

Writing in Nursing Education



**AN INTERDISCIPLINARY
COLLABORATION BETWEEN
NURSING, WRITING ACROSS THE
CURRICULUM, AND THE UNIVERSITY
WRITING CENTER**

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Seeds of Collaboration



- Disciplinary commitment to writing
- Widespread participation in WAC
- Lack of coordination
- Need for a more unified vision for disciplinary literacy in nursing education

Initiatives



- Multi-staged research project focused on understanding and teaching synthesis [Ann & Barbara]
- Course on reading and writing in nursing studies [Sandra & Sarah]

In the Beginning...



- Diagnostic reasoning
- “Higher Order Thinking”
- Dualistic to relativistic thinking
- Critical thinking
- APA Delphi Study (Facione & Facione, 1990)
- Nursing Delphi Study (Scheffer & Rubenfeld, 2000)

Thinking & Writing



- WAC and Advanced WAC Institutes
- Designing writing assignments differently for BSN nursing students and MSN nursing students
- Challenges in helping graduate-level (MSN and PhD) students write effectively

The Problems



- Why are we getting...
 - book reports, data dumps, stream of consciousness writing?
 - unconnected content, lack of transitions?
 - no evidence of analysis or logical reasoning and thinking?
- This is not a copy edit or grammar issue; this is a content and thinking problem.

Enter Synthesis



- Is synthesis or the lack of this skill the underlying writing issue?
- What evidence-based strategies are available to enhance the teaching of synthesis skills?
- How are we teaching our nursing students to synthesize?
- Can we teach synthesis?

Interest in Synthesis



- Complexity
- Lack of research
- Challenges in teaching
- Need for further exploration, especially within disciplinary contexts

How We Decided to Approach the Problem



- How are we approaching it?
- What are the questions we need/wanted answered?
- Who is best suited to answer these questions?
- What does the literature provide?

Assumptions



- Experienced practitioners have honed their skills in synthesis
- Synthesis is not always done at a conscious level

Study



- Multiple phases
 - Phase I
 - ✦ Focus groups with professionals in a range of fields
 - ✦ Focus groups with graduate students in a range of fields
 - Phase II
 - ✦ Focus groups with nursing professionals
 - ✦ Focus groups with nursing students (undergrad & grad)
 - Phase III
 - ✦ Developing curricular materials for teaching synthesis
 - Phase IV
 - ✦ Trying out and assessing curricular materials

Research Questions – Phase I



1. What is synthesis, from the perspectives of professionals and students in different disciplines?
2. According to these professionals and students, what are the components of the synthesis process?
3. What are some commonalities in the synthesis process across disciplines?

Goals – Phase I



1. Describe the components of synthesis from inter-professional perspectives.
2. Identify descriptors used by different disciplines to describe and characterize synthesis.
3. Describe the process(es) underlying synthesis from inter-professional perspectives.
4. Construct an inter-professional description of synthesis that covers the arenas of both writing and practice.
5. Arrive at a deeper understanding of this complex process in order to teach it more effectively.

Focus Group Questions (Phase I)



1. How did you learn how to achieve the skills and the thinking required to do synthesis?
2. What do you find to be the most challenging aspects of getting to the point of synthesis?
3. What do you see as the essential elements of synthesis within your individual professions?
4. What, if any, of the elements of synthesis do you believe might be shared across professions?
5. How do you teach others how to synthesize?
6. What do you believe are the most challenging aspects of teaching others how to synthesize?

Professions in Focus Groups



- Financial Advisors
- Advanced Practice Nurses
- Aerospace Engineer
- Biologists
- Entrepreneur in Physical Fitness
- Librarian
- High School English Teacher
- Chemist
- Technical Communicator
- Occupational Therapist
- Statistician
- Economist
- Music Historian
- Marketing and Project Manager

Phase I Preliminary Findings



- Four Questions/Areas:
 - Learning to Synthesize
 - Challenging Aspects of Synthesis
 - Essential Elements of Synthesis
 - Teaching Synthesis

Phase I Preliminary Findings



- Learning to Synthesize
 - Actions (practice, making mistakes, taking risks)
 - Experience (cases, learning on the job)
 - Conditions (safe environment, support, trust)
 - Qualities/Traits/Habits (being mindful and curious)
 - Interactions (collaboration)
 - Preparation (reading and writing)
 - External Influences (time, circumstances, luck)

