On My Way to Saving Lives: The Importance of Writing in the Nursing Program

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What strategies in the nursing program are used to prepare students for writing in the nursing field? My findings suggest that writing in the nursing program is an essential tool for preparing students for the nursing field. Four categories that describe the essential teaching goals of writing in the nursing program include documentation, journaling, research, and formatting. Through documentation, students are taught the importance of being up to date on their patient’s records. Journaling helps students to reflect on their feelings and experiences, which in return teaches them to be better nurses. Research in the nursing program and in the nursing field help nurses to stay up to date on current practices. Last, formatting essays correctly throughout the nursing program is essential for preparing future nurses for future writing in the field. Through conducting an academic inquiry, I was able to realize that there is more to writing in the nursing field than I thought there was. I was able to ask questions about the research and then get answers. I now feel more enlightened on what is to come of nursing for me in the future.

**Literature Review**

Writing in the nursing field consists of patient charting, documentation, journaling, and research. To understand writing in the nursing field, one must understand the generalization’s people can make about the nursing profession. A website on “Information about Writing Expectations in Nursing” says that students in nursing school are taught how to write in a ‘scholarly fashion’ while also in an APA format (Altman and Kelly). In this study, I am investigating the strategies in the nursing program that are used to prepare a nursing student for writing in the field and how discourse communities and literary sponsors help nursing students to understand the fundamentals of writing in the profession of nursing.

John Swales (1990) defined a discourse community as a group of people who share common goals and purposes and how they communicate those ideas. For instance, the nursing field has a common purpose of healing patients while also being empathetic, caring, and helpful. All nurses must possess these qualities. They communicate their ideas through verbal communication on the job, over the telephone, and at conferences; therefore, nursing is a discourse community. To connect this to the research on how writing in the Longwood nursing program prepares students for the job, it is important to understand how Swales summarizes these concepts of a discourses community through six defining characteristics. Some examples that directly correspond to a nursing discourse community are having their own form of lexis, membership, and documentation (pp. 220-222). Lexis in the nursing field include any type of shortened name for a disease, treatment, medicine, etc., so that there is quick and efficient communication across the field. Membership is attained through completing four years of schooling to complete a B.S.N. degree. Documentation includes charting, journaling, etc. These examples all include some form of writing that students must learn in the program to prepare for outside of the classroom.

The nursing program consists of several different literacy sponsors that influence writing. Deborah Brandt (1998) in the article “Sponsors of Literacy” refers to a sponsor of literacy as someone who has influence on a person in their own literacy learning. Examples of a sponsor of literacy could be relatives, teachers, priests, supervisors, and any other person who could influence literacy. Brandt's research suggests that sponsors in the nursing program at Longwood are important because the nursing students will be influenced by them. These literary sponsors will help to influence the students on how to learn to write in the nursing program. Brandt supports this argument because she says that sponsors have a strong relationship with another person that shows up in past experiences of literacy learning. The literacy learning in this case is learning to write in nursing.

Journaling throughout nursing school lets students reflect on what they learned and experienced. Ross, C., Mahal, K., Chinnapen, Y., Kolar, M., & Woodman, K. (2014) conducted a study on journaling in nursing school. The authors’ argue that nursing students who journal about their feelings, experiences, and things that they learned after clinical work will teach them to have more compassion and understanding for people with illnesses. It will also give them time to reflect on how they felt during clinicals, what they learned, and about the nursing environment. This applies to the research on writing in the nursing program because students at Longwood are required to do reflective journals just like this. The authors’ main points were that students will learn about their “preconceived notions, outcomes and experiences, the atmosphere of the workplace, and holistic client-centered care” (pp. 25-26). Journaling in the nursing program at Longwood will help the nursing students gain this knowledge.

Writing throughout the nursing program has to be beneficial to education of the students. K. Cowles, D. Strickland, and B. Rodgers did a study on the “Collaboration for Teaching Innovation: Writing Across the Curriculum in a School of Nursing” (2014). They wrote about in their study that there are two major characteristics of successful “writing to learn” strategies—all of the course objectives “blend” together to enforce learning existing content and the writing has to be meaningful to the students (pp. 365). This study enforces the importance of the teaching strategies that are implemented on nursing students to prepare them for nursing outside of school.

