

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Reading and writing in nursing education

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ABSTRACT

**Background and objective:** Faculty identified the need for a gateway writing course (GWC) to prepare nurses for the writing requirements in the RN-to-BSN Completion (RNC) curriculum. This article describes the rationale for and development of a discipline-specific GWC developed for a RNC curriculum and reports research of student perspectives about the course and its effectiveness in preparing them to write in their nursing courses.

**Methods:** The mixed method study included pre- and post-course surveys of self-efficacy in reading, writing, and research skills. Focus groups and interviews were used to identify readiness for and success in meeting curricular expectations for students who enrolled in the GWC and those who did not.

**Results:** Statistically significant improvement occurred in all self-efficacy measures (reading:  $p \leq .005$ , writing:  $p \leq .01$ , accessing articles:  $p \leq .005$ ) from the beginning to the end of the GWC. Focus groups and interviews revealed five themes indicating improved readiness in students completing the GWC. Themes included perceptions of readiness, awareness, and preparedness for nursing courses; perceptions of confidence, mastery, efficiency, and self-sufficiency; enhanced knowledge of and ability to navigate academic processes and resources; mastery of APA; and evidence of a reflective mindset and an evolving sense of professional identity.

**Conclusions:** Students felt prepared for the RNC program after completing the GWC, and this sense of preparedness persisted throughout the program. The skills learned in the GWC allowed students to focus on understanding the professional concepts in nursing.

**Key Words:** Nursing education, Nursing curriculum, BSN completion program readiness, Writing

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on writing in nursing education has established the importance of including writing in the curriculum. However, nurse educators often feel unprepared to teach writing in addition to nursing content. Additionally, nursing students have reported feeling underprepared in writing.<sup>[1]</sup> Gazza and Hunker<sup>[2]</sup> identified scholarly writing deficiencies in post-licensure nursing students that required faculty to address a multitude of writing skills. To improve writer develop-

ment, they proposed scaffolding within and across courses in the nursing curriculum and also in courses that support the nursing curriculum. The authors also addressed the need for faculty development to support successful scaffolding.

Nursing students' writing may be perceived, both by faculty and by students, as one of the most problematic aspects of their education, underscoring the importance of paying greater attention to the preparation of nursing students for the

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writing expectations in their courses as well as in the profession. The implications of not addressing this need in nursing curricula include a reduced ability on the parts of practicing nurses to participate fully in evidence-based practice (EBP). In other words, difficulty with academic writing and, by extension, synthesis and critical thinking may hamper nurses' abilities to engage productively in EBP and to be successful as professionals.<sup>[3,4]</sup>

Additionally, participation in healthcare transformation requires nurses to communicate their expertise and scope of practice.<sup>[5]</sup> Accrediting organizations stress professionalization in nursing through their missions and graduate outcome competencies.<sup>[6]</sup> The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) proposes outcomes that prepare registered nurses (RNs) to practice as providers and managers in complex healthcare systems. According to the AACN, effective communication and collaboration are needed for optimal patient care. Nurses need communication skills for EBP, which requires critical thinking, critical reflection, and clinical judgment for appropriate analysis and synthesis of research.<sup>[7]</sup> An ability to write well also supports the dissemination of information and decisions in EBP. Further, the mission and objectives for the National League for Nursing (NLN) emphasize preparation of a nursing workforce that contributes to health care quality and safety.

Increasingly, hospitals are seeking and attaining distinction for high-quality nursing by meeting the American Nurses Credentialing Commission (ANCC) standards for quality patient care, nursing excellence, and innovations in nursing practice. The trend of hospitals toward Magnet Status has increased the need for baccalaureate-prepared nurses, especially in leadership positions.<sup>[8]</sup> Magnet Status requires BSN preparation for all nurse leaders and those who influence clinical nursing practice. Magnet Recognition hospitals hold distinction for excellence through professional practice, delivery of high quality nursing, and dissemination of best nursing practices. The IOM Future of Nursing report<sup>[7]</sup> called for an increase in BSN-prepared nurses from 50% to 80% by 2020. However, there remain numerous points of entry for RN licensure, and these have different curricular requirements and emphases. Nurses entering practice with an associate's degree typically are prepared in a manner that focuses primarily on technical aspects of patient care, making instruction in and support for writing and critical thinking in BSN completion programs even more imperative.