Learning to Synthesize - Examples



- “I think side-by-side with practice is time, but I would say for myself it’s definitely the ability to purposefully synthesize versus just the kind of having it happen. This has happened more as I’ve gotten older and wiser.”
(Chris)
- “For me, I think there’s a component what would really have put me over the top in terms of moving from application to synthesis and that was being widely read. Try to look beyond what your discipline provides you in terms of your background. Because when you take different perspectives, it gives you a better perspective of where you are at in terms of solving problems.” (Steve)

Learning to Synthesize - Examples



- “There are some people who are just natural synthesizers. It’s organic. ... I believe everyone can improve upon it. It can be learned academically.”
(Deanne)

Phase I Preliminary Findings



- **Challenging Aspects of Synthesis**
 - Knowledge and Assumptions (oversights because of biases, assumptions, prejudices)
 - Information (too much or insufficient information; difficulties bringing together, sorting out, organizing, prioritizing info)
 - Conditions (safe environment, sufficient background)
 - Process (synthesis as ongoing, need for flexibility)

Challenging Aspects – Examples



- “...when I take on something new. You get in an area that you don’t have as much background in and all of a sudden synthesis is really hard again.” (Kristi)
- “Maybe not hearing, not taking everything in, and not hearing everything that is coming in because you’re assuming that that part doesn’t really apply or that person doesn’t know what they are talking about, or whatever it is, making some assumptions.” (Sharon)
- “Does anyone ever achieve synthesis? It’s an ongoing process.” (Naoma)

Phase I Preliminary Findings



- **Essential Elements of Synthesis**
 - Actions and Practices (listening, interacting, observing, being attentive)
 - Data and Information Management (gathering and analyzing data, staying current, considering multiple viewpoints)
 - Qualities and Attributes (patience, intuition, flexibility)
 - Knowledge and Understanding (knowing the field, mastering foundational concepts, knowing one's audience, knowing one's self)

Phase I Preliminary Findings



- Interesting Finding
 - Synthesis is not done in isolation – input from others is essential
 - ✦ Role of audience(s)
 - ✦ Importance of communication
 - ✦ Persuasion

Essential Elements - Examples



- “I think foundational concepts are important in my field. It’s the difference between catching the fish and ... knowing how to catch fish. You can learn a fundamental concept and that carries you a long way to being able to apply that concept in a number of different ways. That turns out to be tremendously powerful.” (Steve)
- “First you have to shut off and listen. ... Sometimes we miss a very important key voice from somewhere.” (Deb)
- “But even with that, isn’t there others involved? Because the information that you’re using to synthesize is coming from others.” (Brian)

Phase I Preliminary Findings



- Teaching Synthesis
 - Approaches and Methods (modeling, Socratic method, leading by example, cases, ambiguity, simulation, debriefing)
 - Qualities of Approaches and of Teaching/Learning Situations (structured, safe, guided, consistent, relevant)
 - What Students Need to Do/Possess (demonstrate/apply, write it down, practice, be curious, get experience)
 - Nature of Learning Process (iterative, ongoing, evolving)
 - Teaching Qualities (confidence)

Phase I Preliminary Findings



- Interesting Findings
 - Participants had **MANY** different ideas about how to teach it – there was great variety but also overlap and similarity
 - ✦ A lot of modeling, learning by example, Socratic method
 - ✦ Legitimate peripheral participation and learning by doing (Lave & Wenger)
 - ✦ Ambiguity and dissonance

Teaching - Examples



- “The way I think through things and synthesize isn’t necessarily the only way to do it. That’s what I was thinking about how to teach others by thinking out loud. Students, being as unique as they all are, will find different ways of looking at things and come to different conclusions. If you listen to somebody else, then you can see how they are approaching it from a different way.” (Naoma)
- “Trying to teach them how to become sifters of the information and pull out what you need and leave out what you don’t because you don’t always have the luxury of time.” (Naela)

Teaching - Examples



- “Modeling for them so that you have a situation or example that you can walk through and provide the model for and then they participate in that and they have the opportunity to begin to demonstrate some of that thinking or at least application on their own. ... Like a Socratic method, but not just what one is doing but do you understand why one is doing that?” (Lisa)
- “I think depersonalizing the solution to the problem—not making it any one person’s responsibility. I think you can’t be afraid of coming up with the wrong solution because what many times helps you get to the right solution.” (Steve)

Implications



- Practice in/across multiple situations (in multiple contexts) is essential
- Synthesis does not occur in isolation or at a single point in time
 - It's less an “ah ha” than an ongoing process
 - So we need to help student understand this
- Making mistakes and taking risks are essential and need to be supported and validated
- Having sufficient information and being widely read (having a breadth of knowledge) are essential

