



A curriculum-wide assessment of writing self-efficacy in a baccalaureate nursing program[☆]

Kim M. Mitchell^{a,b,*}, Diana E. McMillan^b

^a Red River College, C608-2055 Notre Dame Ave., Winnipeg, MB R3H 0J9, Canada

^b University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study explores patterns of writing self-efficacy fluctuation across three academic years in a baccalaureate nursing program. The goal was to assess if writing self-efficacy predicted program grades.

Design: Longitudinal exploratory design.

Setting: Three-year accelerated nursing program in a college setting in Canada.

Participants: Follow-up cohort included 49 students; 32 (65.3%) synchronous in program progression and 17 (34.7%) had become asynchronous between first and third year.

Methods: Data was collected five times between August 2013 and May 2016 at program admission, the start of their discipline-specific first-year writing course, the end of the writing course, start of third-year, and the end of third-year. Variables assessed included writing self-efficacy (two measures), writing anxiety, entrance degrees of reading power (DRP) scores, final college cumulative grade point average (GPA), and grades earned on first, second, and third-year papers.

Results: Writing self-efficacy statistically significantly improved from the start of the nursing program to the finish ($p < .001$). Writing self-efficacy fluctuated decreasing from post first-year writing course to the start of the third-year, returning to or exceeding end of writing course levels by the end of the third year. Students who progressed normally through the program (synchronous) were academically stronger (paper grades, DRP, GPA scores) and had higher writing self-efficacy scores than asynchronous students. Using hierarchical regression, DRP scores and synchronous/asynchronous status in the program made a larger contribution to the prediction of final program GPA and paper grades, while the inclusion of writing self-efficacy in the models made a minor contribution to overall variance.

Conclusions: Writing self-efficacy will fluctuate based on context and complexity of writing demanded in academic programs. Second and third-year students require continued support with writing beyond an introductory course. Programs should attend to developing reading comprehension in students as part of their across-the-curriculum writing plans.

1. Introduction

In a global-health environment, nursing students require strong communication, critical thinking, and writing skills to be prepared to work in interdisciplinary teams in practice (Oermann et al. 2014). Writing teaches students to think on paper, build and defend arguments, reveal problems, create solutions, introspect, and raise questions (Lester et al. 2003). Unlike any other pedagogical strategy, writing gets into corners of thinking that other assignment types cannot reach (Zinsler 1993). Yet, perceptions persist among students that writing is not necessary to bedside nursing practice, because the immediacy of the

hands-on tasks of nursing seem more pressing to master (Luthy et al. 2009; Whitehead 2002). Nevertheless, the writing students perform across their curriculum contributes to a state of continuous transition for student nurses learning how to be a nurse through what they write (Chaudoir et al. 2016).

Interventions targeting affective and motivational constructs, such as writing self-efficacy, which contribute to a student's sense of personal agency as a writer, have been lauded as having the potential to improve student writing by having direct and indirect influences on writing outcomes (Pajares and Valiante 2006). Self-efficacy is also identified as having an influence on career choices and subject matter interest

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kmmitchell@rrc.ca, [@academicswrite](https://twitter.com/academicswrite) (K.M. Mitchell).

(Nauta et al. 2002), effort expenditure, persistence, and personal resilience in educational contexts (Phan 2014) and thus writing self-efficacy has curriculum-wide implications. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory acknowledges that self-efficacy is sensitive to contextual characteristics, thus disciplinary influences on self-efficacy must be explored. Authors exploring academic self-efficacy have proposed that the concept is subject to displaced effects on academic performance (Phan 2014) making longitudinal explorations of writing self-efficacy a worthy area of investigation.

While nursing has a small but growing body of literature exploring writing self-efficacy in short-term contexts (Miller et al. 2015; Mitchell et al. 2017a, b), no known studies have explored writing self-efficacy across a nursing curriculum. We were also unable to locate any interdisciplinary curriculum-wide assessments of writing self-efficacy in the literature. We aim to fill this research gap by presenting a long-term follow up of a cohort of undergraduate nursing students exploring patterns of writing self-efficacy across three academic years in a baccalaureate nursing program with the overall goal of assessing the role of writing self-efficacy to predict program grades. Correlations between writing self-efficacy, anxiety, grades from three papers across the curriculum, grade point average (GPA), and entrance degrees of reading power (DRP) scores, are also presented.

