



# Writing a bachelor thesis generates transferable knowledge and skills useable in nursing practice



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## SUMMARY

Generic skills or transferable skills have been discussed in terms of whether or not skills learned in one context can be transferred into another context. The current study was aimed to explore nurses' self-perceptions of the knowledge and skills they had obtained while writing a Bachelor's thesis in nursing education, their experience of the extent of transfer and utilization in their current work. Responding nurses ( $N = 42$ ) had all worked from 1 to 1.5 years after their final examination and had completed a questionnaire that was structured with open-ended questions. Only five nurses reported that they were unable to use any of the knowledge and skills they had obtained from writing a thesis. A majority of the nurses (37/42) could give many examples of the practical application of the skills and knowledge they had obtained. Our findings indicate that writing a thesis as part of an undergraduate degree program plays a major role in the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills which can subsequently be transferred into and utilized in nursing practice.

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## Introduction

It is important to investigate if knowledge and skills obtained from researching and writing a Bachelor thesis, as a part of undergraduate nursing education, is usable and applicable in nursing practice. In Sweden, all registered nurses have a professional qualification as well as a Bachelor's degree in nursing following the implementation of the Bologna process (SFS, 2006: 1053). Bologna process aims to harmonize program structures in European Higher Education Area so they are comparable among countries in Europe (European Commission: Tuning educational structures in Europa, 2006). Since the nursing education has moved into universities, academia demands an emphasis on a scientific approach to critical thinking (Department of Education, 1992). Whereas Greenwood (2002) states that the intention of Bachelor programs is to produce lifelong learners, obtaining a range of theoretical insights and capacity to solve practical problems. Some of these demands can be expected to be met during the learning process and while undertaking a thesis project during nursing education (Blenkinsop, 2003). Education concerning research as part of the academic nursing education has been found to promote positive attitudes towards research, and increase knowledge of research procedures and the interpretation

of results (McCleary and Brown, 2003). In addition, in a study by Lundgren and Halvarsson (2009) Swedish nursing students clearly state that they expected that the skills acquired through writing a Bachelor thesis would be of great value in their future professional life. In contrast, several studies have shown that some nursing students perceived that their education did not fully integrate the clinical and the academic aspects (Holmström and Larsson, 2005) and that the scientific theoretical perspective did not always reflect actual clinical practice (Maben et al., 2007). Some nurses having had 3 years of work experience rated the teaching of research methodology during their education as being the least important in their professional work (Danielson and Berntsson, 2007). Hek and Shaw (2006) found that newly qualified nurses after three months of work believed they had received instruction regarding research in nursing school that they could not relate to clinical practice. However, 12 months later, some of these nurses could acknowledge a greater relevance of the research components in their current and future activities.

## Transferable Knowledge and Skills

There are many terms used in the literature for the process of putting research knowledge into practice, such as *knowledge translation*, *knowledge transfer*, and *research utilization* (Graham et al., 2006; Wallin, 2009). Transferable knowledge and skills are described in a variety of terms such as key, core, soft and generic skills (Bridges, 1993; Curry and Sherry, 2004). According to Curry and Sherry (2004) transferrable skills include both academic, works, social and personal skills. Generic skills or transferable skills have been discussed in terms of whether or not skills learned in one context can be transferred into another new

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context (Crebert et al., 2004). Tennant (1999) claimed that transfer process occurred when there was a possibility of some learning and practical assistance to the new or transfer situation. Knowledge and skills which can be applied across a range of situations are said to be more 'generic' than knowledge and skills that are limited to the context in which they are acquired (Tennant, 1999). Transferable interpersonal skills on the other hand, are assumed to transfer readily across a range of contexts (Boyce et al., 2001; Curry and Sherry, 2004).

Employers have expectations that formal education should produce the kind of learning that allows adaptability and flexibility and creates workers who quickly and willingly apply their existing knowledge and skills to new situations (Tennant, 1999). In nursing education, Blenkinsop (2003) proposes that the learning which takes place when undertaking a thesis project can give transferable skills and knowledge that qualified nurses can subsequently use in nursing practice.

