

# Implementing a Writing Course in an Online RN-BSN Program

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*Scholarly writing is an essential skill for nurses to communicate new research and evidence. Written communication directly relates to patient safety and quality of care. However, few online RN-BSN programs integrate writing instruction into their curricula. Nurses traditionally learn how to write from instructor feedback and often not until midway into their baccalaureate education. Innovative strategies are needed to help nurses apply critical thinking skills to writing. The authors discuss a collaborative project between nursing faculty and technical communication faculty to develop and implement a writing course that is 1 of the 1st courses the students take in the online RN-BSN program.*

The Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice state that clear and effective communication is a baccalaureate nurse competency essential to practice high-quality and safe patient care.<sup>1</sup> Baccalaureate nurses must be prepared to use written, verbal, nonverbal, and emerging technology methods to communicate effectively.<sup>1</sup> Formal writing is important to the nursing discipline as it allows nurses to participate more fully in academic discourse<sup>2</sup> where evidence-based practice is the cornerstone of nursing practice. Scholarly writing skills are important to disseminate nursing knowledge to the broader nursing community.<sup>3</sup> While traditional baccalaureate nursing (BSN) programs have reported that academic writing (formal and scholarly) is not always taught or emphasized,<sup>4,5</sup> RN-BSN programs report that students have a limited knowledge of professional opportunities for scholarship beyond the role of the staff nurse.<sup>6</sup> Researchers highlight the importance of writing/critical thinking skills to patient safety and quality healthcare<sup>1,2,4,7</sup>; yet, evidence is lacking on the extent to which baccalaureate nursing programs are changing to meet the need for developing students' writing and critical thinking skills beyond reliance on English courses.<sup>8</sup>

## Writing Courses in Nursing Curricula

In the last decade, writing in nursing curricula has received greater attention as more traditional baccalaureate nursing

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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**DOI:** 10.1097/01.NNE.0000437362.73347.5c

programs have included specific writing courses into their curriculum. While some improvement in writing skills has been shown in traditional or BSN programs delivered in a classroom setting, few studies have demonstrated the efficacy of writing course/programs in online RN-BSN programs.

In one 8-week online, RN-BSN program, a writing-intensive research course is offered as the 3rd course after 2 others, one of which is a professional nursing course.<sup>9</sup> In the writing course, faculty guide students through the process of professional writing by providing feedback at each stage of the research process. In another baccalaureate nursing program for postregistration nurses, faculty implemented a course (20-hour online learning module) with the intent to improve student information literacy and academic writing competencies as well as skills for reviewing and critiquing using evidence-based practice.<sup>10</sup> The course called "Information Management" was one of the 1st courses in the 2-year program. A self-assessment of the students' information literacy and writing competencies showed substantial improvement over the course of the entire program, with the greatest improvement occurring immediately after taking the course. Interestingly, students who had previous experience with reading professional journals and accessing electronic databases had significantly higher levels of perceived competencies in information literacy skills on the pretest, yet after taking the course, their skills were equivalent to students who had no previous experience.<sup>10(p463)</sup>

Advances in technology have created opportunities for online nursing programs to use technologies in their writing courses. In a UK preregistration nursing program, students were enrolled in "E-Support4U," an online writing skills development support program that provides a scaffolding approach to academic writing.<sup>11</sup> In this program, students were exposed to various online learning technologies, such as wikis and blogs, used in a blended learning environment to engage learners in communication and the construction of

knowledge. Learning was demonstrated by reflective practice-based assignments threaded throughout the curriculum. While results showed that the online support improved writing skills, other issues such as information technology skill acquisition and access issues were a challenge.

In addition to the findings that support the need for writing courses in BSN programs, research suggests that incorporating such a course early in the nursing curriculum is beneficial to students as they continue to build on their writing abilities. In the postregistration nursing program at the University of Hong Kong, incorporating academic writing skills into an introductory information literacy course provided the students with a more comprehensive skill set and decreased concerns that many practicing nurses have on returning to school.<sup>10</sup> In their review of writing requirements for nursing programs in Canada, Andre and Graves<sup>8</sup> found that programs providing discipline-specific writing courses early in their curriculum allowed the students to develop the research and writing skills needed to succeed academically.

Trends suggest that interdepartmental collaboration also strengthens writing programs. McMillan and Raines<sup>12</sup> discuss direct collaboration with writing programs and campus writing services, with students required to meet with a Writing Center staff person as well as a librarian as part of their assignment preparation. Outcomes of the assignment demonstrated interdisciplinary collaboration with campus writing experts not only enhanced writing instruction but improved communication skills with both writing experts and students. Mandelco et al<sup>13</sup> also report direct collaboration with faculty from a university writing program attending nursing classes to assist the students in their writing assignments. Recognizing the value in such collaborative approaches, our RN-BSN program worked with faculty from the technical communication (TC) program to develop and implement the fully online, writing course discussed in this article.