2. Review of the Literature

Nursing programs approach writing instruction in various ways. Andre and Graves (2013) identified that in Canada, 48% of baccalaureate nursing programs had no mandatory writing courses included in their curriculums, 39.5% required a generic writing course, 18.5% required English literature, but only 6% required discipline-specific writing instruction, despite discipline-specific approaches being the preferred method. Two previous reviews of the literature (Oermann et al. 2014; Troxler et al. 2011) identified that most of the writing instructional methods discussed in the nursing literature were reported in anecdotal format, while only a third were evaluated for effectiveness. Oermann et al., called for a more systematic plan for writing in nursing programs and empirical investigations into across-the-curriculum strategies. Jefferies et al. (2018), in a review of 21 papers exploring academic literacy and writing and their connection to critical thinking and clinical practice, concluded that formal essay writing contributes to practice decision making through argument formation, evaluation of evidence, and synthesis of ideas. These authors also indicate that assessing student writing self-efficacy is one strategy for guiding students to improve their writing skills and critical thinking.

Curriculum-wide writing approaches are often associated with the "Writing Across the Curriculum" movement (Lester et al. 2003). This movement believes that writing should be included in core courses of a discipline as a method of connecting writing to learning (Berger 2015; Kolb 2013; Lester et al. 2003). Defining "writing ability" is difficult because it is multifaceted, complex, and situated. Writing ability shape-shifts with the demands of an assignment, thus, writing is a developmental process (Slomp 2012). By increasing the frequency of writing, student comfort with writing will also increase, contributing to the long-term maintenance of writing skills (Kolb 2013).

Numerous research studies have identified that writing self-efficacy can be improved from pre-to-post writing course (Goodman and Cirka 2009; Jones 2008; MacArthur et al. 2016; Miller et al. 2015; Mitchell et al. 2017a; Mitchell et al., 2017b; Van de Poel and Gasiorek 2012). Most of these studies were conducted on first-year cohorts of students in introductory writing courses. To our knowledge, no study, to date, has conducted any follow-up on these cohorts to discover if students maintain their post-course writing self-efficacy levels later in their curriculums. Lack of follow-up leaves these findings open to question as improvement observed may be attributable to testing response or social desirability bias rather than a true improvement in writing self-efficacy post-course. As few disciplinary programs offer academic writing

instruction beyond first-year, it is fair to hypothesize that future writing assignments, contextual factors, and degree of instructor guidance on individual assignments may continue to have an influence on student levels of writing self-efficacy.

3. Methods

3.1. Design

The study described is a long-term follow up of a previous cohort of students who participated in a one group quasi-experimental pretest-post-test design with a time control during the first-year of their nursing program (Mitchell et al. 2017a). Eligible students were approached during their third academic year in a Baccalaureate nursing program to revisit their participation in the study. Data was collected from eligible students at two additional time points in August 2015 and May 2016. The program under exploration is a three-year accelerated program structured into trimesters.

3.2. Participants and Study Procedures

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board at the instructional institution. A letter to participants explaining the purpose of the study and the requirements for participation was included with the questionnaire package. Consent to participate was implied when a participant returned a completed questionnaire. Student confidentiality and privacy rights were explained in this letter and they were informed that choice to participate would not influence their grade in their current courses. Assigned student numbers, rather than student names, were used to assist with matching questionnaires. The returned questionnaires were not scrutinized until the conclusion of the academic year. The questionnaires were delivered to eligible students by a proxy instructor, who was not involved in the research study, but who was teaching a course in which a potential participant was registered. To maximize participation, two email reminders were sent to students encouraging the return of the survey. No stipend or grade bonus was offered to students for participating in the follow-up.

The initial study enrolled all first-year students in an accelerated nursing program who were registered in the first-year academic writing course in either first or second term of that year. Of the 132 participants who completed surveys in the earlier study, 97 were eligible for follow-up based on completing surveys at T1, T2 and T3, or T2 and T3 in the previous study. Fig. 1 presents a participant flow chart with reasons for loss to follow-up which included failure to return questionnaires, leaving the program, and students who still had not completed first-year course work. Class lists prepared for course registration were consulted, with the assistance of an academic student advisor, to identify the students for follow-up. Of the 79 students remaining in the program, 54 (68.4%) had progressed in a synchronous fashion to the third-year of their nursing program, while 25 (31.6%) had fallen asynchronous in their program progression and were still completing second-year coursework. At the start of the follow-up, 49 students returned questionnaires representing 32 (65.3%) synchronous and 17 (34.7%) asynchronous students. By the final follow-up survey, 31 questionnaires were returned for analysis comprising of 24 (77.4%) synchronous and 7 (22.6%) asynchronous students.

Differences between participating students, who responded to the follow-up survey, and the non-participating students, who were lost to follow-up, were explored using an independent group *t*-test based on data gathered during the original study. Participating ($M = 27.38$, $SD = 2.31$) and non-participating ($M = 29.23$, $SD = 3.93$) students differed significantly with respect to their Self-Efficacy Scale for Academic Writing (SESAW) scores at T1, $t(61) = -2.29$, $p = .03$, with non-participants reporting higher initial writing self-efficacy. These groups did not differ on other attributes such as first-year writing course paper grade or final grade, or on the SESAW measures taken at

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