**Data Collection**

I credit my findings to interviews, scholarly articles, scholarly studies, and websites. I went about collecting my data first by setting up an interview with Dr. Vicki Martin, PhD, RN. I asked her questions on her own experiences as a nurse, what kinds of writing do nurses do, what writing is done in the nursing program, and what students struggle with the most. After the interview I was aware of the writing was used in the nursing program; however, I need some other articles to help support the information I received in the interview. I then went to the internet and read some information on a website written by The State University of New York – Empire State College – CDL/Nursing Program. From this website I was able to find more information about journaling and research in nursing programs. With the aid of scholarly articles, I was able to connect my findings with other scholars’ ideas. Through this, I was able to connect my findings from the interview and websites to create my data findings.

**Data Findings**

Through coding my interview and artifacts from the internet, I was able to come up with four labels that describe the strategies used to teach writing in the nursing program. These include documentation, journaling, research, and formatting.

**Data Findings- Documentation**

Documentation is a critical component of writing in the nursing field. It can come in the form of “documenting stuff that happens, possibilities for improved nursing care, patient care, or research” (V. Martin, personal communication, October 20, 2015). Documentation is a key lesson that is taught in the nursing program. The junior year of the nursing program is when intense documentation on the patients in the hospital takes place. If a nurse has not documented a treatment, then it is said that they have not completed that treatment. Documentation is mostly forms that are filled out on the computer. Every health assessment of each patient is a checklist and anything that “deviates from normal, then you type it in” (V. Martin, personal communication, October 20, 2015). Dr. Martin explains how it is “a legal thing for us to make sure that we’re documenting appropriately on every aspect of patient health, you know, our assessments, any tasks or treatments we do, so documentation is very important on a day to day job for a nurse.” The legal aspect is important because if a hospital or office was ever a part of a lawsuit, they need to be able to go back into the records and look for detailed information. If information is missing, then they do not know what happened with that certain patient. So writing in the nursing program about documentation is important for both the patient and hospital.

Care plans are a very important form of documentation that student nurses have to learn about. Care plans are a contract between care providers, their patient, and the patient’s family. “They have to have a little medical lingo in there, a little professional writing, but it also has to be on the level that the patient and the family can understand it because if they can’t understand your instructions and you’re teaching in that plan of care, then they’re not going to adhere to it” (V. Martin, personal communication, October 20, 2015). This medical lingo or “lexis” from the nursing field as a discourse community, introduces the students to the terms that all health care providers use in their field. So students have to learn how to properly write a care plan because they are written everyday as a nurse. Nursing students are taught how to translate the confusing medical lingo into terms that the patient and their family can understand.

**Data Findings- Journaling**

“Between the course readings, presentations, clinical and classroom time, you have gained knowledge and experience to reflect and then to write about” (State University of New York). Journaling in the nursing program is one of the most important forms of writing that students have to do. Journaling is not about writing with perfect grammar and spelling, it is about what students have learned and experienced with patients. Dr. Martin says, “Your writing and the journaling that we have you do, especially in the clinical setting, helps to give you insight into your own experience.” Students are asked to write about their emotions such as feeling judgmental, empathetic, or angry. Nursing students have to recognize that to take care of patients the proper way, they must identify how they feel about taking care of people who are sick. This is why journaling is so important, it gives students insight into how they need to respond and treat a patient according to their feelings.

In addition, this also helps the nursing students to recognize some personal problems that they may have dealt with in the past. Maybe the students have experienced death in the past and did not deal with it, and now they are learning how they can reconcile with it. Dr. Martin says that “journaling is really important for gathering insight. It’s not professional writing, but it has to be truth. It has to be written so that truly you do dig down deep into your soul to see how do I feel about this stuff?” From this, students will be able to have a better understanding of their feelings.

The State University of New York – Empire State College Nursing program did and article and gave examples of teaching critical thinking using reflective journaling. The purpose of journaling is to critically think about the skills that students have learned. The steps to do this include reflecting on what was learned throughout a week of clinicals. Then to write about what was learned and experienced. Last, write about thoughts and feelings. These journals will give students a time to reflect on “understandings and coping strategies that were new or shifted perception or worked when they were used or not.” Journaling is both a way to express feelings and reflect on what students learned.

**Data Findings- Research**

Writing is an important aspect of nursing through documentation and journaling; however, without research, there would be nothing to support the writing. Research is an important component of writing in the nursing program because it teaches students where the answers come from and how supports up the learning. The purpose of research in the nursing field, in general, is to find new innovative ways for patient care. Dr. Martin says that “it’s important to move our profession forward through research, and disseminating that research, and participating in new knowledge development.” Not only does research back up the writing, but research projects that include a lot of writing will be a big component of the nursing program. In the senior year of the nursing program, students will conduct their own research and write about it on their own. It is a way for students to formulate their own answers and then use evidence to support their hypothesis. Nursing students are also taught that they can find answers on how to improve the nursing practice on their own. The lower level nursing students are not doing research, rather they are using the research to back up the writing that is done in the classroom setting.

