] out what [they wanted]to write in [their] paper[s]" and "create[d] ideas in [their] brain[s]." Dave gave more context about what it looked like in the classroom, explaining that Professor Anderson projected the spreadsheet "on the board and they made [them] go over [the topics], and then they'd like, call [them] out in class. That was perfect because that's how I got my topic right off the top of my head." In their second interview, they mentioned how they are "picking [topics] with 100 percent confidence, which makes my writing sound better, like connect more and also flow better." Professor Anderson's focus on teaching students how to choose effective topics, in addition to asking useful questions about them, gave Dave a solid start with the college essay writing process.

Like Michael, Dave especially found Professor Anderson's feedback about lower-order concerns in his writing useful. Because Professor Anderson's class is structured like a repeated writing workshop, they constantly give the students feedback on each stage of the writing process. When Dave reflected on their specific suggestions, they explained that Professor Anderson would usually "either reword some of my sentences" or "they [would] give me an example of" how to turn his floating ideas "into sentences." Dave found that Professor Anderson's modeling of how to fix lower order concerns "jump-start[ed]" him to eventually "being able to put them into sentences" on his own. This personalized modeling helped Dave practice and apply these skills to his own writing process at his own pace, and as a result, they were able to develop his skills-based confidence.

Michael and Dave both saw notable growth in their skills-based confidence from the large classroom activities and the one-on-one feedback from their professors. Each spoke about the impact the professor's approach to feedback had on their skill development. When instructors are specific about how their activities and suggestions are relevant to the writing process, students are more likely to try out those writing strategies and adopt the ones that align with their processes. Not only does this help students learn to trust their writing identities, but it also creates a comfortable learning environment for students to experiment with these skills.

RISK-TAKING CONFIDENCE

As students adopt the necessary skills to be college writers, they eventually push themselves to pursue their own academic interests and curiosities. This is how students begin to develop risk-taking confidence. In the pre-survey, student definitions that related to risk-taking confidence cited that "confidence is something everyone has inside of them that helps people to do things that might not be in [their] comfort zone" and "put[ting] themselves in uncomfortable situations, and learn[ing] from them

if they don't go as intended." Students did not directly mention pushing themselves out of their "comfort zone" or setting goals beyond the course in the post-surveys. While students may not think they are at the risk-taking confidence stage based on their new definitions of confidence, many ask bigger questions about academic work and take risks beyond the first-year composition classroom.

After learning to experiment with new writing strategies, students who start as "performers" can become stronger risk-takers. As a "performer," Michael started the semester by taking limited risks. They only set goals for his writing based on Professor Rogers's suggestions. In his first interview, they talked about how they did not understand some of the comments they received from Professor Rogers, saying, "I'll hear terms from Professor Rogers…[they'll] say corrections to me, I really don't know what they mean. But I know there's a problem there, and I want to figure out how to fix that," especially with outlining their papers. At the time, they did not have a lot of experience writing outlines, and they felt like they needed to figure out how to outline in order to become a better writer. The mindset of "if someone doesn't tell me to do it, I probably wouldn't do it" guided their early process. However, by the end of the semester, Michael developed a sense of personal agency as he adopted the writing skills Professor Rogers taught in class. While they learned that "there's a lot of tactics in like a lot of different methods you can use to prewrite," they ultimately found that "[they didn't] like any of them." After trying out these tactics and methods, they realized, "I focus too much on one little thing, and by the end, I have barely any words and barely any ideas on the paper. It's interesting. It doesn't work for me. I don't see myself outlining very much." Michael has shifted away from being a "performer," and now they have gained enough self-awareness to take risks and advocate for the writing process that works best for them. This new self-awareness has influenced their risk-taking confidence as a whole.

On the other hand, students who start as "novices" can become more advanced risk-takers after asking their professors questions aligned with their curiosities. Because Zara started the semester as a "novice," their risks were already more advanced. Instead of adhering to the minimum page requirement for each assignment, Zara pushed through their discomfort and focused on writing papers they were proud of. In the process, they also followed their natural curiosities about academic and casual language. They wanted to learn the difference between the two and "find the balance" between "sound[ing] scholarly but not… so scholarly it's boring". When they asked Professor Smith for guidance, Professor Smith said that it was a balance they would learn to achieve and that "you don't want it to sound… completely like the average person wouldn't be able to read it, but you also want to…sound like you know what you're talking about." This curiosity about tone led to them considering even larger risks outside of the classroom. They explained, "I always wondered how people who actually write for articles write, because the way they write is just not the way that we in middle school or high school write. But

now, the way we've been writing these essays, it feels like I could do that…. I could write a full blown article, and it actually would be good." This is a major indicator of their increase in risk-taking confidence. Not only do they feel more confident writing academic essays, but they also feel that they could go beyond the freshman composition essay entirely.

Risk-taking confidence allows students to apply any stage of their writing identities to their individual interests. A safe classroom environment can help students feel more comfortable experimenting with their writing, and the specific skills that students learn in the classroom become the foundation for more global questions about academic writing. The ways that students talk about their writing in their surveys and interviews also impact our understanding of how students move through each category of confidence.