## 1.1 Background

### 1.1.1 Seeds of nursing-writing collaborations

Nursing faculty at a comprehensive Midwestern university were finding that students who had graduated from asso-

ciate's degree programs, which may not have required much writing, were underprepared for the writing requirements in the RNC program. In 2011, the director of the University Writing Center and Writing Across the Curriculum (UWC/WAC) (author) reached out to the program's administration. Conversations focused on developing a systematic approach to teaching writing in the RNC program. These conversations were consistent with a larger educational trend to consider the teaching of disciplinary writing—and reading—in professional education.<sup>[9,10]</sup> What was meaningful from our standpoint was that these conversations were a response both to the larger professional context (the trend toward increasing the numbers of baccalaureate-prepared nurses) as well as to the local context at the university and in the RNC program. This collaboration brought these contexts together while highlighting ways writing centers and WAC programs can support writing within professional disciplines.

The collaboration entailed meetings led by the Associate Dean of the College of Health and Human Services that included the director of UWC/WAC and School of Nursing (SON) faculty. They also included the directors of SON and First-Year Writing and SON writing consultants. The RNC students were the focus of these conversations. The faculty felt that RNC students needed additional writing instruction and support. They also reported that the students themselves had expressed concerns about their preparation for writing in the program.

The writing specialists used the meetings to learn about the culture of the nursing program. Nursing faculty shared syllabi and assignments. From these, the writing specialists identified the writing skills faculty were expecting. To situate nursing writing support in the discipline, the writing specialists also familiarized themselves with common nursing genres and asked nursing faculty what they value in student writing. These efforts demonstrated a valuing of the expertise of each discipline and led to the development of a sample syllabus for a nursing reading and writing course, the initial version of which was piloted fall 2011 as an elective, two-credit, 7.5-week, hybrid class. Reading and Writing in Nursing Studies (IHHS 200) initially addressed academic and professional writing and was taught by writing instructors. During that first semester, the instructors discovered that students needed instruction primarily in academic writing to prepare them for the writing in the program. The course was revised in response to this realization.

The instructors also realized that a two-credit, 7.5-week format was insufficient. The course was modified to a 10-week format to provide additional time for assignments and for instructor—and student—feedback. However, this timeframe

still was not sufficient, so in 2013, IHHS 200 became a three-credit-hour class, and it now is required for all students during their initial semester in the RNC program. The course currently is offered in a hybrid format as well as in a fully online format designed for an accelerated, online completion curriculum.

### **1.1.2 Underlying theory and components (and challenges) of discipline-based writing**

In nursing education, several trends support the need for a writing class in RNC programs. One common challenge in these programs is helping students understand the value for and relationship of academic assignments to their professional practice. A dedicated writing class can cultivate this understanding through its explicit focus on academic writing and its roles in nursing practice. There also has been a call for and evidence of the need for BSN-prepared nurses to improve performance and patient outcomes.<sup>[11,12]</sup> Rubenfeld and Scheffer's<sup>[13]</sup> work demonstrates the importance of critical thinking in nursing and supports the connections between critical thinking and writing. Different points of entry for RN licensure, along with the emphasis on obtaining a BSN for advancement,<sup>[7,12]</sup> further support the need for students to obtain these higher-order skills. Some programs have embedded both academic writing and information literacy into nursing courses.<sup>[14–16]</sup> Our approach, upon considering the concerns of nursing faculty and the difficulties that the RNC students reported having in their course work, was to offer a dedicated gateway writing class to help students transition into a curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking and evidence-based practice and that has stringent expectations for both academic writing and information literacy.