## The Technical Writing Course In the Beginning

Arizona State University's (ASU's) College of Nursing and Health Innovation initiated its RN-BSN program in 1999. The program was delivered onsite in a traditional classroom setting. Cohort groups in the accelerated 12-month program were relatively small (10-25 students), allowing faculty multiple avenues for teaching writing skills, such as in-class activities, role modeling through course materials, oral and written feedback on papers, and informal hallway conversations. As the program grew, courses were gradually transitioned to a hybrid delivery model where greater emphasis was placed on written feedback, examples of exemplars on the course Web site, and grading rubrics. The hybrid delivery method also called for students to be more self-directed and accountable to learn and develop their writing skills. As enrollment increased, disparities in student writing skills became more apparent. Although it was not clear whether writing skills, or lack thereof, were linked to cohort groups or to other issues, attempts to improve writing skills through various strategies such as instructor feedback and rubrics failed. Faculty from the RN-BSN and TC programs began formative discussions on a new writing course, possible course content, and options for integrating the course into the RN-BSN

curriculum. The logistics for which department would house the course had to be determined.

By 2011, the RN-BSN program was 100% online, and the faculty were concerned that the student's writing skills were still not at the level all graduates of the program needed for successful career transformation and effectively working in teams to create a culture of safety and caring. The course was finalized, and the decision to have it housed in the TC program and taught by TC faculty was made. The 1st cohort of nursing students took this course in January 2011.

## Course Development

Collaboration between the TC faculty course developers and the nursing faculty relied on the TC faculty's expertise in writing theory and pedagogy while calling on RN-BSN faculty expertise in nursing to develop course goals. In particular, the nursing faculty wanted students to become proficient in lower-level writing skills such as grammar, mechanics, and paragraph and sentence structure; higher-order writing skills to summarize information effectively and synthesize information from the literature; and APA (*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*) format and citation. RN-BSN faculty also wanted students prepared to enter higher education programs and assume professional roles where discipline-specific writing skills would be required. At the same time, nursing faculty wanted students to develop effective writing and technology skills for the workplace, consistent with the baccalaureate essentials.

With these goals in mind, the TC faculty used an outcomes-based approach. The starting point for creating course outcomes was the Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement for 1st-year composition as it had been previously adapted for TC by the TC program.<sup>14</sup> Although the statement was originally developed for 1st-year writing courses, it was written with the intent that it would be adapted for other contexts such as disciplinary writing. Specific relevant outcomes from the statement were mapped to the nursing writing course using course goals as a guide. In this manner, the TC course developers were able to articulate how the course met disciplinary outcomes for writing (genre, rhetorical concepts, disciplinary conventions, and critical thinking).

The writing course focuses on effective communication practices for nurses with an emphasis on how to communicate professionally to various audiences using appropriate genres. The course emphasizes information and technology literacy to help students become proficient in the management of information using appropriate tools, finding and using sources, and using formatting styles and conventions (grammar and other mechanics). Course learning outcomes address these goals (Table 1). Each of the outcomes was mapped to weekly objectives with tasks, activities, and assignments.

## Course Design

Technical communication course developers designed the course using a term-long scenario with sequenced assignments. The scenario places students in a workplace role-playing situation in which they conduct research and write a variety of documents to different audiences. The sequenced assignments include multiple writing tasks that meet the communication needs for academic and workplace settings (Table 2). For example, during the research component of

### Table 1. Writing Course Learning Outcomes

At the completion of this course, students will be able to

- Identify, articulate, and focus on a defined purpose.
- Compose based on the needs of an identified audience.
- Use information, writing, and reading for inquiry learning, thinking, and communicating.
- Access and retrieve appropriate data and information from sources that vary in content, format, structure, and scope.
- Evaluate and synthesis appropriate data and information from sources that vary in content, format, structure.
- Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proofreading.
- Critique their own and others' work.
- Use standard tools for accessing and retrieving information.
- Use common formats for difference genres.
- Control surface features such as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- Apply legal and ethical uses of information.

the course, students complete a research log to demonstrate their search strategies (development of keywords, use of a variety of academic and nonacademic databases) and then complete an annotated bibliography to summarize, analyze, and explain how they will be used in upcoming writing tasks.

