

Doctoral Students' Perceptions of the Similarities and Differences Between Student and Advisor Dissertation Evaluation Scores

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ABSTRACT

Doctoral students often experience discrepancies between their understanding of dissertation writing proficiency and the assessments provided by their advisors. The purpose of this single case study was to explore doctoral students' perceptions regarding similarities and dissimilarities of their self-evaluation compared to their advisor's evaluation, focusing on their self-ratings and advisor evaluations of dissertation drafts. Using a single case study approach, we analyzed self-evaluations, faculty assessments, and individual interviews with four participants in an online EdD program. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory provided a framework for analyzing performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states in shaping students' writing confidence. Findings indicate that misalignment often stems from differences in metacognitive awareness, overreliance on peer working groups (PWGs), and the perceived role of feedback. Participants who viewed feedback as a tool for iterative growth were more likely to align with advisor assessments. We suggest that structured self-evaluation rubrics, targeted advisor feedback, and peer collaboration can enhance doctoral students' writing self-efficacy and dissertation progress. The study's findings underscore the need for doctoral programs to implement structured feedback systems, enhance advisor training, and support peer collaboration to improve writing self-efficacy and dissertation alignment. Future research should explore scalable feedback strategies and the role of PWGs.

KEYWORDS

doctoral writing self-efficacy, dissertation feedback, doctoral advising, advisor-student alignment

Misalignment between student self-assessment of their writing proficiency and faculty evaluations poses an issue in doctoral programs. Many students enter post-secondary studies without the literacy skills they need, which has various relationships to their literacy self-efficacy (Perin, 2020). Numerous studies describe the gap between students' perceptions of their writing skills and the assessments rendered by faculty members (e.g. Breitenbach et al., 2022). One oft-cited study conducted by Kruger and Dunning (1999) revealed a cognitive bias, known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, wherein individuals with lower competence tend to overestimate their abilities. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of writing, as students, especially those in the early stages of their doctoral writing journey, may lack both writing competence and the metacognitive awareness necessary to accurately gauge their writing competence (Breitenbach et al., 2022; Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007; Ondrusek, 2012; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

The purpose of this single case study was to explore doctoral students' perceptions regarding similarities and dissimilarities of their

self-evaluation compared to their advisor's evaluation. To uncover these perceptions, we crafted the following question to guide the study: How do doctoral students explain the similarities and differences in their self-rating and advisor evaluations of their Chapter One first draft, Chapter Two first draft, and Chapter One and Two revised draft?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Doctoral writing involves navigating intricate academic conventions and adapting to evolving faculty expectations, often making the dissertation process daunting for students. While writing skill deficits such as difficulty with structural organization, argument coherence, and genre-specific conventions can hinder student progress (Chien & Li, 2022; Rafi & Moghees, 2023), researchers emphasize that writing development extends beyond technical skill mastery. Instead, scholars increasingly recognize dissertation writing



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as iterative, relying heavily on metacognitive reflection, constructive feedback, and supportive faculty-student interactions (Aitchison et al., 2012; Friedrich-Nel & MacKinnon, 2015; Perin, 2020). This literature review explores these tensions, highlighting key theoretical perspectives on feedback, metacognition, and writing self-efficacy.

Dissertation Writing Tensions

Doctoral writing serves as a site where tensions arise regarding expectations, roles, and feedback practices. Aitchison et al. (2012) suggest that these disagreements often stem from conflicting expectations about writing, where faculty may perceive writing as a flexible, developmental process while students interpret feedback as judgment on personal capability. Disciplinary variations further compound these tensions; Chien and Li (2022) indicate that genre expectations differ significantly across disciplines, causing confusion about what constitutes quality writing. Such ambiguity may lead students to perceive feedback negatively, exacerbating writing apprehension and decreasing self-efficacy (Kelly & Gaytan, 2020).

However, consistent and explicit feedback practices can mitigate these tensions. Bearman et al. (2024) identify structured, iterative feedback, regular meetings, detailed comments, and critical questioning as pivotal in developing both writing proficiency and self-efficacy. Supporting this, Friedrich-Nel and MacKinnon (2015) emphasize formative assessment as instrumental in allowing students to experience incremental success, promoting persistence despite initial challenges. Kaul et al. (2024) similarly identify specific, iterative feedback as essential. Thus, institutional clarity around expectations and structured feedback processes appears crucial for doctoral students to effectively navigate writing tensions. Addressing these complexities requires fostering metacognitive awareness, which is closely tied to writing self-efficacy, as students who actively reflect on their writing strategies and progress are more likely to develop confidence in their abilities to meet academic expectations.