Implications



- Flexibility, adaptability, open-mindedness, and intellectual integrity are essential
- There appear to be many ways to teach and cultivate skills in synthesis and students need multiple opportunities to practice, demonstrate, and apply what they learn

Reading and Writing in Nursing Studies: Supporting the RN Student in BSN Education



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SARAH PRIMEAU – GRADUATE STUDENT, WRITTEN
COMMUNICATION

Context: RN to BSN Student



- Multiple educational entry points for RN licensure
- Movement toward Bachelors of Science in Nursing (BSN) for advancement & employment in health care systems
- Evidence for need for BSN prepared nurses: improved performance and patient outcomes (Ellenbecker, 2010)

Effective Writing - BSN Students



- Pre-licensure RN students reported struggling with academic writing assignments (Whitehead, 2002)
- Academic writing competencies included within RN to BSN curriculum with information literacy (Tarrant, Dodgson, & Law, 2008)
- Faculty concerns consistent with those in studies

Nursing/UWC Collaboration



- Discussion between College Dean's , SON and UWC of need in RN to BSN students
- Stakeholders' discussion of options
- Decision to pilot course
 - 7 1/2 week course in semester prior to program
 - Hybrid format (3 online, 4 face-to-face)

Recruitment to ENGL278



- IRB approval to evaluate ENGL278
- Guided Self-Placement for Writing
 - Computerized self-assessment with recommendation
 - Self-assessment of :
 - ✦ reading/writing ability, frequency, enjoyment, struggles
 - ✦ academic writing skills, use of APA
 - ✦ Recommendations from teachers & co-workers

ENGL 278: Reading & Writing in Nursing Studies



- Offered in semester prior to NURS courses
- Content:
 - Self-awareness as writer
 - Ethics, APA, plagiarism
 - Strategies in writing for different purposes/audiences
 - Research & academic writing
 - Reviewing, revising, reflection, polishing

Sample Demographics

Category	Total n/%	Took ENGL278 n/%	No ENGL278 n/%
Age	n=70	n=11	n=59
18-23:	10 / 14.3%	1 / 9.1%	9 / 15.3%
24-29:	10 / 14.3%	0 / 0	10 / 16.9%
30-35:	19 / 27.1%	3 / 27.3%	16 / 27.1%
36-40:	12 / 17.1%	3 / 27.3%	9 / 15.3%
41-45:	7 / 10.0%	1 / 9.1%	6 / 10.2%
46-50:	9 / 12.9%	3 / 27.3%	6 / 10.2%
51-59:	3 / 4.3%	0 / 0	3 / 5.1%
≥60 :	0 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 0
Sex	n=71	n=12	n=59
Male:	7 / 9.9%	1 / 8.3%	6 / 10.2%
Female	64 / 90.1%	11 / 91.7%	53 / 89.8%
Race	n=70	n=12	n=58
White:	37 / 52.9%	5 / 41.7%	32 / 55.2%
African American:	25 / 35.7%	6 / 50.0%	19 / 32.8%
Other:	8 / 11.4%	1 / 8.3%	7 / 12.0%

Self-Assessment Questions



On a ten point scale, rate your:

- 1. Overall writing abilities.**
- 2. Nursing writing abilities.**
- 3. Confidence level for writing in an academic setting as a student.**
- 4. Confidence level for writing in a professional setting as a nurse**
- 5. Overall reading abilities.**
- 6. Nursing reading abilities.**
- 7. Confidence level for reading in an academic setting as a nurse.**
- 8. Confidence level for reading in a professional setting as a nurse.**
- 9. Ability to locate and access relevant nursing journal articles for papers and other assignments**

Initial Self-Ratings: Both Groups

	ENG278		No ENG278		p-value
	n	\bar{x}	n	\bar{x}	
1. Overall writing abilities.	12	5.83	59	6.95	.126
2. Nursing writing abilities.	12	6.75	59	6.88	.843
3. Confidence level for writing in an academic setting as a student.	12	5.25	59	5.69	.590
4. Confidence level for writing in a professional setting as a nurse	12	5.92	59	5.54	.585
5. Overall reading abilities.	12	8.08	59	8.17	.834
6. Nursing reading abilities.	12	8.08	59	8.17	.778
7. Confidence level for reading in an academic setting as a nurse.	12	6.92	59	7.32	.507
8. Confidence level for reading in a professional setting as a nurse.	12	7.25	59	7.19	.917
9. Ability to locate and access relevant nursing journal articles for papers and other assignments	12	6.25	59	6.44	.756