CONCLUSION

Each of the four categories of confidence I have identified provides insight into how students experience first-year composition. In the surveys, personal belief confidence was the most commonly described category of confidence out of the four. This may be explained as students constantly questioning who they are as writers and how they fit into academia. Emotional confidence emerged after many students discussed feeling "comfortable," and a classroom environment that promotes collaboration between writers with a casual tone can help foster this comfort. Skills-based confidence was most commonly described by faculty and students in their interviews, as this category focuses on the transferable skills students learn, especially the skill of crafting effective arguments on the page. Classroom activities that allow students to apply these skills to their writing processes can help them become more assured in these skills. Risk-taking confidence was described the least in the surveys, but the students I tracked were able to build personal agency and take more risks after seeing the larger significance of college writing. All of these categories originated from the students' perspective on first-year writing courses, as this is one of the prominent gaps in previous research about confidence.

Conducting this research with my background in tutoring allowed me to see how student confidence functions from all perspectives: instructor, tutor, and student. If instructors can have a deeper understanding of student confidence and how students experience it in the first-year writing classroom, they can adopt teaching practices within their pedagogies that better support their students. Here are some practices that I would recommend that instructors use in the classroom to foster student confidence in writing:

- **Dive deeper into student experiences**: Ask students about their experiences with the writing assignments. Invite them to discuss these experiences with each other in small groups, or ask them to share their experiences with you in one-on-one check-ins as you review their work.
- **Build a safe writing community**: Encourage the class to act as a community of writers rather than a room of students and a teacher. To help the students engage with one another as writers, try

doing topic development and brainstorming activities as a large group.

- **Act as a writing "mentor" more than a "teacher":** Use a casual and conversational style to mentor student writers. This will help them feel comfortable sharing their experiences, asking questions, and practicing using their newfound agency as college students and writers.
- **Give individual and group feedback**: Blend one-on-one time for individual feedback with peer writing and revision activities. Encourage students to search for feedback from multiple perspectives: from you, each other, and the writing center.
- **Share why the content is relevant**: Connect the skills you teach in the classroom to real-world issues or ideas they are studying in their majors. Reflect on the role writing has played in your life, and share the importance of writing in all fields of study.
- **Identify the type of confidence**: Consider what kind of confidence students are exhibiting or developing at each stage of an assignment or throughout the semester. Ask your students what would help them identify as writers, feel more comfortable in the classroom, feel secure in their practice of writing skills that they have been learning, and what risks they are considering.

Student confidence is the key to bridging the gap between instructor and student perspectives to help writing instructors better serve students in first-year composition courses. Even though confidence appears to be an abstract concept that cannot be defined, the four categories of confidence I have identified prove that this is not the case. I invite instructors to rethink how they engage with students in the classroom: Do you treat your students as writers or students (personal-belief confidence)? Do you create an environment focused on collaboration or lecturing (emotional confidence)? How do you focus on teaching writing skills: by providing feedback on multiple drafts, or by providing feedback on a final graded draft (skills-based confidence)? Other than grading, what is your role in the course: to teach writing or to mentor first-year writers (risk-taking confidence)?

With this new understanding of student confidence, I hope more students will make the same profound leap from "I am not a writer" to "I am a confident writer!"

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Define confidence in your own words. What does it mean to be confident?
2. Based on your definition of confidence, on a scale of 1 to 4, how confident are you in your writing skills? Why?

   1 - not confident
   2 - a little confident
   3 - somewhat confident
   4 - very confident
3. Define "good writing" in your own words. What does it mean for writing to be "good?"
4. Based on your definition of "good writing," do you think you are a good writer? Why or why not?
5. How do you feel when you are assigned to write a paper? List your specific feelings.
6. Describe your writing process. How do you approach an essay or writing assignment?
7. What parts of the writing process do you feel most confident in? (Brainstorming Prewriting/ Outlining Drafting Revising Editing/Proofreading)

8. What parts of the writing process do you feel least confident in? (Brainstorming Prewriting/ Outlining Drafting Revising Editing/Proofreading)
9. Have there been any classroom activities that you have done that have helped you build confidence in your writing? Where were they? (in high school, college, etc.)
10. On a scale of 1-4, how important are teaching comments to building your confidence as a writer?

    1 - not important
    2 - a little important
    3 - somewhat important
    4 - very important
11. On a scale of 1-4, how important is peer feedback to building your confidence as a writer?

    1 - not important
    2 - a little important
    3 - somewhat important
    4 - very important
12. On a scale of 1-4, how confident are you when you submit a paper for a grade?

    1 - not confident
    2 - a little confident
    3 - somewhat confident
    4 - very confident

APPENDIX B: STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

FIRST INTERVIEW

1. Tell me more about your definition of confidence. What does confidence mean to you?
2. Tell me more about your definition of good writing. What does good writing mean to you?
3. Take me through what your writing process has looked like for your first essay for your class. What have you learned from your professor that has helped?
4. Based on your new process, what parts of the writing process in general are you most confident in and why? Which do you want to work on more?
5. What classroom activities have been especially helpful to you?
6. How would you define your professor's style of teaching writing?

7. What kind of feedback are you getting from your professor? Is it helpful?
8. How confident did you feel turning this paper in for a grade?

FINAL INTERVIEW

1. Tell me more about your new definition of confidence. What does confidence mean to you?
2. Tell me more about your new definition of good writing. What does good writing mean to you?
3. Take me through what your writing process has looked like for your last essay for your class. What have you learned from your professor that has helped?
4. Based on your new writing process, what parts of the writing process in general are you most confident in and why? Which do you want to work on more?
5. What classroom activities have been especially helpful to you this semester?
6. What kind of feedback are you getting from your professor now? Is it helpful?
7. How confident did you feel turning your last paper in for a grade?
8. How do you feel about your writing and yourself as a writer compared to earlier this semester? What has changed?