Although academic in nature as genres, the research log and annotated bibliography facilitate meeting the goals of learning how to research and analyze sources. However, because the purpose of the research and analysis is to deliver information for workplace audiences through a presentation and report, these academic-style assignments facilitate students' learning so that they come to recognize that conducting good research and analysis is not simply an academic exercise; it is part of evidence-based practice applicable in the workplace. Other assignments in the scenario require students to write workplace-style genres including a proposal to a supervisor, a presentation to a general (patient or community) audience, and a report to other nurses. The proposal and presentation are examples of how the student "communicates issues concerning healthcare delivery to decision makers in healthcare organizations," which is an ACCN Essential.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to addressing both academic and workplace research and writing outcomes, the assignments allows students to interact with content in a discipline-related way that fosters practice-related critical thinking skills.<sup>15</sup> The scenario in use for 2013, for example, requires students to develop a patient education presentation in a series of steps from proposing a topic to a supervisor, researching the topic, creating a presentation, and reporting on the patient education project to other nurses. Because the scenario is based on the types of practice that they encounter in their workplaces (educating patients, for example), the research and writing tasks are more engaging and interesting. Allowing students to select their own topic to research and write about further engages students. Most choose a topic based on their experience as RNs, bringing a level of real-world problem solving and active learning to the course. Some students, for example, select topics that they believe are not well addressed in their workplace or that they believe they could know more about in order to better serve their patients.

The assignment sequencing also allows students to progress through a "natural" sequence in which they submit a

proposal on a topic, conduct and analyze research, and then use information found to present and report on the topic to different audiences. By requiring students to sequence through a project in this way, students understand that their research and writing are contextual so that they reference (cite) information sources that not only show the evidence for their claims, but that are also information sources that are relevant for the target audience. Through sequencing assignments, students grasp a more sophisticated understanding of writing in the workplace including methods to understand the purpose of their writing and the audience to whom it will be directed. The outcome is that students make good choices related to content, style, and other writing conventions based on the needs of their audience.

In addition to writing assignments described above, students engage in discussion board posts each week. Prompts for discussion and activities are used to facilitate learning and prepare students for the writing assignment due that week. For example, annotated bibliographies are due during week 4 of the course. For the discussion board prompt, students are asked to analyze and discuss the audiences for their upcoming assignments in which their research

### Table 2. Technical Writing Course Assignments (2013)

Week 1	Discussion board—similarities and differences in writing in school vs writing in the workplace: memo to course instructor—analyzing writing as a hallmark of professionalism for nurses;
Week 2	Discussion board—types of proposals: proposal to supervisor for a topic for a presentation as part of a patient education scenario (see below);
Week 3	Discussion board—information literacy and the frustrations of research: research log;
Week 4	Discussion board—analyze audiences for the presentation and report: annotated bibliography;
Week 5	Discussion board—what makes an effective presentation? Presentation to patients (on the topic proposed in the week 2 proposal);
Week 6	Draft and peer review of reports: report to nursing team on researching/preparing a patient education presentation;
Week 7	Reflective memo.

**Patient education scenario:** For this course, you will be asked to do a series of writing assignments based on the following. Your assignments will ask you to write to multiple audiences, primarily to audiences that you would write to in a typical workplace setting. Context: Congratulations, you have just been hired as a new nurse at ASU General Hospital! ASU General serves a diverse population in a densely populated urban area. This is your 1st job after graduation, and you're excited to get started on your career! Your hospital has begun an initiative to enhance patient education. As part of the effort, a Web site has been created to posteducational materials. The materials that have been most popular with patients are short presentations that are focused on a particular topic. As a result, ASU General has decided to add more topics. On your 1st day on the job, your supervisor assigns you the task of creating an educational presentation for patients. For weeks 2 through 6 of this course, you will work on the assignments you will need to propose, research, and create the presentation.



will be used (a presentation to patients, a report to other nurses). The goal for this discussion is multifaceted: (1) it facilitates engagement with the planning stage of the writing process through an analysis of the purpose and audience of upcoming assignments; (2) it provides instructors the opportunity to give students feedback on their planning and preparation before they begin composing; and (3) because one of the requirements of the annotated bibliography asks students to assess their sources and explain how they will be useful (or not) in upcoming assignments, the discussion board work helps them to understand the context prior to completing the bibliography.

Students receive feedback in 2 ways. Instructors grade and provide feedback on discussion board postings and assignments so that students can track their progress and use feedback to improve on upcoming assignments. Grades and feedback for assignments are based on a rubric derived from outcomes. In addition, students engage in peer review of drafts for the report assignment using a guide to help them read and review each other's work. Using the reviews they receive, students are then able to revise their report before submission for grading.

