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Implementing a Nursing Literacy Initiative to Address the Needs of Students in a Licensed Practical Nursing Program

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ABSTRACT

Faculty members at a college of nursing partnered with a local literacy consultant to target the needs of underprepared postsecondary students, resulting in a Nursing Literacy Initiative (NLI) in a Licensed Practical Nursing program. Analysis of data showed that the College of Nursing had a high failure and student attrition rate in Quarter 1 and 2 courses; in addition, analysis of PAX scores, the college of nursing admissions examination, showed student verbal scores to be significantly lower than science or composite scores. The NLI is grounded in research on disciplinary literacy and recognizes that the specialized language used in nursing textbooks and professional or clinical experiences is not a natural fit for most students; it is also at odds with a dominant high school approach that encourages doing science instead of reading about science (Pearson, et al., 2010). Using a conceptual framework that mimics the nursing process, initiative planners detail their assessment, diagnosis, plan, intervention, and evaluation of the literacy initiative and, consequently, of student success. Specific assessments and strategies used in the NLI are presented; efforts to develop faculty understanding through presentations, a co-teaching model, and collegial mentoring are also presented.

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Introduction

At a college of nursing in a midsized midwestern city, instructors partnered with a literacy consultant from a nearby public school district to address the disciplinary learning needs of students in a licensed practical nursing (LPN) program. Disciplinary literacy stands in contrast to more traditional content area literacy approaches that emphasize general strategies that can be applied to texts across content areas. While these intermediate literacy strategies are important, disciplinary literacy acknowledges that the reading and use of academic language required in specific disciplines is more specialized and often more complex than reading general audience literary texts (Moje, 2008; Shanahan and Shanahan, 2012). Therefore, the literacy consultant and institutional leaders at the college of nursing planned a disciplinary literacy initiative that would explicitly uncover the language patterns that nursing professionals use to work within a community of health care experts. Our nursing literacy initiative (NLI) seeks to identify and make accessible the skills in reading, thinking, speaking, and listening that are needed for success in both nursing coursework and clinical practice. For example, the specialized academic language used in nursing textbooks, class lectures, and clinical experiences is

not a natural fit for many students; it is not the language they have used in school, what they have heard at home, or how they talk with family and friends. Complicating this difficulty, there is a major gap between the complexity of general-level high school textbooks and postsecondary textbooks; in many high school science classrooms, textbook reading is deemphasized because teachers want students to do science rather than just read about it (Pearson et al., 2010). Thus, many students enter postsecondary settings underprepared to read academic science texts that are lexically dense, nominalized, highly specialized, and increasingly abstract (Fang, 2012).

To offset this lack of preparation, disciplinary literacy privileges teachers who are content experts and who use an apprenticeship approach to explicitly teach how to read and effectively use the academic language unique to the profession. With this apprenticeship approach, instructors do not hold students accountable for invisible criteria, norms, and expectations for learning and performance that is assumed everyone knows (Zwiers, 2014); instead, instructors explicitly model how to read, think, write, and speak within a professional community. As Schoenbach, Greenleaf, and Murphy (2012) write, literacy apprenticeships allow disciplinary experts, our nursing educators, to “show what goes on behind the curtain of expert reading” and call attention to “overlooked or hidden strategies” (22). However, because nursing educators have high levels of content expertise, they can develop “expert blind spots” (Zwiers, 2014) and may not know themselves how to provide explicit instruction in

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reading from the perspective of a nursing professional. In many cases, nursing faculty members may have become so comfortable in the discourse patterns unique to their profession that they are blinded to how foreign and complex reading assignments seem to many students beginning a nursing certification program. To fully comprehend a single page in a nursing textbook, for example, students must attend to as many as four different forms of professional reading: comprehending exposition, calculating equations, analyzing diagrams, and interpreting charts. Among these, typically only comprehending exposition is required when students read nonscientific texts, the dominant literacy focus of P-12 schooling. Disciplinary literacy recognizes that students do not—and should not—rely on just one skill when reading texts of the scientific variety. Instead, disciplinary literacy calls for recognizing that professions have unique ways of communicating that require specialized ways of learning (Shanahan and Shanahan, 2012). The NLI, therefore, is our institution's way of recognizing that nursing education calls for professionals to provide explicit instruction in the specialized ways nurses read, write, speak, and listen. This emphasis on disciplinary literacy as it applies to nursing helps students “gain access to the codes and strategies” that allow them to adjust their thinking to match that of professionals in the field (Zwiers, 2014).

