Headed in the “Write” Direction: Nursing Student Publication and Health Promotion in the Community

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ABSTRACT

Effective writing is vital to nursing practice. As educators, we sought to incorporate a meaningful writing assignment as part of a junior-level professional development course. We used innovative methods that support the missions of higher education in general and nursing education in particular while promoting healthful living and establishing the community-as-client. In addition to fostering health education and health promotion, this writing assignment served to enhance students’ writing skills and provide them with an opportunity to have their work published. The venue for publication was The Auburn Villager, a weekly local newspaper with a circulation of 6,000 within the local community in East Alabama. The writing assignment was a tremendous success on many levels. Foremost among the positive outcomes was student pride in experiencing publication of their creative work. In addition, students reported a feeling of satisfaction that the assignment had both practical and educational utility.

Effective writing is vital to nursing practice. Written communication in nursing encompasses many forms, such as documentation of care, scholarly writing, and writing for health promotion. Like most academic programs, there are educational objectives mandating that students will use written skills to assist clients in implementing behavior changes that maximize quality of life.

Barriers to Writing Instruction

This critical learning outcome appears rather simplistic; however, the implementation is complex. The daunting reality of teaching written communication is well-known to faculty who encounter students entering the nursing program equipped with limited writing experience and ability. As faculty, we are sensitive to students’ lack of training regarding psychomotor skills, such as inserting intravenous lines or indwelling catheters. We constantly strive to make skills teaching in laboratory experiences interesting and engaging and insist on significant preparation prior to attempting a nursing skill. However, we typically spend little time considering strategies to creatively teach the skill of written communication.

“I want to be a nurse, not a writer.” This sentiment is a common one expressed by future nurses in our institution. Students do not appear to link effective writing with effective communication, collaboration, and learning—all of which are particularly vital to the nursing profession (Berg & Serenko, 1993). Indeed, poor writing skills have been linked with miscommunication and decreased quality of nursing care (Silva, Cary, & Thaiss, 1999). Davidhizar, Bechtel, and Tiller (1999) described the need for students to recognize the unique link of improved patient outcomes with the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively.

In addition, students should learn the importance of boldly communicating the vital role of the nurse in the delivery of health care early in their careers. According to Buersh and Gordon (2006), nurses are notoriously silent about what we do; we must find our professional voice.

Advances in communication technology add another variable to the task of teaching effective communication. Faculty who are marketing the value of “depth and breadth” writing and research face a hard sell from this generation of students accustomed to instant communication in the form of texting, “sound bytes,” and instant messaging. Consequently, novice students must learn the value of nursing texts and journals as references for writing and move beyond mere removal of the shrink-wrap. Diehl (2007) found the most common writing concerns expressed by students...
Developing the Creative Assignment

After much deliberation, we began to develop a plan to incorporate a meaningful writing assignment in a junior-level nursing course using innovative methods that support the missions of both higher education and our program. Building on the precepts contained in the American Association of Colleges of Nursing’s (AACN) Essential 1: Liberal Education for Baccalaureate Generalist Nursing Practice (2009), we created a writing assignment to promote healthful living while establishing the community-as-client. In addition to fostering health education and health promotion, this writing assignment would also serve to enhance students’ writing skills and provide them with an opportunity to see their work published.

Among the many benefits students obtain from publication include advancing the profession, promoting leaning and critical thinking, and developing confidence in writing and publication skills (Davidhizar et al., 1999). Broussard (1997) found that introducing client-to-nurse communication concepts early in a professional nursing program enhances client teaching skills.

Drawing on both the supporting ideas found in the literature and local community resources, we decided to develop a writing assignment that would enable student-authors to see their work in print. In the fall semester 2008, as part of a junior-level professional development course with an enrollment of 96 students, we proposed an assignment change from the traditional required “Professional Concepts” paper to one exploring a health or safety-related topic which would be published in a local newspaper. After discussion, the Dean heartily approved the assignment, whereas the rest of the faculty expressed enthusiasm regarding both the creative possibilities and the opportunity for community outreach.