Feedback and Metacognition

Metacognition, or students' awareness and understanding of their thought processes, has long been taken up in educational contexts and plays a central role in doctoral writing. Explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies improves student performance (Negretti, 2021). Graduate students also benefit significantly from feedback-driven metacognitive engagement strategies (Filipovic & Jovanovic, 2016). Nicol and Kushwah (2024) demonstrate that dialogic self-feedback practices enhance students' abilities to self-assess and revise effectively. By fostering active engagement in evaluating their own work, these practices improve not only writing quality but also students' belief in their own abilities (Duijnhouwer et al., 2010). Students who perceive feedback as positive and instructive report greater satisfaction with supervision (de Kleijn et al., 2013). This perception can enhance self-efficacy by validating their writing efforts and fostering a growth-oriented mindset toward revision.

Accurate metacognitive judgments correlate closely with critical thinking, writing proficiency, and rhetorical effectiveness (Teng & Yue, 2022). However, simply encouraging metacognition is not sufficient without structured, repeated faculty guidance. Effective feedback from advisors serves as necessary scaffolding, enabling students to move from passive recipients of critique to active participants in revision processes (Kaul et al., 2024). Developing these skills helps students internalize writing as a process rather

than as a fixed ability, reinforcing their sense of control over their own progress. Engaging students in dialogic self-feedback enhances feedback literacy, self-assessment, and revision strategies (Nicol & Kushwah, 2024). Despite the recognized benefits, research suggests that such metacognitive scaffolding remains inconsistently implemented in doctoral contexts (Lehan et al., 2016), suggesting a critical area for improvement.

Graduate Writing Feedback and the Role of the Advisor

Feedback, particularly formative critique, significantly shapes doctoral students' scholarly writing development (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000) and writing self-efficacy (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Crumbo, 1999; Pritchard, 2018; Schunk & Gunn, 1986). Iterative feedback, characterized by repeated, incremental revision cycles, enhances students' performance accomplishments, enabling them to internalize writing as a dynamic, process-oriented practice rather than a fixed skill (Duijnhouwer et al., 2010). This kind of feedback additionally fosters academic identity, writing skills, and independence (Castello et al., 2013; Guerin, 2013; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019), enhancing knowledge-building (Prior, 2001) and critical thinking (Can & Walker, 2011; Friedrich-Nel & MacKinnon, 2015; Gazza et al., 2013; Odena & Burgess, 2017).

Yet, students' reception of feedback can vary significantly, shaped by emotional responses, existing self-efficacy beliefs, and advisor-student power dynamics (Carter & Kumar, 2017; Naidoo et al., 2023). Receiving feedback can be emotionally charged as students navigate writing self-efficacy (Aitchison et al., 2012). Increased self-efficacy does not always translate to better writing outcomes (Duijnhouwer et al., 2010), and overconfidence may result from self-enhancement biases, affecting students' sense of belonging (Naidoo et al., 2023). Further, faculty-student power dynamics shape feedback reception (Carter & Kumar, 2017), while unclear advisor expectations heighten writing apprehension (Kelly & Gaytan, 2020). How feedback is delivered, in terms of clarity, specificity, and tone, influences whether students perceive it as constructive guidance or as confirmation of inadequacy (Kelly & Gaytan, 2020). Despite the demonstrated need, early-career faculty often lack structured institutional support to develop these critical mentoring competencies (Huet & Casanova, 2021; Kumar et al., 2023).

Furthermore, peer writing groups provide supplementary support, offering vicarious experience and modeling successful writing strategies (Capello, 2020). Students in these groups engage in activities such as peer review, rubric-based feedback, and collaborative reflection, which reinforce writing self-efficacy by making visible the successes and struggles of peers (Naidoo et al., 2023). This underscores the need for institutions to integrate structured peer-support mechanisms alongside faculty mentoring.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework we selected to guide this study was Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy. The theory of self-efficacy comprises four components or principal sources of efficacy information. First, performance accomplishments involve experiencing success firsthand. Second, vicarious experience involves experiencing success modeled by others. Third, verbal persuasion is focused on feedback from a trusted source, suggesting that someone "can cope



successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past" (Bandura, 1977, p. 198). Finally, physiological states point toward emotions that may influence one's perceived self-efficacy, particularly involving what Bandura (1977) called "fear-provoking thoughts about their ineptitude" (p. 199), which results in anxiety that exceeds the reality of the situation. We used this framework to inform our data analysis, which we describe in the following sections.