Background: Use of Data to Determine Instructional Needs

Program Directors in the LPN program were concerned about data showing an average failure rate of approximately 15% in Quarter 1, a rate that almost doubled by Quarter 2. Typically, students who failed at least one course in Quarter 1 had significantly lower scores on the PAX preadmission nursing examination than successful students. The PAX is used by nursing programs across the country and student scores on three subcategories—math, science, and verbal—determine both a composite score and admission status (National League for Nursing, 2016). Since PAX math scores between successful and unsuccessful Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 students at our institution were not significantly different, we focused our analysis of the composite score and the scores in the science and verbal subcategories. Table 1 presents these data, collected between January 2014 and December 2015.

A horizontal look at the data in Table 1 shows a significant difference between the composite and science scores of both successful and unsuccessful students compared with their verbal scores. Looking vertically, there is also a difference in the verbal scores of successful and unsuccessful students; however, our successful students are also tethered to verbal scores that are sharply lower than science or composite scores. These students may be employing just enough reading and study strategies to get them through the quarter successfully, yet faculty members know that the complexity of reading will only increase as students continue in the program. Therefore, low verbal scores on the PAX indicate that even those who are passing in Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 may still struggle with the reading, thinking, and speaking requirements in courses that come in later quarters. In addition to PAX data highlighting students' potential literacy problems, instructors also reported, anecdotally, that students came to class without reading assigned materials. When asked to explain why, students reported that they could not concentrate on the

reading, that they read assigned text over and over and still did not understand the content, or that they chose not to read at all, relying on class lectures to learn the content.

In many cases, institutions with similar data have responded by becoming more selective in their admissions process or by requiring more prerequisites of underprepared students (Lajoie, 2013). These strategies do not result in a better on-time completion rate, attrition rate, or the National Council Licensure Examination first-time pass rates (Lajoie, 2013). Although the literature on nursing literacy is sparse, new research posits that reading comprehension may be a missing variable in student success in nursing programs (Lajoie, 2013). Therefore, working with the literacy consultant to integrate disciplinary literacy instruction in specific Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 courses became the focus of our NLI.

Developing a Nursing Literacy Conceptual Framework

Professional nurses use the nursing process to demonstrate the critical thinking required by the profession. To fully anchor the thinking of the literacy consultant and nursing instructors, it was imperative that we design a conceptual framework to ground and integrate the language of both professions. The Nursing Literacy Conceptual Framework that we created is shared in Fig. 1, both demonstrating this critical link and guiding the implementation of the NLI as we assess, diagnose, plan, intervene, and evaluate student success.

Assessment

Analysis of PAX preadmission data identified significantly low verbal subscores as a problem for students entering the program between January 2014 and December 2015. These scores gave us insight about the high failure and attrition rates in Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 courses and alerted us to a previously unrecognized characteristic of our student demographic. Considering that low verbal subscores likely affected student confidence entering the program, we decided to look at influences on student motivation as these factors might have inordinate significance when students are faced with the complexity of nursing textbooks, even for students with average verbal subscores on the PAX. Positive associations with reading difficult texts are central to building and sustaining academic motivation and engagement. Further, students who have a strong sense of efficacy with reading are “more purposeful, enduring, and productive” (Henk, Marinak, and Melnick, 2012). Henk, Marinak, and Melnick (2012) write that “how individuals feel about themselves as readers can influence whether they choose to read, the energy they will devote to it, and how long they will work at making sense of text” (312). Conversely, students who do not have positive associations with reading difficult texts “tend to be inattentive, disengaged, and uncommitted” (Henk, Marinak, and Melnick, 2012, 311). With this insight, we sought an assessment that would provide data on motivational factors like the tendency to be comparative, the development of beliefs, and the expectation of mastery (Wood and Blanton, 2009). Because we already had subjective assessment data from nursing instructors indicating that students struggled to persist with difficult reading or sometimes

Table 1
Comparison of PAX Scores of Students Passing or Failing Quarter 1 or Quarter 2 courses

Quarter 1		Quarter 2	
Successful students	Unsuccessful students	Successful students	Unsuccessful students
Composite (62.3)	Composite (52.7)	Composite (62.9)	Composite (54.9)
Science (77.1)	Science (69.2)	Science (77.2)	Science (72.2)
Verbal (32.6)	Verbal (23.9)	Verbal (33.4)	Verbal (25.2)

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