



Evaluating undergraduate nursing students' self-efficacy and competence in writing: Effects of a writing intensive intervention



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 21 December 2014

Keywords:

Nursing education
Nursing research
Self-efficacy
Communication-writing

ABSTRACT

While professional nurses are expected to communicate clearly, these skills are often not explicitly taught in undergraduate nursing education. In this research study, writing self-efficacy and writing competency were evaluated in 52 nontraditional undergraduate baccalaureate completion students in two distance-mediated 16-week capstone courses. The intervention group ($n = 44$) experienced various genres and modalities of written assignments set in the context of evidence-based nursing practice; the comparison group ($n = 8$) received usual writing undergraduate curriculum instruction. Self-efficacy, measured by the Post Secondary Writerly Self-Efficacy Scale, indicated significant improvements for all self-efficacy items (all p 's = 0.00). Writing competency, assessed in the intervention group using a primary trait scoring rubric (6 + 1 Trait Writing Model[®] of Instruction and Assessment), found significant differences in competency improvement on five of seven items. This pilot study demonstrated writing skills can improve in nontraditional undergraduate students with guided instruction. Further investigation with larger, culturally diverse samples is indicated to validate these results.

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Introduction

Effective communication skills, both written and oral, are essential for professional nurses to function in leadership roles in today's increasingly dynamic and complex healthcare environment (Huston, 2014; Sullivan, 2012). Historically, nurses have relied on face-to-face communication to share ideas, exchange information, and provide patient care. This oral tradition, often informal and unstructured, is used to plan and implement appropriate, safe nursing care (Yoder-Wise, 2011). Today though, nurse leaders must go beyond face-to-face conversation to communicate more broadly across healthcare settings with other providers, ancillary support services, and non-health related services to positively impact patient and family outcomes. It is critical, then, that professional nurses in this diverse technology-driven environment are able to construct clear, coherent messages to effectively address patient care issues (Huston, 2014; Sullivan, 2012; Yoder-Wise, 2011).

Recognizing that essential communication skills are often limited or lacking in professional nursing practice, our team

implemented a writing intervention targeting the generalist nursing curriculum with the intent to improve student writing skills. The goal of this pilot project was to develop and test this innovative writing intervention implemented in a typical online learning setting. Participants in this project were practicing registered nurses (nurse to degree-prepared nurse students) who were completing their undergraduate baccalaureate nursing (BSN) degree in two non-traditional nursing programs in the United States. As a result of learning higher order critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills through writing skill development, we hypothesized that these professional nurses would be better prepared to communicate effectively, and ultimately, demonstrate themselves to be leaders in their clinical environments.

Using a quasi-experimental, pre-post design, nurse to degree-prepared nurse (baccalaureate completion [RN-BSN]) students enrolled in their final course at two universities located in the mid-western United States participated in the 16-week project. One group received the writing intensive intervention; the comparison group received usual writing experiences consistent with preparation for the generalist nursing degree in the United States. The primary aim of this present study was to determine the efficacy of a writing intensive intervention on the outcome of writing

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competency in online nursing students completing their generalist nursing degree. A secondary aim of this research was to examine the influence of the writing intensive intervention on assigned writing tasks over the semester on the outcome of writing self-efficacy, a potential mediating variable. Therefore, the study questions of interest in this pilot study were:

- 1) What is the difference in the change in writing self-efficacy over the semester between the intervention group and the comparison group?
- 2) What is the change in writing competency for the intervention group after a semester-long writing intensive intervention?

Background

Writing self-efficacy

An important factor in achieving writing competence can be explained by having confidence that one can be a successful writer, as shown in studies using Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1997) to predict writing success (Daly and Miller, 1975; Lavelle, 1993; Pajares and Valiante, 1999; Piazza and Siebert, 2008). Bandura defined self-efficacy as the "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (1977, p. 3). The combination of one's behaviors, personal characteristics and capabilities, and life circumstances intersect and interact to determine the level of human achievement (Bandura, 1986, 1997). "The individual [then] not only reflects upon his/her own abilities to carry out the course of action, but also reflects on and attempts to predict what the outcome will be based upon the contemplated course of action" (Skarbak, 2008; pp. 15–16).