## Research Utilization

According to Estabrooks (1999) research utilization is the use of research findings which can be conceptualized as instrumental, conceptual and/or symbolic. Instrumental referees to a concrete application of research findings such as making a decision or an intervention. Conceptual research utilization can increase awareness of the research, result in changes in thinking but not always in actions whereas symbolic is the use of research to influence the views of others on a particular issue. Lack of academic degree among nurses significantly increased the odds of perceiving barriers to research utilization (Nilsson Kajermo et al., 2008) whereas nurses who had studied research methods in their basic nursing education seemed to experience fewer barriers (Nilsson Kajermo et al., 1998). Education seems to be one factor in overcoming negative attitudes towards research utilization (McCleary and Brown, 2003). From an educational perspective, very little is known about how academic attitudes and values obtained through writing a Bachelor thesis and the skills obtained, are transferred and utilized in clinical practice.

## Aim

To investigate how nurses' knowledge and skills obtained from writing a Bachelor thesis in their nursing education are transferred and utilized in clinical practice.

## Method

The current paper reports the results from a questionnaire structured with a series of open questions, given to nurses who had completed a Bachelor thesis during their education. All the nurses had been initially prepared for the work on their theses by taking two 5 point courses in scientific methodology during their first five terms of the education. The aims of these courses were that the student should learn to analyze, critically review and discuss scientific papers. The compulsory thesis writing course was held in the sixth and final term of the student's education. The theses are, to a great extent, based on literature reviews of scientific papers and should be written and presented according to the university's accepted standards. The students were free to choose any topic within the overall scope of caring and nursing, and could write their thesis individually or in cooperation with another student. The course included a final seminar discussion of the thesis with a co-student acting as a "critical opponent."

## Sample

Two classes of nurses who had been working 1 to 1.5 years following their graduation from the university, a total of 64 nurses, were invited to participate in the study. All graduated from the University

of Gothenburg. The nurses were contacted in conjunction with a planned follow-up of alumni. All nurses were at the time working in inpatient care. No further demographic data were collected.

## Data Collection

The questionnaire consisted of nine open-ended straight forward questions concerning the possible importance and usefulness of writing a thesis to their choice of nursing specialty and everyday nursing practice. The questions were formulated in order to capture their self-perceptions and experiences of the extent of transfer and utilization of the knowledge acquired during the writing of their theses. Examples of questions are: "Have you used your thesis work in your professional work? How?", "Have you been able to use the way to work, which you used for thesis work, in your profession?" and "Did you learn anything new during the thesis work about your own abilities? Describe what!" The questionnaire was sent by post and a reminder was sent four weeks after the initial distribution.

## Data Analysis

The answers given in the questionnaire were collated, transcribed and content analysis subsequently performed. Initially, all the answers given were read thoroughly, in order to obtain a sense of the overall response. Since the questions were partly overlapping and some were deliberately vaguely formulated, the answers did not easily fall in to mutually exclusive categories. Because of this, the whole text had to be consolidated into one document, and the text was then read carefully with the aim of the study in mind (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The text was re-read and key sentences or words were marked and divided into meaning units, codes were created and considered according to any apparent similarities and differences, interpreted, sorted and abstracted into themes (Krippendorff, 2004). To increase credibility the analysis was performed by both authors who debated and discussed the values and assignments of the codes and themes in order to confirm validity until a consensus was reached.

## Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Head of the Institute of Health and Care Sciences and conducted according to the ethical standards and guidelines of the declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2008). Each questionnaire was coded, and names and codes were kept separately, thus guaranteeing confidentiality. A participant information fact sheet giving details of the study was enclosed together with the questionnaires, and participation consent was assumed on the basis of the return of the completed questionnaire.

## Findings

The number of completed and usable questionnaires was 42, giving a response rate of 65%. The answers were mostly rather short. Only five nurses reported that they had not been able to use any of the knowledge and skills obtained from writing a Bachelor thesis in their current clinical practice.

Two domains were identified: the knowledge and skills gained through working with the thesis; and the utilization in clinical nursing practice of gained knowledge and skills. These domains are described and illustrated below.

## Knowledge and Skills Gained

### A Critical Approach to the Research Process

The nurses stated that they had learned how to find and evaluate research findings through the research methods used in the thesis. The nurses had also developed a scientific approach towards research

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