Previous studies of nursing students' writing<sup>[17,18]</sup> suggest that nursing students do not transition easily between workplace and school writing. This difficulty is attributed to the different requirements of the two types of writing. According to Meyer and Land,<sup>[10]</sup> students experience discomfort as they learn the threshold concepts of disciplines. These are the ways of thinking and understanding in those disciplines that ultimately change how students view and participate in a discipline. This explains why RNC students may experience discomfort and perceive contradictions between workplace and academic writing. At the same time, they may feel anxious about studying academic writing because the process of learning about writing in a classroom generally differs from their previous experiences of learning to write in the workplace. In a seminal article on genre, Russell,<sup>[19]</sup> claims that students experience "deep difficulties in learning to write new genres because there is clearly more at stake than right and wrong task representations" (p. 511). Our theoretical and research-based understandings of these kinds of anx-

eties and challenges contributed to the design of the writing course.

In response to Russell and other scholars who have discussed the challenges students face when adapting writing knowledge for new contexts, writing researchers have developed teaching practices that help students transfer rhetorical knowledge from one context to another. In a study of interdisciplinary writing instruction, Nowacek<sup>[20]</sup> claims reflective assignments help students understand "their rhetorical situation as agents—seeking to transfer not only their writing-related knowledge but other knowledge, ways of knowing, identities, and goals as well" (p. 133). Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak<sup>[21]</sup> describe a curriculum designed to support knowledge transfer that includes explicit teaching along with opportunities for practice. These scholars also recommend reflective assignments that help students connect prior knowledge with new learning, helping them relate key concepts to larger frameworks.

Scholars also address the dissonance and uncertainty learners experience when they encounter new academic and professional contexts. Sittler<sup>[18]</sup> suggests that nursing students develop a "hybrid" literacy, and research from the Council of Writing Program Administrators<sup>[22]</sup> recommends that writing courses support students' development of multiple literacies, in part by providing students with opportunities to write for new audiences and purposes. The development of these additional literacies may be particularly complex for students who are already working in their professional fields and who have established identities within nursing, like many students in RNC programs.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1 Course assessment/research design**

Evaluation and assessment instruments were developed to determine student perceptions of their own reading, writing, and research skills both prior to and after completing the writing course and the RNC curriculum. The developers were interested in examining the impact of the course on students' academic experience in the RNC program. Both qualitative (focus group) and quantitative (questionnaire) assessments were used in the evaluation. Approval for the study was received by the university human subjects review committee.

A pretest-posttest design was used to measure change in student self-assessment at the beginning and end of the writing course. Because this course was designed as a pilot to meet a specific need in the RNC program, the nursing and writing faculty developed questionnaires for the students. The questionnaire items were written to reflect the course objectives and assignments. These questionnaires gave stu-

dents a means for assessing their skills and confidence in academic reading and writing more generally as well as in reading and writing within the profession of nursing. They also addressed students' skills with information literacy and APA style, and they allowed students to self-disclose their perceived strengths and challenges in specific areas (questionnaire available on request). The research question asked in this study was, Did the writing course change, and in what ways, students' self-rated abilities in the areas of reading, writing, and information literacy in nursing?

A phenomenological approach was used to assess students' experiences and their perceptions of their skills with reading, writing, and information literacy at the end of the RNC program. Interviews and focus groups were carried out to obtain additional information about students' experiences with and the impact of the writing course. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand, from the students' perspectives, their experience with and attitudes about writing based on whether they had taken the course or not. A descriptive phenomenological approach, as described by Edmund Husserl,<sup>[23]</sup> was used to analyze the meaning of the experience of taking or not taking the writing course and the subsequent experience in the RN- BSN curriculum.

