

Building Self-Efficacy: How to Feel Confident in Your Online Teaching

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Now that we are into the realities of teaching in a COVID-world, I keep hearing similar sentiments from my colleagues, something to the effect of, “It’s going fine, but I don’t feel like a good teacher anymore.” What I hear in these statements is not a bad teacher but one who has lost confidence in their teaching. Whether teaching fully online, a hybrid model, or in-person with social distancing requirements, everyone has had to make changes to the way they teach. The pedagogical style and practices that we previously relied on are either no longer an option or are not as effective given the current constraints. So, we have adapted, learned the technology, and made necessary adjustments. We’re doing it, but we don’t feel like we’re doing it well. We’ve lost our confidence, and thus feel like we’re not good teachers anymore. The good news is that we don’t have to wait for teaching to return to “normal” to feel like good teachers again. We can start to feel confident again by building self-efficacy in our own online or hybrid teaching.

Self-efficacy refers to one’s confidence in their ability to perform a task (Bandura, 1977).

Self-efficacy is situation specific, so while we may have high self-efficacy when it comes to traditional pedagogical methods, we can have equally low self-efficacy for online or hybrid teaching. Our individual assessment of our competence to teach, and our confidence to

overcome the barriers to doing so, represents our self-efficacy for new teaching styles. While faculty have all shown that they can teach online or hybrid, we don't necessarily feel confident that we're doing it well.

Bandura's self-efficacy theory suggests there are four major sources for building confidence to perform and persevere at a task: mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. Based on these sources of self-efficacy, there are a few practical strategies that faculty can use to build confidence and competence for online or hybrid teaching.

Mastery experiences

Succeeding at specific tasks can boost our self-confidence and likelihood of achieving success at similar tasks. In other words, small changes can ultimately lead to big victories. This requires setting realistic, achievable goals and practicing resilience in the face of failures. Instead of trying every new technological strategy or feature that is available, try just one at a time. Today you might try to use Zoom breakout rooms. Make it a small part of class so that if it flops, the entire class doesn't have to be scrapped. It may take you one or five class periods to achieve complete success with breakout rooms, but once you do, it can be fully integrated into your class and you can build on that success to try something else. Perhaps you can start to integrate Google docs into the breakout rooms, add a poll, or try a new application all together.

With each small success you achieve a mastery experience that builds your confidence, until eventually, you feel totally competent and confident using a variety of technology-based teaching methods. You may experience failures along the way, but by setting reasonable goals, those small challenges do not ruin an entire class. Instead of becoming overwhelmed and feeling pressure to try every new app or technique that is suggested to improve online teaching, we should take them as ideas and try to integrate them little bits at a time. Select one new thing that will best fit your class or your style and try it for a week or two before adding another new element.

Vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion

Perhaps now more than ever it is important to give support and receive support from our colleagues. Faculty can build their confidence to try new things in the classroom when they learn and see other people succeed, and when they are encouraged by others. If you're thinking about trying something new, there is probably another faculty member on campus who has already tried it before you. Network with other faculty, talk to them, learn from them, and take encouragement from them. Observing successes and receiving genuine verbal encouragement can help boost our own internal confidence reserves. So, make time to connect with each other and be intentional about sharing your successes, not just commiserating about your challenges.

Emotional arousal

Our own mental state impacts the way we respond to and perceive our sense of self. Bandura (1977) states that “high arousal usually debilitates performance.” When we are feeling mentally distressed about the circumstances surrounding our teaching, it is more difficult to stay positive and confident about how we are performing in the virtual classroom. It is important to practice self-care so that we can remain physically and emotionally healthy, which will help increase optimism and positivity about our own teaching experiences. Resilience when learning a new pedagogical method is critical and is easier to maintain when fear and self-doubt are not dominating thoughts. Taking a mindful minute before each class, practicing a personal favorite stress management technique, or sharing our concerns with trusted colleagues can help balance our emotional arousal and should be made a priority.

Final thoughts

Although I am not a gymnast, I once did a cartwheel in front of my class. I was trying to teach the concept of self-efficacy and thought this would be an effective method for illustrating the concept. I’m not sure what made me brave enough to do it, but I do know I was taking a risk of, quite literally, falling on my face. Now, a decade later, it feels like we’re doing mental gymnastics in class every day as we struggle to adapt to new teaching environments and pedagogical constraints. Every day feels like a risk as we try new technological modalities and instructional styles. And just as much as I lacked confidence in my ability to do a cartwheel, many faculty lack confidence in their ability to teach effectively in an online or hybrid environment. Yet, we are all taking the risk, and most days we don’t fall on our faces, but we also don’t feel very graceful. Despite our self-doubt and stumbles, we can learn to thrive in this new teaching environment and use the self-efficacy theory to offer practical guidance to help us get there.

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References

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