METHODOLOGY

For this single case study, we explored online doctoral students' perceptions regarding similarities and dissimilarities of their self-evaluation compared to their advisor's evaluation in a dissertation-focused course. We bounded this study by one cohort of students in an online EdD program at a private research university in central Texas. A single case study was the best approach because we wanted to explore participants' experiences at a particular time, reflecting a common case (Yin, 2014). In the following sections, we describe the course, the participants, data collection, and data analysis.

Course overview

Students in the online EdD program typically complete two courses each trimester with the intent of program completion in three years. In term five of a nine-term program, students take two dissertation courses simultaneously for a total of six hours of credit. In these courses, they develop their introduction and literature review (Chapter One) and methodology (Chapter Two) of their four-chapter dissertations. As part of the six hours of coursework, which we used to bound the case for this study, students attended live sessions each week focused on different aspects of writing these chapters. They received our Composition Resource Guide (see Werse et al., 2026), a rubric for the two chapters (see Table 1), and course materials, including readings and explanatory videos, to support their dissertation progress. In our live sessions, we used the guidance from the Composition Resource Guide—a student resource that several members of our program developed to articulate programmatic expectations for the dissertation—to teach students what belonged in each section of their dissertations and offer suggested page lengths and possible organizational structures for each section. We also showed them the related rubric so that they could understand their progress using a color rating system. Students submitted their drafts at particular submission points in the term for review and feedback. The multiple submissions were important for students to apply the feedback they received on their drafts and improve their documents in anticipation of submitting it for candidacy review. Table 1 includes a sample of the rubric. Table 2 includes a general overview of the color ratings (green, yellow, orange, and red).

Dissertation feedback is a collaborative and supportive process provided by multiple full-time program faculty (Smith et al., 2024). At the time of this study, each faculty advisor (FA) oversaw a group of 6–12 students, and affiliate faculty members of the Research and Writing Development Center (RWDC) gave additional feedback and served as dissertation defense committee members. For each draft, typically, an RWDC affiliate faculty member reviewed the dissertation draft first and looked for areas of concern related to clarity and conciseness. Then, the advisor reviewed the dissertation for its content. Each reviewer added comments in the document for the

student to address to improve the dissertation. At the recommendation of FAs, students also formed self-led peer working groups (PWGs) of about four members to meet weekly and provide feedback to one another throughout the trimester. These groups functioned independently without faculty monitoring or guidance beyond the suggestion of consistent, weekly meetings with targeted goals.

Table 1. Rubric Sample

Section	Green	Yellow	Orange	Red
Statement of the Problem	Clear description with data to demonstrate the breadth and depth of the problem. Succinctly addresses how the problem is manifest in the organization. No embedded solutions.	Clear description with data to demonstrate the breadth and depth of the problem. May address how the problem is manifest in the organization. No embedded solutions.	Problem may be ill-defined or lack congruence with the rest of the chapter. May need more data to support depth and breadth.	Focuses on the solution, not on the problem. Lacking congruence with the rest of Chapter One.
Literature Review Length	20+ pages of relevant content.	18+ pages of relevant content.	10+ pages of relevant content.	Less than 10 pages of relevant content.

Table 2. Student and Faculty Advisor Rating General Descriptions

Green	Yellow	Orange	Red
You are making great progress on your [dissertation] and are on track to advance to doctoral candidacy at the end of this term.	You have experienced some hurdles, but your [dissertation] is showing improvement. Keep pressing forward—don't stop!—and you should be able to advance to doctoral candidacy at the end of the term.	Your [dissertation] is behind where it should be at this point. You will need to double your efforts and utilize your resources to advance to doctoral candidacy at the end of this term.	At this time, your progress on your [dissertation] is concerning. It will take significant work to catch up. It is unlikely that you will advance to doctoral candidacy at the end of this term.

Participants

Four doctoral students served as the participants in this study. When beginning this course, we invited all 56 students in a particular cohort in an online EdD program to participate in data collection that would later become a series of studies (see Kaul et al., 2024). Of the 56 students, 53 agreed to participate via an online consent form. We used criterion-based sampling with maximum variation (Creswell & Poth, 2018) based on differences in the advisor/student ratings to identify four participants for the current study. The inclusion criteria included receiving candidacy at the end of the course and completing three self-evaluations, one at each submission in the term. For each submission, faculty and students independently rated the submissions using four color options (green, yellow, orange, and red; scored 1–4, respectively) and a rubric organized by dissertation section that indicated student progress toward doctoral candidacy.