From the perspective of phenomenology, each person participates in an experience both by affecting and being affected by their environment.<sup>[23]</sup> Bracketing the researcher's assumptions about a phenomenon is an important aspect of this approach to illuminate researcher bias and reduce its effect on study conclusions. Basic assumptions identified by the researchers prior to planning and hosting the focus groups were: a) Nurses prepared through an associate degree program may question the importance of writing and research in their professional lives because its emphasis may have been lacking in their curricula and in their workplaces, b) within the RN-BSN curriculum, academic writing is an important component necessary for success, and c) the writing course would help the RN-BSN student understand the contribution of academic writing to the profession and assist in developing the skills necessary for the curriculum and for approaching the practice of nursing more professionally.

## 2.2 Quantitative approach—student questionnaire

### 2.2.1 Participants

Participants for the questionnaires were recruited at the beginning of the RNC program. The questionnaire results are from students enrolled in IHHS 200 over two semesters who were invited at the start of the program to complete questionnaires at the beginning and end of the 15-week writing course. No incentive was offered for participation. Thirty-one students consented with 19 students providing data on

both questionnaires. The students completing both questionnaires were predominately female (94.4%), ages from 18 to 50, with 84.2% (16) between the ages of 30 and 50, and with 73.7% (14) working in direct patient care. Ten (55.6%) were White and 15 (83.3%) were not Hispanic or Latino. Demographic data are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic data

Demographic Category (n)	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex (18)</b>		
Female	17	94.4%
Male	1	5.6%
<b>Age Category (19)</b>		
18-23	1	5.3%
24-29	2	10.5%
30-35	5	26.3%
36-40	4	21.1%
41-45	3	15.8%
45-50	4	21.1%
<b>Race (18)</b>		
White	10	55.6%
Black/African American	7	38.9%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	5.6%
<b>Ethnicity (18)</b>		
Hispanic or Latino	3	16.7%
Not Hispanic or Latino	15	83.3%
<b>Which best describes your current employment? (19)</b>		
Direct patient care	14	73.7%
Management/administration	1	5.3%
Research	1	5.3%
Not currently employed	3	15.8%

### 2.2.2 Sampling

Starting out, the questionnaire was administered at the beginning and end of the IHHS class as well as at the beginning, middle, and end of NURS 275 Essentials of Professional Nursing I, the first in a series of nursing courses that incorporate extensive writing. Since the writing course was initially optional for students, the continued use of the instrument in the first nursing course provided a control consisting of students who had not taken the writing class.

### 2.2.3 Measures

The questionnaire included nine items in which the students self-rated their abilities in academic and professional reading and writing. The self-ratings used a Likert Scale from 10 (extremely high) to 1 (low). For analysis, the nine items were subdivided into two different sub-scales with four items each (a reading sub-scale and a writing sub-scale based on the objectives for the course) and one item that was analyzed separately. The four items in the writing sub-scale included self ratings in overall writing abilities, nursing writing abilities, confidence level for writing in an academic setting as a student, and confidence level for writing in a

professional setting as a nurse. The four items in the reading sub-scale included self ratings in overall reading abilities, nursing reading abilities, confidence level for reading in an academic setting as a nurse, and confidence level for reading in a professional setting as a nurse. One item analyzed separately asked students to self-rate their ability to locate and access relevant nursing journal articles for papers and other assignments. Students in all sections of the writing courses received the same curriculum.

### 2.3 Qualitative approach—Interviews and focus groups

#### 2.3.1 Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four students and two faculty members. Two of the students had taken IHHS 200, and two elected not to take the writing course. Participants were recruited from sections of the writing and nursing courses. Of the two faculty, one was a faculty member in the SON who taught NURS 275, and the other was a lecturer in the English department who taught IHHS 200 and worked as a writing consultant for nursing students.