No differences found between groups

Change in Self-Rating: ENGL278



	Beginning		End		p-value
	n	\bar{x}	n	\bar{x}	
1. Overall writing abilities.	12	5.83	12	7.00	.062
2. Nursing writing abilities.	12	6.75	12	7.75	.146
3. <u>Confidence level for writing in an academic setting as a student.</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>5.2</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>6.3</u>	<u>.041</u>
		<u>5</u>		<u>3</u>	
4. <u>Confidence level for writing in a professional setting as a nurse</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>5.9</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>7.0</u>	<u>.046</u>
		<u>2</u>		<u>8</u>	
5. Overall reading abilities.	12	8.08	12	8.25	.674
6. <u>Nursing reading abilities.</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>8.0</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>8.6</u>	<u>.012</u>
		<u>8</u>		<u>7</u>	
7. <u>Confidence level for reading in an academic setting as a nurse.</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>6.9</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>8.5</u>	<u>.002</u>
		<u>2</u>		<u>0</u>	
8. <u>Confidence level for reading in a professional setting as a nurse.</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>7.2</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>8.5</u>	<u>.002</u>
		<u>5</u>		<u>8</u>	
9. <u>Ability to locate and access relevant nursing journal articles for papers and other assignments</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>6.2</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>7.9</u>	<u>.032</u>
		<u>5</u>		<u>2</u>	

Self-Ratings at Start of NURS 275

	ENG278		No ENG278		p-value
	n	\bar{x}	n	\bar{x}	
1. Overall writing abilities.	12	7.00	59	6.94	.899
2. <u>Nursing writing abilities.</u>	12	7.75	59	6.88	.040
3. Confidence level for writing in an academic setting as a student.	12	6.33	59	5.69	.268
4. <u>Confidence level for writing in a professional setting as a nurse</u>	12	7.08	59	5.54	.018
5. Overall reading abilities.	12	8.25	59	8.17	.853
6. Nursing reading abilities.	12	8.67	59	8.17	.166
7. <u>Confidence level for reading in an academic setting as a nurse.</u>	12	8.50	59	7.32	.013
8. <u>Confidence level for reading in a professional setting as a nurse.</u>	12	8.58	59	7.18	.005
9. <u>Ability to locate and access relevant nursing journal articles for papers and other assignments</u>	12	7.92	59	6.44	.012

Initial Research Questions



- How do nurses enrolled in an RN-to-BSN program describe their evolving sense of themselves as writers and readers, and how does their awareness of their own growth as writers impact their perceptions of the nursing profession and their roles and work within that profession?
- Also, which experiences (academic or professional) have contributed in the most significant ways to their understanding of themselves as writers and readers in the nursing profession?

Semi-Structured Interviews



2 students completed Engl 278 in Fall 2011

1 student did not enroll in Engl 278

1 Faculty member from Nursing

- Winter 2012 course included many Engl 278 students
- Involved the development of Engl 278

1 Faculty member from English

- Co-taught Engl 278 in Fall 2011
- Writing Consultant in Winter 2012

Interviews were conducted in Winter 2012.

Students' Professional Backgrounds



Students currently hold (or have held in the past) a variety of positions:

- nurse manager or assistant manager
- case manager for an insurance company
- auditor/reviewer
- floor nurse (for many departments)
- long-term care supervisor
- graduate nurse
- charge nurse
- float nurse

Types of Writing Discussed by Students



For work:

- Patient documentation, charting
- SOAP notes
- Progress notes, Group note
- Daily assessment
- “late entry”
- Patient health assessment (ex: head-to-toe)
- Patient care plan, plan of care
- Training manuals
- Educational materials
- Hospital policies
- “self-determination”
- Audits
- Action plans or responses to audits (incl. benchmarks, timeframes)
- Summary of patient needs
- Summary of discharge plans

For school*:

- Research paper
- Reflections
- health history assessment
- online discussions
- “lots of writing”
- surgical experience paper
- evidence-based practice paper
- papers for English class in “modes”
- philosophy of nursing
- controversial issue
- critical thinking inventory

*students described writing from their ADN programs and first semesters of the BSN program

Interviews: Some Initial Themes



Engl 278 helps students feel ready

- to approach academic writing assignments
- to meet the expectations of the BSN faculty

Writing for work vs. writing for school:

- purposes for writing are linked with doing
- differences in process and product
- similarities in product

Theme: Readiness



A theme present in all four discussions of Engl 278: That **Engl 278 contributes to students' feelings of readiness for the program's expectations for writing.**

- S-1 stated that Engl 278 gave her a “level of comfort going into the program.”
- S-2 said that Engl 278 helped her feel “confident, very confident actually, going into NURS 275, just knowing how to construct a paper and knowing what the expectations are as far as organizing it and what needs to be in the paper as far as a rubric goes.”
- F-2: students who had taken Engl 278 were generally more confident and “less scared” to begin writing projects for their nursing courses.