After the trimester ended and instructors posted grades, we compared students' scores to those of their advisors. For each submission, we calculated the rating differences as positive (student underrating compared to advisor) or negative (student overrating). For example, if a student rated their first submission as green (1), but their advisor rated it as yellow (2), we calculated the score at -1. We then totaled the submission scores for each student to organize them

into three groups: students who underestimated their progress, students who overestimated their progress, and students whose ratings were nearly aligned with their advisor's ratings. Of the three students who consistently underestimated their progress across the submissions, one agreed to participate in the study. Of the six students who consistently overestimated their progress across the submissions, one agreed to participate in the study. Of the 16 students who consistently had nearly aligned ratings across the submissions, two agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

We collected the data from two data sources. The first data source comprised student and advisor ratings on a self-evaluation and advisor rating form, which were submitted at three submission points in the term: Chapter One first draft, Chapter Two first draft, and Chapter One and Two revised draft. After the term ended, we reviewed the ratings that the students provided and compared their ratings with the FA's ratings. We looked for students who consistently underestimated, overestimated, or aligned with the FA ratings to select four participants to interview as our primary data source.

The second data source included an individual interview with each participant (see Table 3). The interview protocol contained 11 questions or prompts to gather information about students' perceptions related to the dissertation ratings and feedback. The first four questions focused on the self-evaluation activity and the rubric (e.g., Describe how you used the self-evaluation rubric to assess your writing submissions.). Then, three questions gathered information on students' perceptions of their advisor's feedback (e.g., After reading feedback from your advisor, describe how it affected your view of your assessment.). The final four questions related to feedback and reflection (e.g., Describe your strategy for addressing feedback. What steps, if any, did you take when you came across feedback you did not understand?). Several questions included follow-up probing questions that the interviewer could use to gather additional details from the participants based on the nature of their responses. To minimize potential researcher bias, a graduate assistant in a different program who was not involved with the rating process conducted the interviews on a video conferencing platform. Before the interview, the student reviewed a copy of their self-reflection evaluations. Each interview began with the purpose of the research, noting the future use of the data and pseudonyms, and informing participants they could skip any of the questions.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we organized the student and advisor ratings. We compared these ratings at each of the three submission points. To begin analyzing the interviews, two researchers uploaded the recordings to an automated transcription service. We cleaned the transcripts and met several times to discuss the interviews and write the embedded units of analysis. We used Bandura's (1977) four principal sources of information—performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states—as our a priori codes. Two of the researchers first independently completed initial coding using one participant's interview transcript. Shortly thereafter, we met to discuss the codes and came to 100% agreement before coding the three remaining interview transcripts independently. After coding the transcripts, we met again to discuss the codes and write the embedded units of analysis using thick, rich

description (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to point to how each doctoral student explained the similarities and differences in their self-rating and advisor evaluations of their submissions. Then, we conducted a within-case analysis according to the framework, from which we uncovered the study themes and wrote the study's findings.

FINDINGS

We sought to understand how doctoral students explained the similarities and differences in their self-ratings when compared to their advisor's ratings. Each individual interview conveyed participants' unique perspectives related to their writing self-efficacy. The interviews revealed that advisor-student communication is critical and that the students whose feedback aligned most closely with their advisors emphasized the importance of the self-evaluation rubric. First, we describe each of the three embedded units of analysis, organized by rating alignments. Second, we present a framework analysis using Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy.

Embedded Units of Analysis

We organize this section using three embedded units of analysis that reflect the alignment between student and FA ratings: students who underestimated their progress, students who overestimated their progress, and students whose ratings were nearly aligned with their advisor's ratings. The first embedded unit includes a student who underestimated the readiness of his document (Alex, pseudonym). The second embedded unit includes a student who overestimated the readiness of her document (Bridgette, pseudonym). The third and final embedded unit includes two students who were nearly aligned in ratings with their advisors (Claire and Diane, pseudonyms). Students' interpretation and use of the rubric, their feedback experiences, and the presence of reflective dialogue with advisors influenced how they understood their progress relative to formal evaluations.

Alex underestimated his document when compared with his advisor's rating, and he attributed this discrepancy to a focus on meeting rubric objectives as a part of his self-assessment. He also expressed surprise when his advisor rated his work more highly than expected. Table 3 shows the comparison between Alex's and his advisor's ratings on each document submission. Alex explained that he used the self-evaluation rubric before beginning to write the document. He shared, "I looked at it initially, and then I went to work" and "I tried to focus on 'What is the objective?' I need to meet this objective, being what I'm getting from [the university] in terms of the rubric, and those that I need to meet to get there." Alex also said, "I would say that [my advisor's rating of my document] did not influence my revisioning writing process much at all." This seems to indicate that the student did not become discouraged by or gain a sense of false confidence from the advisors' ratings. Alex also stated, "I had some pleasant surprises as far as compliments that I got a couple of times. You know, where you think, well, am I really on track there? Oh, cool. I was." He noted that at submission, he expected an orange rating but received a yellow rating. He explained, "That's where my evaluation and my advisor's evaluation differ. I was hoping for yellow, but I kind of thought I wouldn't get there." Alex shared that he thought this marked improvement was due to advisor feedback, but he did not indicate why he underestimated the rating.