Learning about research in the nursing program is important to writing that will be done on the job. Dr. Martin reiterates the fact that research is the only way to improve our practice. To do this, research and writing about findings and presenting those findings is the only way to pass on the information to other nurses. This is why it is so important to learn about writing and research throughout the nursing program because this is how practices in the profession move forward.

**Data Findings- Formatting**

All forms of writing need some type of format and a tool that is used to write it. Technology is used very often in nursing so learning to format on the computer is ideal. The tools used to write in the nursing program consist of a word processor.

The steps taken to write a paper in the nursing program are summarized by Dr. Martin. She says that the first step in writing a paper in the nursing program is to jot down thoughts into an outline form. The next step is to develop the paper and work at in until there are several different drafts. The last thing to do is finalize it (V. Martin, personal communication, October 20, 2015). The idea is not to throw the paper together a couple of days before it is due, which most students do. The paper needs time to be perfected so that it is not sloppy. The thoughts need to be clear and well written. Grammar, sentence structure, and spelling are huge components of writing these papers. Students have to practice perfecting these skills because writing in the nursing field has to be accurate so that there is no misinterpretation.

There are also helpful places to aide students with formatting issues. This is not limited to just writing in the nursing program. Dr. Martin talks about how the Greenwood Library has helpful tools to help students format their paper correctly. The library provides various resources that student can use. The writing center helps students with formatting problems while also helping them “to go over grammar, sentence structure, and help [them] to formulate thoughts and good paragraphs.” Through the help of professors and librarians, student nurses begin to identify who they believe to be a literary sponsor and who has influenced and helped them the most to become literate in the nursing field. This is why it is so important to find help when writing papers.

In terms of the type of words that are used to format these papers, as said earlier, the writing needs to include the medical lingo. The purpose of this is to prepare students for writing in the field. The students need to get used to the professional language that needs to be included in writing.

Plagiarism and A.P.A. format are the most important things that need to be considered when formatting a paper. In terms of plagiarism, Dr. Martin says that students need to take the time to “synthesize [their] thoughts, [so] that you don’t plagiarize someone else’s work.” A.P.A format is very important in nursing. Nursing hold tight to this format because all journals and research articles are written in this format so it is very important for students to learn how to write in A.P.A.

**Discussion**

My data suggests that, as reiterated earlier, writing in nursing is very important. A patient’s life is on the line and documentation and care plans are critical so that nurses can give the right care. It surprised me how much writing was involved in the nursing program and in the nursing field in general. It is not just about care plans, there are many other writing components that prepare a young nurse for writing on the job. The data that was in my Literature Review was helpful while connecting my research together because I had a better understanding of the nursing discourse community. The outliers that I discovered include that students struggle with writing throughout all majors, not just in the nursing program. Nursing professors, and I am sure all other professors in any major, believe that students are not entering college as strong writers because what students were taught in high school does not apply to university writing. Students who come into college are not necessarily bad writers, they were just taught to write a specific way, to the high school discourse community, rather than the university discourse community. There needs to be a correlation between the writing that is taught in high school and the writing in college so that not only nursing students but students in all majors will be prepared for university writing.

**Implications**

Students in the nursing program should have a certain outlook on what writing in the nursing major is. Future students in the nursing major should know that nurses do write. Writing in the nursing field is not all about documenting patient care or writing on a certain disease, but writing may include journaling, research, and care plans that are essential to one’s grade. For the older students such as juniors and seniors, writing is very important to nursing. Students should not wait until the last minute to do their work because they need a lot of time to perfect their writing which they can bring to the writing center to help with grammar and spelling errors. Professors encourage students to use those resources, especially for higher level writing in the program. Professors should realize that students often do not understand how important writing is for nursing. I know that before I conducted my research, I did not think nurses wrote at all. Professors need to teach students how to write, but also why it is so important to the nursing field. I have learned that writing is not to fit a rubric, rather college writing is more about a student’s influence on a paper and how they go about creating questions and proposing research methods to collect the right data. I have also learned that there are more ways to collect data than just looking it up online. Through interviewing and coding the data, I have learned how to conduct research in a different and more efficient way, which will help me throughout my time in the nursing program.

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