Participants for the focus groups were recruited from two cohort sites in the final semester of their nursing curriculum during the winter of 2014. All students in the cohorts were invited to participate. At one site, two students who had completed IHHS 200 participated, and six students participated who had not taken IHHS 200. At the other site, three students who had taken IHHS 200 participated, and four students participated who had not taken IHHS 200. Separate focus groups for those students who took the writing course and those who did not were scheduled to promote a more comfortable group process (focus group questions available on request).

#### 2.3.2 Questions and process

The questions for the focus groups varied based on whether students had taken the writing course. Those who had were asked how the writing course did and did not align with nursing faculty expectations for writing. They were also asked about the most beneficial aspects of the writing course and what had been valuable to them in their subsequent nursing course work. The third question addressed the applicability of the course content, the fourth addressed the role of reflection in their academic and professional work, and the fifth and final questions addressed their use of writing resources and consultants. The students who had not taken the writing class were asked six questions: how well prepared they were for the nursing faculty's expectations for writing; the alignment (or lack thereof) between the nursing faculty's and their own writing expectations; what they believed would have best prepared them for those expectations; why they did not take the writing class; the significance and role of reflection

in their academic and professional work; and their use of writing resources and consultations. Focus groups were facilitated by members of the research team who asked questions from a script to assure fidelity of the data. The researchers were familiar with the writing course and had provided writing assistance to students in the RN-BSN curriculum, which assisted them in asking clarifying questions.

Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. The facilitators also took notes during the sessions and all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Each facilitator reviewed the notes, independently, identifying themes that emerged. The final list of themes was achieved through consensus.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Questionnaire results

The beginning and end questionnaire results were compared. Questions in the subscales at both collection times were identical. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test revealed statistically significant improvement in self-efficacy scores from the beginning to the end of the course in the writing subscale and ability to access articles: Writing subscale  $p \leq .01$ , reading subscale  $p \leq .005$ , and ability to access journal articles  $p \leq .005$ . The median score on the writing subscale increased from the course beginning (Md = 25.0) to the end (Md = 27.0), the median score on the reading subscale increased from the course beginning (Md = 29.5) to the end (Md = 35.0), and the ability to access journal articles subscale increased from course beginning (Md = 7.0) to the end (Md = 8.0). The reliability of the reading subscale and writing subscale were measured using Cronbach's Alpha. At the pretest, Cronbach's Alpha was .91 for the writing subscale and .88 for the reading subscale. At posttest, Cronbach's Alpha was .90 for the writing subscale and .91 for the reading subscale.

### 3.2 Focus group and interview results

The trends in the questionnaire data were supported by the interviews and focus groups. Several shared themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups, and these support the improved self-efficacy findings from the questionnaires for those who took the course. They include

- Perceptions of readiness, awareness, and preparedness for the nursing courses;
- Perceptions of confidence, mastery, efficiency, and self-sufficiency;
- Enhanced knowledge of and ability to navigate academic processes and resources;
- Mastery of APA;

- Evidence of a reflective mindset and an evolving sense of professional identity.

### **3.2.1 Readiness, awareness of, and preparedness for nursing course expectations**

In the interviews, the students who completed the writing class emphasized that the course prepared them for the nursing program: “I think what we did in the writing class is exactly what our nursing instructors expected of us. . . All the papers we went through in that short amount of time in the writing class, we’re doing all of those papers in our nursing classes—that style of writing—lit reviews. . . everything” (L, personal communication, 2 April 2014). Another student said, “I haven’t run into anything in this program that wasn’t touched upon, or that I did not have an idea about” (D, personal communication, 2 April 2014). The focus group students who had taken the course also reported improvements in their reading and writing skills. Additionally, all students who took the writing course self-assessed higher at the end of the course on five of nine skills deemed important for success in the program. They shared their perceptions of what they gained from the course: “I feel like it just prepared us to have a running start. Once we hit the door, we could take our assignment, take our rubric, and get our paper done, while other people were still wondering if they were doing it right” (J1, personal communication, 21 April 2014). S1 said it provided a “level of comfort going into the program” (personal communication, 17 March 2012). She said she learned more than she expected and “use[d] what I’ve learned, or what I re-learned. . . and applied that to my work,” earning A’s on all her subsequent nursing papers.