**Table 3. Alex and Faculty Advisor Rating Comparison**

Submission	Alex's Rating	Advisor's Rating	Difference
Chapter One First Draft	Orange	Orange	0
Chapter One Revisions and Chapter Two First Draft	Orange Orange	Yellow Orange	+1 0
Chapter One and Chapter Two Revised Draft	Yellow Yellow	Green Yellow	+1 0

Bridgette, by contrast, consistently overestimated her progress when compared with her advisor's rating, often basing her self-ratings on the time and effort she invested rather than the rubric criteria, which led to discouragement when faced with lower advisor evaluations. Table 4 shows the comparison between Bridgette's and her advisor's ratings on each document submission. Bridgette seemed to hold tightly to the notion that her document was strong because it required many hours of work rather than using the rubric to determine document quality. Regarding the feedback, she explained, "I think it was pretty similar. I do think that in the second submission, our feedback was a little bit different again because...I thought I would rank myself higher due to the amount of hours that I put in. But overall, the feedback we both gave was pretty similar to one another." However, the advisor and student ratings often differed. She also said that her advisor's rating and feedback were discouraging at times. She shared, "It's a pretty tough blow to get back extensive amounts of corrections." The use of a different metric, time spent, rather than the rubric elements to arrive at the rating might have contributed to the misalignment between the ratings.

Table 4. Bridgette and Faculty Advisor Rating Comparison

Submission	Bridgette's Rating	Advisor's Rating	Difference
Chapter One First Draft	Yellow	Orange	-1
Chapter One Revisions and Chapter Two First Draft	Yellow Yellow	Orange Orange	-1 -1
Chapter One and Chapter Two Revised Draft	Green Yellow	Orange Yellow	-2 0

Claire and Diane, whose self-assessments were nearly aligned with their advisors' ratings, pointed to the central role of the rubric and advisor feedback in shaping their understanding of progress. Claire emphasized the rubric's utility as a communication and planning tool, while Diane highlighted the importance of advisor conferences in correcting her misconceptions about the quality of her work, particularly around organization. Tables 5 and 6 show the comparison between Claire's and Diane's and their respective advisors' ratings on each document submission. Claire and Diane used the self-evaluation rubric to guide their writing but diverged in how they interacted with their PWGs. Claire highlighted the importance of the self-evaluation rubric, reporting that she used it frequently and that the rubric "was like the spine and the very essential tool of communication between the advisor [and] the student." She said she used the rubric as a checklist to prioritize her work time and to identify areas in which she was "behind" where she wanted to be. The self-evaluation rubric also guided discussions with Claire's PWG. However, Diane indicated that her PWG was less direct and did not use the rubric when providing feedback to one another. Diane said, "The problem with the peer working group is nobody wanted to hurt feelings; [they] would give feedback, but it

wasn't as direct, and it wasn't what I needed, as far as being able to truly improve my writing." Students had varied perspectives related to the role of the PWG.

Table 5. Claire and Faculty Advisor Rating Comparison

Submission	Claire's Rating	Advisor's Rating	Difference
Chapter One First Draft	Orange	Yellow	+1
Chapter One Revisions and Chapter Two First Draft	Orange Orange	Yellow Orange	+1 0
Chapter One and Chapter Two Revised Draft	Green Green	Yellow Green	-1 0

Table 6. Diane and Faculty Advisor Rating Comparison

Submission	Diane's Rating	Advisor's Rating	Difference
Chapter One First Draft	Yellow	Orange	-1
Chapter One Revisions and Chapter Two First Draft	Yellow Orange	Orange Yellow	-1 +1
Chapter One and Chapter Two Revised Draft	Yellow Yellow	Yellow Yellow	0 0

Claire and Diane revealed that advisor and student communication, whether in conferences or written feedback, was critical for students becoming more aligned with their advisors' ratings. Claire indicated that although she initially rated herself lower than her advisor, she realized after feedback that she should have more confidence in herself, making her more hopeful. She used the iterative feedback on previous versions of the draft and explained, "Confidence is good, but you need to polish and polish." Diane explained that conferring with her advisor helped in the accuracy of her self-evaluation. She shared, "[After talking with my advisor, I] realized not only how bad the organization was, but then how badly I assessed my organization." This additionally underscores the need for students and advisors to use the rubric consistently to remain in agreement about the document's status or to support students in understanding their progress.