Faculty front-loaded classroom writing instruction, which included outline construction, composition principles, rules of grammar and syntax, and APA formatting, before the students began the task of writing. All handouts, PowerPoint™ slides, grading rubrics, and useful Web sites were made available on Blackboard™ for convenient reference. The first draft of the paper was due during week 5 of class, with the final copy due in week 13. Paper length was based on a typical newspaper article of 500 to 600 words (approximately 2 to 3 double-spaced pages). The writing guidelines and grading rubric are found in the Table.

The Auburn Villager is a weekly newspaper with a circulation of 6,000 within the local area. The Auburn Villager contains local human interest stories, advertisements, recipes, community events, and other items of interest to the local community. The editor-in-chief welcomed the creation of a student-authored monthly column on health-related issues entitled “Healthy Living from the School of Nursing.” The newspaper’s editorial staff designed a unique logo depicting a shiny apple alongside the school’s name.

The intended audience was the entire community, whose population represents a diverse range of income, race, age, occupations, and education levels. On the first day of class, groups of eight students were randomly assigned to one topic that faculty chose from a list of 12 nationally-designated health topics. The articles addressed diverse issues such as Minority Donor Awareness Month (August), Health Aging Month (September), and Toy Safety Month (December). After evaluating the students’ work, faculty selected the 12 best papers for publication (one from each monthly topic) and electronically submitted each article to the editor 3 weeks before press time. The published articles were laminated and displayed on a bulletin board in a prominent hallway in the school.

Lessons Learned

Successes

The assignment was a tremendous success on many levels. Foremost among these was student pride in experiencing publication of their creative work. A display of all 12 of the published articles in the school building was especially thrilling for the student-authors as peers, faculty, and visitors admired the final products. The students were noticeably competitive in the quest for selection of the publication honors. In addition, students reported feelings of satisfaction that the assignment had practical utility and were pleased that the entire community could see their work (versus just one faculty member). One unforeseen result occurred when our Development Officer began sending The Auburn Villager to actual and potential donors as evidence of the school’s contribution to the local community.

The assignment also highlighted the issue of health literacy in diverse populations. Students enrolled in the school of nursing range in age from their early 20s to their 40s, are English speaking, and predominantly female and Caucasian. The students appreciated the challenge of writing newspaper articles of interest for a diverse lay audience with educational and occupational backgrounds different from their own. And importantly, through their writings, students were able to visualize the nurse as a central figure in patient care—a role that goes far beyond merely instructing patients to “consult your physician.”

Challenges

For faculty, the most difficult, albeit predictable, challenge was the amount of work required in evaluating 96 first and 96 second drafts, making suggestions for revisions, and editing 12 manuscripts for publication. This came as no surprise as we expected the workload, at the very least, to double by virtue of grading two drafts. Each paper took an estimated 45 to 60 minutes to grade per faculty. A significant amount of time was also spent addressing student questions and requested assistance with second-draft revisions.
One key decision we made was the amount of time devoted to helping students with necessary first draft revisions. We decided not to return a corrected first draft to the students but, instead, presented general suggestions for revisions to the class as a whole by scheduling a writing laboratory experience in which we discussed actual excerpted student writing samples. The student reaction to the decision not to provide individual written feedback was somewhat negative; some were frustrated by low grades on the final paper and complained that the lack of written feedback on the first draft was misleading. Perhaps another result of the absence of specific written feedback was a lack of effort from some students to improve their final papers beyond the first draft.

### Grading

Two faculty members were needed to provide consistency in grading: one to judge the quality of the papers’ organization and content, and one to evaluate adherence to APA style. One advantage to this division of labor was that students had clear designees with whom to address concerns (and with whom to debate final grades).