In contrast, students who did not take the writing class reported that faculty expectations seemed idiosyncratic: “I think some expected us to be either at a higher level or at a lower level. The expectations were totally inconsistent” (C, personal communication, 22 April 2014). C added that some instructors graded harder on APA than others. S reported “A lot of inconsistency in the evaluation process” (personal communication, 22 April 2014). And M said faculty expectations were “Extremely subjective based on the instructor we had” (personal communication, 22 April 2014). These students also focused primarily on the mechanical aspects of writing.

### **3.2.2 Confidence, mastery, efficiency, and self-sufficiency**

The interviews and focus groups also produced evidence of improved confidence. There were connections between confidence, readiness, and success. S2 said the course helped her feel “confident, very confident actually, going into NURS 275, just knowing how to construct a paper and knowing what the expectations are as far as organizing it and what

needs to be in the paper as far as a rubric goes” (personal communication, 9 April 2012). J2 said, “I felt very—maybe not very—but at least confident in our assignments. It did prepare us” and “not only in writing assignments, but even [in] how to do the research” (personal communication, 21 April 2014). This student also acknowledged being more confident in her writing for other classes.

In discussing goals for the writing course, F1 said, “I would hope that they [students] would gain more confidence coming into the nursing program; that they would also feel more successful so that the idea of writing didn’t get in the way of the assignment, and that they would, in fact, have more success” (personal communication, 10 May 2012). The course provided strategies for being successful, and several students credited their success in the program to the class: “Confidence is not usually my strong point in any area, but [in] writing, I was great. I felt pretty good. . .; I felt like if I had the rubric in front of me, I could figure it out. If I spent enough time reading it over again I could just figure it out” (J1, personal communication, 21 April 2014). Students who did not take the writing class also acknowledged feeling confident; however, some said their confidence was not well founded: “I really did have more confidence in myself than I should have” (personal communication, 2 April 2014).

### **3.2.3 Enhanced knowledge of and ability to navigate academic processes and resources**

In discussing their experiences in the writing course, the students also displayed their knowledge of writing strategies and of resources for their writing. For example, some students described adjusting to the practices involved in writing in academic contexts: “When [the professor] taught us about learning to link. . . articles, and how to see similarities and differences between things, like synthesis, that’s what helped me the most. I was never told or asked to think about things in this manner” (L, personal communication, 2 April 2014). In the focus groups, the students discussed strategies they learned for reading assignment rubrics, rethinking their perceptions of and approaches to revision, and expanding their research practices: “For me it’s using the databases because I had never done research before. . . So just being familiar and knowing how to get that information has been very beneficial” (D, personal communication, 2 April 2014). One student (S1) described using her instructor’s rubric as a guide for constructing her paper and using it, again, toward the end of her writing process to be sure she had met all the requirements.

Students also discussed learning about writing resources. S2 described developing a writing process that now included returning to online reference materials from the class (e.g.,

Purdue OWL) along with meeting with writing tutors. D talked about learning “How to use the library, ... the writing center, getting experience using the databases, using the keywords,” and said, “all that stuff that [the class] taught us was very helpful once we got in[to] the nursing program” (personal communication, 2 April 2014). The students also appreciated the instruction they received on locating sources and carrying out research. Their acknowledgement of these gains demonstrates that they cultivated the kinds of skills genre scholars have categorized as “new ways of learning,” which very likely helped them adapt to academic writing and contributed to their feeling confident and ready (p. 419).<sup>[24]</sup> Those students who did not take the writing class also said they learned about resources, but primarily from each other: “We learned as we went, we learned from each other ... the...resources” (C, personal communication, 22 April 2014).