Within-case Analysis

In this section, we share the themes uncovered when considering the four areas of Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy. We note one theme for each area of the theoretical framework: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states. It is important to note that in light of some students' underestimations and overestimations, their self-efficacy did not always reflect their progress. For example, a participant may have consistently overrated their progress with high self-efficacy. For this reason, in this section, we do not focus on their ratings as much as we focus on participants' experiences with their ratings, their advisors' ratings, and their reflections on using—or not using—those ratings to make dissertation progress.

Aligning with performance accomplishments, the first theme revealed that participants who were nearly aligned or underestimated their ratings viewed success as an interactive process rather than having a well-written document at a particular point. For example, Claire shared that she felt validated when her advisor rated her higher than she rated herself. She said, "It conveyed to me that I should have more confidence in myself." She firmly stated that "she

grew through the process as an academic writer." Similarly, Diane stated that she grew as a writer, sharing, "I've definitely learned a lot by experiencing and getting the feedback." She also explained that "it's a good life skill to have perseverance and the drive to embrace struggle and work towards something that's important to you." Diane also observed that her self-rating became better aligned with her advisor's rating over time. She explained about the rubric, "It was kind of something I would refer back to. I've learned through the course of the program that beginning with the end in mind is the most efficient way to go about trying to get things as correct as possible in the proper format." Of note, Alex highlighted the importance of making small progress, like feeling successful when he changed his purpose statement and describing how feedback helped him grow as a writer. He shared, "It was really just a challenging and enjoyable journey to challenge myself to meet these objectives." Across participants, those who earned advisor ratings at or above how they rated themselves saw feedback as performance accomplishments in a way that those who consistently overrated themselves did not.

Considering vicarious experience, the second theme revealed that participants worked to increase self-efficacy by using PWGs in different ways. Alex said that he looked at PWG members' work to see what he liked related to their formatting or wording. He said that "seeing other examples is helpful." Similarly, Diane noted that her PWG was an opportunity to clarify questions with one another. Claire's PWG used the rubric to guide their conversations about their documents. She said, "All of our peer-to-peer working group meetings are an intentional effort to get to the green...And how can we support each other through that?" Bridgette indicated that her PWG affected how she evaluated herself, noting that although they did not use rubric language, they talked about how they felt they did.

When focusing on verbal persuasion, the third theme revealed that participants determined that different resources or people were trusted sources of information. For example, Diane did not view her PWG as a good source of feedback and shared that "nobody wanted to hurt feelings," yet Bridgette viewed her PWG as a valuable tool for understanding feedback. She shared, "After getting a round of extensive feedback, I evaluated myself differently because I was able to see how I was evaluated in their eyes." Meanwhile, Alex and Claire indicated that they saw the rubric as a good source of feedback between their advisors and themselves. Alex shared, "I read it as, 'This is where I need to be if I want to be in the green...Well, did I address this? Got it? Great, move on.'" Claire said that because of the rubric, she knew the expectations, so direct feedback from her advisor was not surprising. Alex also pointed to direct advisor feedback as being necessary for his success. He said, "I think the feedback that I got from my advisor was, on the one hand, very, very helpful and very specific. And on the other hand, was honest and straightforward." Alex consistently described feedback from his advisor as both clear and specific. Diane also found her advisor's feedback to be valuable. She said, "[my advisor] has obviously had a lot of experience, and so she was very effective at communicating what I needed to work on and communicating it in a way that I was able to process." Diane indicated that this communication from her advisor helped her to successfully align her expectations with those of her advisor.

In line with physiological states, the fourth theme revealed that some participants were determined to use feedback to grow rather than to take it personally, while others shared their strong feelings of discouragement. For example, Diane was positioned in a growth

mindset, sharing, "It's part of growing, and it's part of learning. And I feel like as an educator, that's what I want my students to embrace, to overcome struggles and overcome discouragement." Alex shared that he tried not to compare himself with his PWG or others. Rather, he explained that he tried to stay focused on the objectives to meet the standards set forth by the rubric. When asked if the feedback was encouraging, neutral, or discouraging, Alex said,

For the most part, encouraging, because it helped me to see where I needed to get to. Sometimes, my response to it was neutral in that, okay, this is what I got to do. It did not discourage me...I'm still evolving and developing as a writer and so my view on that is that I need feedback and direction, and that's what I'm getting. Not always easy, but it's always helpful if you approach it with that mindset.