We made the grading rubric extremely detailed to avoid the appearance of subjectivity, a common accusation leveled at faculty, which can undermine student confidence and morale. Our rubric consisted of six weighted categories: introduction (15%), definition of the disorder or problem (15%), prevention or man-

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**TABLE**

**Writing Guidelines and Grading Rubric**

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<th>Writing Guidelines</th>
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| 1. Introduction: Include your topic and why this topic is important to the Auburn community. (15 points) | 0 to 5 points = no or poor introduction.  
6 to 10 points = some introduction; nothing beyond a forecast.  
11 to 15 points = introduction grasps reader's attention (engages the reader) and forecasts major points |
| 2. Definitions of key concepts: Include references and address from a “lay person” perspective. (15 points) | 0 to 5 points = no or poor articulation of thesis.  
6 to 10 points = some articulation of thesis.  
11 to 15 points = clear articulation of thesis. |
| 3. Prevention and management of disease: Include areas the patient could self-manage disease or condition. (20 points) | 0 to 7 points = little or no use of examples.  
8 to 15 points = some use of examples or evidence, but not consistent.  
16 to 20 points = frequent or consistent use of examples and evidence; example or evidence appears whenever the reader asks, “such as...?” |
| 4. Involvement of health professions: Include what treatments or screenings are performed by health professions and any aspects of help or assistance provided by the health professional community. (20 points) | 0 to 7 points = little or no use of examples.  
8 to 15 points = some use of examples or evidence, but not consistent.  
16 to 20 points = frequent or consistent use of examples and evidence; example or evidence appears whenever the reader asks, “such as...?” |
| 5. Summary: Summarize points made in the paper and include two organizations or Web sites that would be helpful for readers to acquire more information. (20 points) | 0 to 7 points = no or poor conclusion or summary of major thesis.  
8 to 15 points = some summary of points made, but nothing beyond summary; no broad conclusions or implications.  
16 to 20 points = a conclusion going beyond summary of what was written in the body of the essay |
| 6. References: Strict adherence to American Psychological Association (APA) format and professional-level sources in both the body and the reference page. (10 points) | 0 to 3 points = lack of adherence to APA.  
4 to 8 points = occasional errors; repetition of errors.  
9 to 10 points = strict adherence to APA format to support the body references and cited references. |

**TOTAL POINTS POSSIBLE: 100**

**TOTAL POINTS:**
agement of the condition (20%), role of the health professional (20%), summary (20%), and references (10%). Upon reflection, we will assign a higher percentage of points for APA in the future because students who were not proficient in using this format seemed to lack the motivation to improve.

The assignment accounted for 10% of the course grade. For future classes, we intend to increase this percentage to 20% after realizing that students with low expectations regarding their writing ability appeared to exert little effort toward the assignment. We shall also consider assigning points for the rough draft and additional points for the final copy in hopes that this will encourage greater attention toward improving the final product.

Other Key Points
The criterion for selection of the published papers is important. We place great weight on whether the student’s paper clearly communicated the health topic in lay terms and whether the paper, as all good newspaper articles should, engaged reader interest. As a result, some student-authors who received lower grades were selected for publication over students whose work was more scholarly. This seeming disparity caused some resentment among students as they compared the results of their work with each other. In the future, we will attempt to perfect the grading rubric to reflect our expectations.

The negative reaction from students regarding lack of written feedback will be addressed in the future as well. The authors intend to use one class meeting time for peer student-to-student review, dedicate the first 15 minutes of each class to explore difficulties with issues such as APA formatting, and establish an online discussion board for students to post writing questions to faculty and peers.

We believe that random assignment of topics prevented students from writing about a subject they had knowledge, which necessitated exploration of an unfamiliar subject. This randomization also increased communication between students that may not naturally collaborate and probably promoted relationship-building within the large class.

Assignment of the proper faculty to for this teaching strategy is critical. If multiple faculty members are involved, they must not only be in philosophical accord with the purposes of and expectations for the assignment, they must also possess experience with professional writing critique.

Although the assignment was time intensive for faculty, the rewards outweighed the labor required. Benefits to students included participating in a relevant writing assignment, the opportunity to achieve publication, and experience in conveying the role of nursing to the public. Faculty experienced satisfaction developing a dynamic writing assignment that benefits students, the school, and the community.

Conclusion
This writing assignment was based on a core concept essential to any baccalaureate nursing program—effective communication. The goals of the newspaper assignment were to enhance students’ writing skills, provide an opportunity for publication, and promote healthy living in the community. We believe the assignment served to help students head in the “write” direction while supporting the mission of higher education, our university, and the school of nursing. Many other benefits resulted from the assignment, such as increased visibility of the nursing school in the community and promoting the role of the nurse as educator and client advocate.

References