



UTILIZING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO INCREASE STUDENT WRITING ABILITIES IN DOCTOR OF NURSE PRACTICE PROGRAMS

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This article describes the process and initial outcome of an interdisciplinary approach to the development of a writing-enriched curriculum in a doctor of nursing practice program at a regional institution in the upper Midwest. (Index words: Interdisciplinary; Scholarly writing; Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) Program) *J Prof Nurs* 31:64–70, 2015. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) articulates a vision for the doctoral preparation of advanced practice nurses. Programs to educate doctorally prepared nurses, either with the doctor of philosophy degree or the doctor of nursing practice (DNP) degree, must share high expectations for rigor and scholarship (AACN, 2006). Writing, more specifically competence in scholarly writing, is a skill that is needed to advance the profession (Shirey, 2013); moreover, clear and effective communication is critical as a means to provide quality health care (Luthy, Peterson, Lassetter, & Callister, 2009). Although writing is central to the completion of a higher degree (Jackson, 2009), Shirey noted “the development of systematic teaching/learning approaches that help highly educated nurses to effectively convey verbal and written messages” (pp. 138–139) remains unaddressed in scholarship and provided one approach, Strategies, Methods, and Assessment of Outcomes, Related to Teaching/Learning (SMART), in an attempt to address this gap. Writing Enriched Curriculum (WEC) is another systematic teaching/learning approach focused on writing but differs from SMART in strategies and methods. In addition, it is grounded in interdisciplinary collaboration.

The project discussed in this article was modeled on the WEC approach out of the University of Minnesota

that combines elements of writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID). WAC and WID have already successfully been used in baccalaureate nursing programs (Cowles, Strickland, & Rodgers, 2001; Luthy et al. 2009). Drawing from WAC and WID, WEC seeks to more purposefully and consciously infuse writing into a program's curriculum through an intensive interdisciplinary collaboration between a department and a specialist in composition and rhetoric who serves as a writing consultant. This article demonstrates the value of utilizing these kinds of interdisciplinary collaborations to improve the writing and communication skills of graduate nursing students.

Background

The authors teach at a small, regional, comprehensive Catholic Benedictine college that enrolls 3,552 students. The Department of Graduate Nursing (DGN) is housed within the School of Nursing, one of six schools at the college. The DGN currently supports three programs: a master's of science in advanced nurse practice (MS), a post-master's (MS) DNP, and a bachelor of science (BS) to DNP. Within the BS to DNP program, options for study and certification include (a) adult/gerontological nurse practitioner, (b) family nurse practitioner, and (c) psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner. All of these programs are delivered in a blended format, consisting of a mix of on-line and face-to-face courses.

Faced with growing enrollments (an approximate 20 student increase over 2 years), the DGN faculty became increasingly frustrated with the wide range of writing skills of students entering the programs. Caffarella and Barnett (2000) identified that many graduate students do not think or write like scholars or researchers. This is a

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disconnect with faculty expectations that students will begin programs as proficient writers who will continue to develop. DGN faculty also were frustrated because they did not feel prepared to work with students who had varying and often low levels of preparedness for graduate-level work and writing. Their frustrations were particularly heightened in the on-line classroom environment, where nearly all student-to-student interactions and student-to-faculty interactions occur in writing.

The WEC Approach

To address the increasing frustrations of faculty and improve students' writing abilities in the DGN, in spring 2012, the authors undertook an interdisciplinary project that was faculty driven, discipline specific, and context specific. As noted above, the project was based on the WEC approach that seeks to integrate writing into a department's curriculum by having faculty articulate discipline-specific writing conventions and expectations, evaluate existing curriculum for its inclusion and use of writing, and then develop a plan for integrating writing throughout the curriculum (Center for Writing, n.d.). To do so, faculty engage in a three-phase, recursive process in which they create, implement, and assess a writing plan with the assistance of a writing consultant (Center for Writing, 2009). The writing plan is the centerpiece of the WEC approach, as it "articulate[s] discipline-specific writing expectations, and plans for curricular integration of writing instruction, writing assessment, and instructional support" (Center for Writing, 2009).

In WEC, all departments and faculty engage in the same process—creating, implementing, and assessing a writing plan—but each plan differs because it is specific to a particular department and faculty population, and crafted to meet their mission, needs, students, resources, structures, objectives, etc. Unlike the SMART approach, WEC is not a one-size-fits-all approach to incorporating writing into a curriculum; rather, it is a contextually based approach that responds to local conditions. Although one-size-fits-all approaches often are attractive to time-crunched faculty, contextually based approaches, such as WEC, productively capture and respond to the realities and resources of a specific department, its faculty, and its students (Anson, Dannels, Flash, & Housley Gaffney, 2012).

The Writing Plan

In this section, the collaboration between the DGN and the writing consultant to create and implement a writing plan over three semesters (spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013) is outlined. The writing plan focused on the BS to DNP program and its 15 core courses that are delivered only in an on-line format. However, because all three of the DGN's programs share some courses, the post MS to DNP and MS programs were also modified. It is important to note before proceeding that the experience with the WEC model provided in this article is not meant to serve as the definitive way to create and implement a writing plan, but rather as an illustration of an interdisciplinary and contextually based approach to incorporating writing into a curriculum.

Creating the Writing Plan

To create the writing plan, we collected and analyzed data to uncover writing expectations of faculty as well as areas of concern. Collected data included the following: sample marked student papers and their corresponding assignments and rubrics; the graduate program handbook; syllabi and writing assignments from the 15 core courses; and individual interviews with the DGN faculty performed by the writing consultant. Each faculty member also created her own informal writing outcomes statement for the DGN that outlined what writing skills graduates should be able to demonstrate upon completion of their program.

From these data, a Writing Outcomes Statement for the DGN was created and approved for use; the statement clearly articulated six overarching writing outcomes and provided further detail under each of the six goals (see Appendix A). In addition to this data collection, the DGN faculty and the writing consultant meet three times over the course of the spring 2012 semester during departmental meetings. These meetings allowed faculty to share their experiences with student writing and their own writing expectations. They also allowed the writing consultant to raise topics or issues that were identified during the data collection and analysis process and receive feedback from the faculty as a whole.

The writing plan outlined major findings and offered five recommendations for the DGN:

- (a) participate in a workshop on the marking and grading of student writing;
- (b) include direct instruction and support in academic writing in the core courses during the first year of the program;
- (c) integrate elements of the writing process and peer review throughout the curriculum;
- (d) restructure the use of discussion board posts (DBPs) and explore other electronic media for student interaction in all courses; and
- (e) incorporate more opportunities to practice reflective clinical practice throughout the curriculum (see Appendix B).

The plan and its recommendations were based on the analysis of the collected data, feedback from faculty at departmental meetings, and a comparison of the core courses and their assignments to the newly created Writing Outcomes Statement. This comparison was depicted in color-coded chart that highlighted how and to what extent the core course curriculum (including assignments and instruction) currently is or is not meeting the writing outcomes. The chart was created in an EXCEL spreadsheet, in which the courses were listed on the vertical axis and the outcomes on the horizontal. The assignments for all courses were reviewed and marked for the outcomes that they met, and these data were inserted into the spreadsheet.

Implementing the Writing Plan

The plan was implemented over two semesters, fall 2012 and spring 2013. During the fall 2012 semester, the DGN

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