Applied to a learning situation, students demonstrate personal behaviors consistent with their level of self-efficacy, such as expenditure of effort, task/assignment completion, and progression toward accomplishing learning goals (Schunk, 1995). Achievement and success in learning, evidenced by good grades, positive feedback from the instructor and peers, and importantly, a positive self-evaluation reinforce student confidence and enhance self-efficacy (Pajares and Johnson, 1994; Schunk, 2003). Conversely, a failure of some sort, such as inability to grasp the content or a poor grade lowers student self-efficacy (Pajares, 2003), although if self-efficacy is well developed, impact of this failure is likely minimal (Bandura, 1986).

Research in the area of writing literacy and education demonstrates that students' self-efficacy and motivation to learn can be enhanced when teaching strategies are used that (1) model desired behaviors and skills (Schunk, 1987), (2) guide students in setting individual learning goals (Zimmerman, 2000), and (3) promote self-assessment of progress toward these goals (Schunk, 2003). Skills and knowledge are fundamental, i.e. the student must know *how* to complete the task. Students who demonstrate higher motivation and personal learning standards also demonstrate higher levels of self-efficacy (Pajares and Johnson, 1996; Zimmerman and Bandura, 1994). Those who have lower expectations of their writing ability engage in more limited types of writing experiences (Maimon, 2002; Pajares and Johnson, 1994) and demonstrate lower writing performance in some studies (McCarthy et al., 1985). To improve both writing performance and students' belief they can be successful, teachers must not only provide skill-building opportunities (Carter, 2008) but also address student confidence and competence in tandem (Goodman and Cirka, 2009; Pajares, 2003; Pajares and Johnson, 1996).

Furthermore, students have expectations that their efforts will bring about positive outcomes (Schunk and Swartz, 1993; Shell et al., 1989), ranging from simply passing the course to full mastery of skills and course content (Parjares and Johnson, 1994). Finally, for each learning situation, students have a set of beliefs about the value of learning and expected benefits. If students do not value the learning experiences, they are unlikely to be motivated and engaged (Pajares, 2003; Wigfield, 1994; Zimmerman and Bandura, 1994).

The combination of mastery experiences, vicarious learning, reduction in stress reaction and negative emotions, and social persuasion that form the elements of Bandura's theory (Zimmerman and Cleary, 2005) have been translated into scales that assess writing self-efficacy. These commonly used scales were developed within the context of the formal childhood educational environment. However, they only provide short-term evaluation of student attributes and are focused on writing *products* rather than *process*. Schmidt and Alexander (2012) recognized the lack of compatibility in applying these existing scales to assess college student writing. Further, they had concerns related to the scales' emphasis on product vs. process. As a result, this team of researchers developed the Post-Secondary Writerly [sic] Self-Efficacy Scale to assess college students' beliefs in their ability. Because college students in post-secondary educational settings typically devote more time to learning and practicing writing skills, this scale avoids the one-time, limited focus characteristic of childhood education writing confidence scales.

Writing competence

Writing competence is defined as having the necessary writing skills to produce an organized, coherent message that addresses purposeful ideas, logical organization, and effective use of language (Arkle, 1985; Education Northwest, 2013; Rice, 2011). Rhetoric and composition instructors routinely focus on these skill-building attributes to move the student toward becoming a competent, even proficient writer (Grundy, 1986). This type of instruction becomes discipline-specific when instructors from a given discipline, such as nursing, design student writing experiences that apply directly to professional development and performance in the workplace.

Connecting critical thinking with writing is central to writing intensive courses. *Writing Across the Curriculum*, an initiative created among the composition community in the 1980's, encourages students to use writing as a medium to experience various writing modalities within their discipline (Anson and Lyles, 2011). Writing intensive faculty from the discipline are thus challenged to foster a learning environment in which students experience *Writing in the Discipline* by *learning to write* and *writing to learn* (Clark and Fischbach, 2008). *Learning to write* provides student experiences with different writing genres, typically narrative style, reflection, argument or persuasion and basic writing mechanics. *Writing to learn* is at the heart of *Writing in the Discipline*, guiding students in identifying and organizing ideas important to nursing and communicating these ideas in a meaningful way to their peers. Several writing characteristics are fundamental to writing intensive courses, most importantly the use of sequencing, or *scaffolding*, of assignments with a progression in assignment difficulty from the simple to complex. Scaffolding is based on Vygotsky's (Berk and Winsler, 1995) concept of the new learner (in Vygotsky's work, the child) mentored by the expert teacher (adult) to master learning tasks at a level that the learner (or child) could not perform independently. In addition to implementing scaffolding principles, writing intensive guidelines specify that assignments are distributed across the 16-week course to allow repeated practice in writing tasks, that each writing task meets a minimum standard for

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