He described the journey as challenging and enjoyable, saying, "I feel like I'm still in that journey, but that's been fun...to kind of try and grow in that. And fail in it and grow in it." Bridgette indicated that the feedback was neutral rather than encouraging or discouraging; however, she said, "Although we're expecting a lot of corrections, it still does kind of sting a little bit when you get those back...Being human, it's hard to read through so much corrective feedback." She said that the first day she received feedback, she would "just sit on it" and "let wounds simmer." Bridgette did point to the value of having a positive attitude around writing, which she said helped her to work through corrections and try again. Claire, who was nearly aligned with her advisor on average, underestimated her rating on the first submission. She said the higher rating from her advisor was "so encouraging." She also shared that her PWG did not share their color ratings, stating, "We're very mindful of how we carry each other through the process." Claire explained that they decided not to share color ratings to avoid hurting feelings or discouraging one another.

DISCUSSION

The four themes in the study around rubric use, feedback clarity, and peer support highlight the complex challenges surrounding doctoral student writing self-efficacy and the advisor's role in supporting students through those challenges. As such, we organize this section by these findings to underscore connections with the existing literature with the intent of raising awareness of these challenges within the EdD context.

Aligning with performance accomplishments, the first theme revealed that participants who were nearly aligned or underestimated their ratings viewed success as an interactive process rather than having a well-written document at a particular point. This suggests that doctoral students conceptualize writing success as dynamic rather than static, which shifts how faculty should consider feedback processes. Similar findings from both Dujinhouwer et al. (2010) and Kaul et al. (2024) also noted the importance of iterative feedback as an important aspect of the writing process that influences students' writing self-efficacy. However, our findings uniquely emphasize the relational dimension between advisor feedback and students' perceptions of growth. Further, Friedrich-Nel and MacKinnon (2015) highlighted the important role that formative assessment plays in helping students experience success in the iterations of their academic writing tasks. Our findings align with Prins et al. (2024), who found that when using a rubric for dissertation writing, students valued the rubric for the intended functions, although using the rubric did not always directly correspond to a more aligned rating. This reinforces Bandura's (1997) concept of performance



accomplishments by extending understanding to include the relational dimension and iterative feedback process as critical factors in developing writing self-efficacy.

Considering vicarious experience, the second theme revealed that participants often did not compare their ratings with one another, but they built self-efficacy by using PWGs in different ways. Participants reported building their self-efficacy through various activities with peers in their PWGs, including using each other's drafts as examples, asking clarifying questions about certain parts of their drafts, peer-rating using rubrics, or simply reflecting aloud with one another about their progress. Although participants' responses varied regarding the exact ways their PWGs helped them, all reported how their self-efficacy was influenced by experiencing success modeled or shared by others. This finding underscores that doctoral students draw confidence primarily from supportive and interactive peer practices rather than direct comparison, challenging simplistic understandings of vicarious experience as mere social comparisons. In that same vein, Caffarella and Barnett (2000) discussed the importance of giving and receiving feedback and its impact on academic writing improvement, and Capello (2020) emphasized the importance of collaborative learning in the dissertation writing process. Participants shared support for one another through their PWGs by recognizing that group members were cognizant of others' feelings and that each member was on a personal writing journey (Naidoo et al., 2023). However, our study uniquely clarifies the importance participants placed on personalized and varied peer interactions (e.g., peer-rating with rubrics, shared reflections, and mutual clarifications), rather than standardized comparison. This contributes theoretically to Bandura's (1977) construct by broadening the notion of vicarious experience to include varied peer interactions rather than strict comparisons of performances.

When focusing on verbal persuasion, the third theme revealed that participants determined that different resources or people were trusted sources of information. This underscores the critical role of advisor communication style and clarity, indicating that doctoral students value explicit and direct feedback to align their writing goals effectively. The participants found that clear, specific feedback from their advisors was a valuable source of information, similar to the findings of Lehan et al. (2016), whereas unclear feedback led to writing apprehension, as found by Kelly and Gaytan (2020). The participants noted that the advisors communicated effectively about what the students needed to improve, and this communication helped to align expectations (Aitchison et al., 2012). Caffarella and Barnett (2000) discussed the importance of giving and receiving critiques in developing scholarly writing skills among doctoral students. Study findings specifically demonstrate that participants varied notably in their perceptions of PWG feedback, viewing advisor feedback as more consistently influential due to perceived authority and clarity. Thus, our findings enrich Bandura's (1977) verbal persuasion component by highlighting advisor clarity and trustworthiness as critical sources of persuasive influence in doctoral writing contexts.