## Course Management

Both the RN-BSN program and the TC program are part of ASU Online, a division of the university that manages and delivers online degree programs. All courses delivered through ASU Online are 3-credit, 7.5-week courses. The writing course is taught in multiple sections each term; enrollment for each section is capped at 30 students. To ensure consistency in course delivery, the syllabus and assignments are standardized across all sections. A full-time faculty member from the TC program serves as the course lead, with all the other sections taught by part-time faculty associates, all of whom are experienced writing instructors in the TC program. The lead course faculty is responsible for developing the course scenario and assignments as well as the template shell in the ASU's online learning management platform. The template shell is copied for each individual section each term so that all instructors work from the same foundation. The lead course faculty also coordinates with the faculty associates throughout each term to address problems and to facilitate communication with the nursing program.

## Progress and Continuing Challenges

### The Course

The writing course is now in its 3rd year, and some successes and continued challenges are evident. Technical communication and RN-BSN faculty have met frequently to discuss the course and how well the students are applying their writing and communication skills in other nursing courses. The use of a workplace-style role-playing scenario with sequenced assignments has been successful as evidenced by student feedback, although it has also produced some challenges with attempting to balance academic versus workplace writing. Most of these issues are related to writing conventions such as formatting and have been addressed through clarifications in course materials to help students learn to make judgments about when to use academic conventions and when to use workplace conventions.

As example, the use of APA style has been a source of confusion for students as they grapple with understanding the purpose and use of a disciplinary style. Because they are enrolled in a college-level writing course in a degree program that emphasizes the use of APA style, students naturally assume that it should be used for all of their writing; however, it is not necessarily appropriate for workplace documents. Our strategy was to add more explanatory and instructional material to the course site to explain to students that for the purposes of the writing, APA style is used for references and citations, but for other style-related issues, workplace conventions are appropriate. Technical communication faculty who teach the course have attempted to help students understand the purpose of using style both for attribution and for disciplinary conventions of writing. RN-BSN faculty, in their own courses, have also added explanations to inform students that their disciplinary content courses will emphasize APA style more specifically than the writing course.

The importance of students' understanding how writing and communication contribute to professionalism is a goal of the course, one that has been achieved. Early on, students write a reflective memo on why writing/communication is a "hallmark of the nursing professional". This assignment has proven to be popular with both students and nursing faculty according to student and faculty feedback. We have come to realize that it sets the tone for the course. Anecdotally, we have learned that this early reflection on professionalism helps students who are simultaneously enrolled in NUR391: Professional Nursing Theory (the degree program's foundations course) to make connections in their learning between different courses in the degree program.

Other challenges remain. Enrollment for the RN-BSN program has increased exponentially in 3 years, resulting in an increasing number of sections for the writing course each term. Discussion is underway to find ways to ensure that enough instructors are available to be assigned to the course. In addition, 3 years has provided faculty with ample anecdotal evidence that the course has been successful as an initial step in helping students to learn effective writing skills. A more formal assessment strategy is currently under development, including a longitudinal assessment using student assignments in each course of the RN-BSN curriculum.

## Collaboration on Course Design

Clear, concise, and well-expressed teamwork and collaboration through open communication are integral to the nursing profession. This is equally true of the writing discipline and has facilitated ongoing collaboration and coordination between TC and RN-BSN faculty as we review course content and student outcomes each year.

The development of RN-BSN faculty writing pedagogy was an unexpected outcome of the interdepartmental collaboration. Expectations from the RN-BSN faculty that students are proficient in mechanics, style, and critical thinking on course completion are under continual discussion. Our discussions revolve around how to meet overall programmatic goals for improving student writing and the recognition that the course is 1 step in writing improvement but that what students learn must be reinforced and built on in other courses. As the collaboration continues, both TC and RN-BSN faculty concur that writing is a process and a key component

of communication, and refining this skill will take more than a single course.

## Conclusion

Collaboration among TC and RN-BSN faculty in the development and implementation of the writing course has been an enriching and educational experience. Learning to write is demonstrably a process of learning how ideas are shaped, understood, and contextually applied based on the purpose and the audience. Nursing students cannot be expected to master this process without formal instruction and opportunities for practice.<sup>3</sup> Future collaboration will not only enhance the current writing course but ensure that professional writing is threaded throughout the RN-BSN program so that students build on the knowledge and experience gained from the course.

Implications for nurse educators are clear. Students must be prepared with the skills necessary to write and communicate effectively to succeed both academically and in their career.<sup>1</sup> Patient safety, collaboration, and teamwork depend on it. Nurse educators have an obligation to ensure that the development of writing skills is an integral part of every nursing curriculum.<sup>5</sup> Greater emphasis on the role of scholarship in nursing, expectations for evidence-based practice, and increased attention to the role of writing in learning and developing a reflective professional practice must be an educational priority.<sup>8</sup> The writing course for the RN-BSN program at ASU is an example of an innovative educational approach to meet the demands for baccalaureate nursing students with high competencies in writing and communication.

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