### 3.2.4 *Mastery of APA and other writing conventions*

Another common theme was the learning of APA style. APA is emphasized in the RNC program, and students had reported struggling with commas and periods, uses of title and sentence case, use of ampersand, and so on. Because of these concerns, the writing class included APA, and students started to talk in more sophisticated ways about APA and about roles conventions play in disciplinary thinking and academic writing. Sitrler<sup>[18]</sup> and Thorpe and Kulig<sup>[25]</sup> suggest that RN-BSN students face difficulties with academic writing because of differences between the conventions of academic and professional writing. The writing course’s approach to APA appeared to help clarify these differences in a manner that was meaningful to students.

Students in the focus groups also discussed the helpfulness of the lessons on APA: “I had no experience with APA formatting at all. Before that, it had been 15 years since I’d been in school. We didn’t do any of that then, so it was all completely new to me and overwhelming...” (J3, personal communication, 2 April 2014). Like J3, most said they had had little or no prior exposure to APA. They also addressed how effectively it was taught:

And I think the way that...she explained what APA ... made it make sense and made it seem worthy of learning for a lot of other things. She explained it as a convention, which I never really thought of that word before, but she said a convention is a basic style or a basic expected way of doing things. (J1, personal communication, 21 April 2014)

J1 also talked about how APA continued to pose challenges for her peers who had not taken the class: “What I noticed was that a lot of the other students seemed really

overwhelmed when they started with the APA” (personal communication, 21 April 2014). The focus on APA as a convention led to a deeper understanding and appreciation of its importance and role. Instead of viewing APA as just a set of rules, she viewed it instead as an aid to writing: “The little tips and tricks for things like save the period for the end after you are done with the parentheses—that just always stuck in my head. And APA likes action words—if you can arrange your sentence in a way that’s more action-oriented instead of being passive.... it just seems like a stronger paper.”

### 3.2.5 *Evidence of a reflective mindset and a developing professional identity*

Scholars in composition have found that writing helps students engage in their learning and contributes to identity formation.<sup>[26-28]</sup> Sommers and Saltz found that the most successful student writers accept their status as “novices,” which could be difficult for RNC students since they already are working in the field. In the past, Ellenbecker<sup>[12]</sup> described differences in how nursing students are socialized into the profession, with ADNs being socialized as technicians and BSNs as leaders. Scholars in nursing also suggest that activities like reflective writing may help students make connections between theory and practice.<sup>[29]</sup>

The interview questions relating to reflection were focused on how students used their knowledge of workplace writing as a resource while studying academic writing. Students’ descriptions highlighted the differences they noticed between these two kinds of writing. For example, writing at work often is connected with “doing”: Charting and patient documentation are records of both the patient’s condition and what the nurse has done. S1 said,

There is an old adage in nursing, and it’s very, very true. I live by the rule. “If you do not document it, it did not happen.” Anything that a nurse does, even a discussion with a patient over the telephone—for example, with case management—or face-to-face visits, performing care, administering meds, you name it, [it needs to be documented]. (personal communication, 17 March 2012)

In a study of academic writing, Johnson et al.<sup>[30]</sup> say nurses who write patient documentation may “chart observations and write in terse phrases, [a] decided contrast to their academic assignments, where faculty anticipate developed sentences, paragraphs and thoughts” (p. 168).

Students also demonstrated a reflective mindset when they explained how they had adapted strategies they learned in the course for the writing they were doing in their workplaces.