Theme: Readiness



F-1 connected readiness with success:

- In describing some of goals for creating a course like Engl 278 F-1 said, “I would hope that they [students] would gain more confidence coming into the nursing program. That they would also feel more successful so that the idea of writing didn’t get in the way of the assignment, and that they would, in fact, have more success.”
- Students’ responses also suggested connections between readiness and success....

Readiness and Success



- S-1 admitted that before taking 278, she felt that she “had the basics down pat” and that she learned more than she expected in Engl 278. She described earning As on papers during her first semester of nursing coursework: “I use what I’ve learned, or what I re-learned, in 278 and applied that to my work now...” She identified two concepts as the most helpful: learning about and practicing APA style and learning the features of various academic genres.
- S-2 emphasized “strategies as far as putting a paper together” and having a better understanding of the nursing faculty’s expectations for writing. S-2 also described developing her own personal writing process and habits, which include returning to online reference materials from Engl 278 and regularly meeting with tutors at the writing center.

Theme: Professional vs. Academic Writing



Differences between work and school:

At work, writing is often directly connected with doing: charting and patient documentation is a record of both the patient's condition and what the nurse has done.

- S-1 said, “There is an old adage in nursing, and it’s very very true. I live by the rule. ‘If you do not document it, it did not happen.’ Anything that a nurse does, even a discussion with a patient over the telephone for example with case management or face-to-face visits, performing care, administering meds, you name it.”

Professional Writing: Example



For example: nurses working at the bedside may value writing that is descriptive yet concise (S-3, S-2), objective (S-3, S-2, S-1), and non-judgmental (S-3,S-2).

The students' explanations connect writing and doing:

- S-2 and S-3 described reasons why a nurse needs to be objective and non-judgmental: certain kinds of notes made by nurses go in a patient's permanent medical record, notes are read by other members of the interdisciplinary healthcare team (physical therapists, physicians and specialists) and/or the next shift of nurses.
- S- 1 emphasized that writing is “proof” of the care provided and that incomplete documentation can “harm the company” or “affect your license.”
- S-3 emphasized being objective and brief because “wordiness” can obscure the main point.

Professional Writing: Example



Students identified differences in not only the product but also the process of professional and academic writing:

- Changes to charts and patient documentation can only be made the same day or possibly the next day and only if the tag “late add” (Student 1) is included with the revision.
- This kind of writing is “episodic” (Faculty 1) and is distinct from the recursive process of academic research and writing.
- Student 2 described changes in her understanding of revision: “I had a hard time grasping revising, because I always looked at revising as me struggling when I was working on a paper, but now I understand it’s a normal part of writing (S2-7).”

Writing for Work/Writing for School



Similarities between work and school:

- S-1 stated that Engl 278 helped her identify patterns of grammatical errors in her writing. Now, in emails or documentation at work, she is more aware of those errors.
- S-2 said that focusing on organization in writing and considering her writing from a reader's perspective was valuable to her as a nurse: "I think that before the class.... I wouldn't be looking at the perspective of somebody else is judging your writing. So I would kind-of hurry up and chart, and it might not be that organized... I think it helps me now to look back and make sure it makes sense and it's clear and it's organized because a lot of times prior I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't re-approach my documentation."

Next Steps: Interviews



Implications of connections between writing and professional identity

Consider additional theme: Reflection at work and in school

Additional interviews:

- 1 more faculty member from English
- 1+ students who did not enroll in Engl 278

Lessons from ENGL 278



- Students who took ENGL 278 reported improvement in reading and writing skills over the 7 1/2 week course.
- At beginning of the program, students who took ENGL 278 self-assessed higher on 5/9 skills believed to be important for success in the RN-to-BSN curriculum.
- Both surveys and interviews indicate students who took the writing course:
 - self-assessed a greater readiness for the RN to BSN program.
 - improvements in professional/workplace writing.

Next Steps: Surveys & ENGS 278



- Evaluate data through first semester.
- Continue to refine and improve ENGL 278 based on student feedback.
- Compare examples of written assignments from both groups
- Continue to evaluate the results across another year of incoming students.
- Monitor student success in the RN to BSN coursework to graduation.
- Support for faculty to reinforce skills learned in ENGL 278.