In line with physiological states, the fourth theme revealed that participants varied significantly in emotional responses to feedback, with some interpreting critique as motivation for growth, while others experienced discouragement or apprehension. These findings support prior research regarding the complex role emotions play in shaping writing self-efficacy (Naidoo et al., 2023) and suggest a need for more nuanced advisor and peer support strategies sensitive

to students' emotional experiences and sense of belonging. Similarly, this finding aligned with Aitchison et al. (2012) in that emotions shape students' perceptions of their writing self-efficacy, making writing a personal and often demanding experience. Students' perceptions of advisor feedback affected their writing self-efficacy; some of the participants chose to grow as writers as they engaged with faculty feedback (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Pritchard, 2018), while others showed writing apprehension (Crumbo, 1999). Naidoo et al. (2023) found that a sense of belonging related to the writing process. These findings explicitly illuminate how doctoral students actively interpret feedback differently, emphasizing that responses to critique profoundly shape their self-efficacy trajectories. This advances Bandura's (1977) physiological states concept, highlighting emotional interpretation of feedback as a key principle in understanding self-efficacy development.

LIMITATIONS

The first limitation is the small sample involved. Because the study is limited to four selected participants, it is not generalizable. However, we can use this information in our program as we consider the role of faculty advising in the dissertation. Further, the information is useful for advisors who are considering the use of a self-evaluation rubric and who encourage students to engage in PWGs as they consider student writing self-efficacy in the dissertation-writing process. The second limitation includes the consideration that the advisors had different levels of experience related to faculty advising, different feedback styles, and minor differences in rubric interpretation. The differences in advising, despite the use of a shared rubric, may have impacted their ratings or students' perceptions of those ratings.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are implications for two groups: FAs and doctoral students. First, FAs should be mindful of providing clear, specific feedback through the rubric rather than overly general comments to their students. As participants in this study expressed, rubrics were vital in helping them learn to evaluate their work and the work of others in their PWG. As such, we recommend that FAs develop and then use rubrics to help set clear expectations for each section of the dissertation to help guide their iterative and specific feedback to students. As such, FA training in rubric-based feedback may help with these efforts. Further, the findings of this study suggest that students experienced positive feelings in the academic writing process when they encountered small successes, which was often the result of focusing on specific chunks in the revision process. Findings also suggest that students feel disappointment when they thought they had made more progress, but their FAs' assessments were not as strong as they had hoped. FAs should consider helping students prioritize which sections of the dissertation need revisions and then determine in what order those revisions need to occur. In this same spirit, it may be important for FAs to explain to students the role of the advisor and what to expect when receiving and reading feedback. In a proactive attempt to help students understand intentions when we provide feedback, we explain to students that feedback is an investment in their academic journeys—not a personal critique.

Second, doctoral students must recognize that earning a terminal degree is an arduous process, one that requires faculty

feedback and peer support. Participants in this study revealed the importance of receiving and then using clear and specific feedback from the FA. Participants also shared the importance of clear communication between themselves and their FAs to help them identify specific needed revisions. As such, doctoral students should make extensive efforts to keep clear lines of communication with their FAs. As they engage in self-evaluations, it would be helpful to consider their perceptions of their work and how their perceptions compare to faculty perceptions. This reflection may help doctoral students to more accurately assess their work against the rubric along with learning more about disciplinary norms and expectations. Similarly, doctoral students can form PWGs with other students to help develop a network of individuals willing to provide feedback, brainstorm ideas, or offer encouragement as another avenue of trusted support.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This study highlights participants' experiences and underscores that success in academic dissertation writing is an interactive process supported by formative assessments (such as rubrics and self-evaluations), peer support, and specific and iterative faculty feedback, which provide metacognitive scaffolding. The study's findings reveal that self-efficacy and progress in dissertation development are facilitated through peer interactions and trusted feedback sources, while emotional responses to feedback play a significant role in shaping writing self-efficacy. Doctoral program leaders should consider investing in FA development, scaffold peer support structures, and consider ways to assist FAs in engaging students in metacognitive reflection as a core academic writing skill.

Future research can include a larger sample size and participants from various institutions, which would enhance the generalizability of the findings and offer a broader understanding of the factors influencing writing self-efficacy. For example, a mixed methods study could use a survey to collect qualitative data from a larger sample paired with qualitative interviews and focus groups, or a longitudinal study could examine changes in writing efficacy and dissertation progress over time. Finally, investigating how PWGs and their structures, the use of rubrics, and iterative faculty feedback influence doctoral students' writing processes and self-efficacy could provide valuable insights.

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