

SELF-EFFICACY THEORY

In addition to being influenced by their drives, interests, and attributions, students' motives are affected by specific beliefs about the student's personal capacities. In self-efficacy theory, the beliefs become a primary, explicit explanation for motivation (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy is the belief that you are capable of carrying out a specific task or of reaching a specific goal. Note that the belief and the action or goal are specific. Self-efficacy is a belief that you can write an acceptable term paper, for example, or repair an automobile, or make friends with the new student in class. These are relatively specific beliefs and tasks. Self-efficacy is not about whether you believe that you are intelligent in general, whether you always like working with mechanical things, or think that you are generally a likable person. These more general judgments are better regarded as various mixtures of self-concepts (beliefs about general personal identity) or of self-esteem (evaluations of identity). They are important in their own right and sometimes influence motivation, but only indirectly (Bong & Skaalvik, 2004). Self-efficacy beliefs, furthermore, are not the same as "true" or documented skill or ability. They are self-constructed, meaning that they are personally developed perceptions. There can sometimes, therefore, be discrepancies between a person's self-efficacy beliefs and the person's abilities. You can believe that you can write a good term paper, for example, without actually being able to do so, and vice versa: you can believe yourself incapable of writing a paper, but discover that you are in fact able to do so. In this way, self-efficacy is like the everyday idea of confidence, except that it is defined more precisely. And as with confidence, it is possible to have either too much or too little self-efficacy. The optimum level seems to be either at or slightly above true capacity (Bandura, 1997). As we indicate below, large discrepancies between self-efficacy and ability can create motivational problems for the individual.

Motivation as Content versus Motivation as Process

A caution about self-efficacy theory is its heavy emphasis on just the process of motivation, at the expense of the content of motivation. The basic self-efficacy model has much to say about how beliefs affect behaviour, but relatively little to say about which beliefs and tasks are especially satisfying or lead to the greatest well-being in students. The answer to this question is important to know, since teachers might then select tasks as much as possible that are intrinsically satisfying, and not merely achievable.

Another way of posing this concern is by asking: “Is it possible to feel high self-efficacy about a task that you do not enjoy?” It does seem quite possible for such a gap to exist. As a youth, for example, one of us (Kelvin Seifert) had considerable success with solving mathematics problems in high school algebra, and expended considerable effort doing algebra assignments as homework. Before long, he had developed high self-efficacy with regard to solving such problems. But Kelvin never really enjoyed solving the algebra problems, and later even turned away permanently from math or science as a career (much to the disappointment of his teachers and family). In this case, self-efficacy theory nicely explained the process of his motivation—Kelvin’s belief in his capacity led to persistence at the tasks. But it did not explain the content of his motivation—his growing dislike of the tasks. Accounting for such a gap requires a different theory of motivation, one that includes not only specific beliefs but “deeper” personal needs as well. An example of this approach is self-determination theory, where we turn next.