

Beyond the academic essay: Discipline-specific writing in nursing and midwifery

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Abstract

Although academic writing in higher education has been the focus of research efforts for more than two decades, the specific writing experiences, needs and difficulties of undergraduate nursing and midwifery students have remained largely under-researched. This article reports on a project that investigated the nature and dynamics of academic writing in pre-registration nursing and midwifery at a UK university. The project collected data from a survey completed by 135 students and two focus groups. The article examines the specific genres on these two programmes, the difficulties participating students face when writing them, and their views as to how they can be best supported to do these tasks. It concludes with an analysis of the implications that these issues have for teaching discipline-specific genres in nursing and midwifery and offers some suggestions to respond to such implications.

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1. Introduction

Academic writing has long been recognised as an essential skill university students need to master (Andrews, 2003; Elander, Harrington, Norton, Robinson, & Reddy, 2006; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Whitehead, 2002; among others). Research on writing in the British university context indicates that on admission students are already supposed to know at least the basics of academic writing (Elander et al., 2006; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Whitehead, 2002). Lillis and Turner (2001, p. 65) argue that university students are sometimes expected to write with a high degree of precision even before starting their programmes. These views echo the opinion that content lecturers in specific disciplines hold. In one of the few published articles about writing in nursing, Whitehead (2002) argues that there are two fairly common beliefs: students will develop academic writing relatively easily, and they will do it to the expected standards. These assumptions, Whitehead contends, do not always materialise as most nursing students find writing difficult and standards confusing. In her study on the literacy experiences of a nursing student, Leki (2003, p. 87) also refers to the importance that content lecturers attach to academic writing:

Although the College of Nursing did not officially require any specific amount of writing in any of its courses, faculty considered writing an important skill for their graduates to master.

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Although content and writing lecturers' opinions about the importance of academic writing converge, they seem to differ in how they perceive students' needs. Whereas writing lecturers appear to focus on the basic principles of writing (e.g., paragraphing, structuring, referencing) (Kaldor & Rochecouste, 2002), content lecturers seem to take these as given and use 'academic writing' or 'writing skills' as a short-cut for discipline-specific thinking, argumentation, and content (Bazerman, 2005; McLeod, 1989). The interpretation and application of guidelines and marking criteria seem to be another area of disagreement. Research in this area has shown that guidelines and assessment criteria are not always made sufficiently specific to students and may not constitute the 'homogenous set of requirements' they are sometimes believed to be (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Norton, 1990). How writing and content lecturers apply these criteria appears to reflect what they teach (writing or content) and how they perceive writing principles (general or discipline-specific).

Studies on how these beliefs, assumptions and disagreements materialise in health care university programmes in general, and in nursing and midwifery pre-registration¹ programmes in particular are rather scant (cf. Leki, 2003; Whitehead, 2002). In fact, applied linguistics has paid little attention to written genres in the health care sector (Candlin & Candlin, 2003) despite its long-standing interest in genre and genre pedagogy (see Hyland, 2002a). To date, the limited published work has focused on either doctor-patient relationships (Frank, 2000; Ibrahim, 2001) or post-registration activity (Parks, 2000; 2001; Parks & Maguire, 1999), possibly reflecting a new direction towards the investigation of workplace genres in applied linguistics and discourse studies (Silva & Brice, 2004). In nursing research has focused on the writing needs of professionals, producing a significant number of publications on workplace writing (Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999), with a special emphasis on supporting nurses to publish (see, for example, Oermann, 2005; Tornquist, 1999; Zim & Entwistle, 2002). Similarly, the literature on writing in midwifery has tended to concentrate almost exclusively on post-registration demands (Page, 2000; Taylor, 2000). The specific academic writing experiences of undergraduate nursing and midwifery students, however, have remained under-researched.

This article reports on a project that examined the specific written genres in pre-registration nursing and midwifery, the difficulties students face when writing them and their views on how they can be best helped to do these tasks, all of which have implications for teaching academic writing in these disciplines. The article analyses these pedagogical implications and suggests some strategies to respond to them.

2. Theoretical framework

The academic essay has been named the 'default genre' in higher education (Andrews, 2003; Womack, 1993). It has also been identified as one of the most demanding tasks students have to face and a main source of their frustration (Elander, et al., 2006; Krause, 2001). The influence of the academic essay is recognised to be so strong that its importance is acknowledged even by postgraduate students (Allison, 2004), having become the main vehicle for maintaining the literacy practice Lillis (2001, p. 20) calls "essayist literacy."

However, discipline-specific demands may require students to be fluent in more specific genres, even when they are capable of producing other generic text types (Johns, 1997). Reports, for example, are recognised as a major specific genre in disciplines such as business and engineering (Okoye, 1994; Stanton, 2004). In a recent study, Zhu (2004) found that reports made up 35% of the 242 assignments she analysed at an American college of business administration. Similarly, the reflective essay is one of the main genres in education, nursing and midwifery programmes (Lunsford & Bridges, 2005; Rocha, 2005). Still another discipline-specific example is the care critique, a critical evaluation of the care a patient has received, which is highly representative of many health disciplines, but on which very little if anything has been published.

The limited research available on health-specific genres may have resulted from the strong influence exercised by overarching genres like the 'essay,' usually taught as generic skills in the 'general' writing class. But these "overarching genres and universal skills [...] take on meaning only when they are situated in real contexts of use" (Hyland, 2002b, p. 393). When reports, memos or presentations are taught as universal genres, students from different disciplines need to ultimately adapt them to meet their own discipline-specific needs.

Hyland (2002b) argues for a more contextualised approach to teaching genres. I would argue with Hyland that students should be encouraged to explore and probably differentiate genres not only in terms of their specific structures and lexis but also in the way they reflect the social values of the communities that have generated them. Teaching

¹ The term 'pre-registration' is used for programmes of study nurses and midwives do before they register with a professional council which allows them to practise.

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