The students who participated in the focus group likewise discussed the value of reflection, both in academic and in workplace contexts. D said, “I think reflection helps in our professional life because it helps with critical thinking skills and that’s the thing that nurses need to do. It just makes you think more about what you do as a professional” (personal communication, 2 April 2014). The students characterized reflection as a tool for critical thinking, for applying what they read and researched, and for making connections to their lived experience:

I think I’ve been forced, with writing the papers, to look at my professional practice and take experiences and put them into my papers because you can’t just research. You have to . . . make it connect to real life. A lot of our assignments have been “pick something that matters to you,” or “pick something that’s a problem on your unit. . . .” (L, personal communication, 2 April 2014)

Some of the students noted differences in reflection between BSN-prepared nurses and those without a bachelor’s degree: “I’ve found myself at work saying, ‘I learned at school. . . .’ or ‘I read in this article. . . .’ or ‘I looked up this. . . .’ But other nurses who aren’t bachelor’s-degree [prepared] or haven’t recently been in school, they don’t practice that way. They tend to go to what we already know instead of looking at new things” (L, personal communication, 2 April 2014). Reflection played a significant role in these students’ professional and academic practices. J2 acknowledged that, “At first, I probably would have said not too significant, but I find myself reflecting a lot, in both. I’m always thinking about how I could have done things differently at work. And in school work, how I could have done things differently. . . . I’m constantly rotating through my head the day’s events” (personal communication, 21 April 2014). Similarly, M said,

I reflect in my own way every time I work as far as my interactions with the staff and with the patients. . . . The only way you can improve yourself is if you reflect on it and figure out, “Did that interaction go well?” If it didn’t, how do you change it? Or vice versa—what was good about that interaction that you could then use to build on something else? (personal communication, 22 April 2014)

The value of reflection also was acknowledged by students who had not taken the writing class: This was a skill valued by both cohorts. In a few cases, conceptions of reflection

seemed more connected to external validation than to the intrinsic benefits of self-improvement and self-efficacy: “Just get the paper done and get a good grade” (R, personal communication, 2 April 2014). For most, however, reflection played a role in personal and professional growth and in self-efficacy, some of the deeper benefits of reflection: “I think as the semester progressed, I saw it become more valuable just because we were starting to evolve in our writing and progress to more in-depth thinking, and so I think that as that evolved, [so did] our reflection on why we’re doing what we’re doing” (J3, personal communication, 2 April 2014).

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Results of this research support an affirmative response to the question: “Did the writing course change, and in what ways, students’ self-rated abilities in the areas of reading, writing, and information literacy in nursing?” The results also provide descriptive data about the ways in which the writing course changed students’ abilities in these areas.

##### Lessons learned

The findings across the themes discussed previously speak to the value of the writing course in helping nursing students think more expansively about writing, genres, conventions, and reflection. Students in an RNC program are benefiting from an approach to writing instruction that emphasizes purpose, audience, and context in addition to conventions, strategies, and reflection. In interview and focus group responses, students described their growth in confidence and acknowledged their developing understanding of the differences between workplace and academic writing. They also displayed a reflective mindset—going beyond simply reciting conventions or rules to applying and adapting rhetorical strategies from one context to another. The reflective mindset supports the critical thinking required for nurses to assume leadership roles and supports the rationale behind the movement toward the BSN in the nursing profession.

There were many practical lessons in developing and piloting this course. One was that RNC students need exposure to and practice with academic writing. They also need time—to learn technology, to work on assignments, to obtain writing support, and to reflect on and apply what they are learning. It was clear from our assessments and research that students have numerous competing demands and different expectations about workload, program requirements, and instructor expectations. Students also came with different kinds and amounts of preparation. Some of the challenges students faced included competing commitments (both personal and professional), financial challenges, differing expectations about workload and difficulty, and writing anxiety. The

unique support provided in IHHS 200, which was designed deliberately to address academic writing in nursing, was essential to students' perceived readiness and success. This type of targeted and rhetorically focused writing instruction would not have been offered in the same manner by the nursing faculty. Whitehead<sup>[1]</sup> noted that nursing faculty are not prepared to provide this type of support. Collaborations, such as that between the School of Nursing and the UWC and WAC, become significant sites of shared learning and understanding.

While there were limitations to this research due to the small sample sizes, the course outcomes and student reports point to the success of the course in preparing students for their academic writing. We have described a systematic approach to developing a course that met the needs of students and faculty. Although the numbers were small, and we lacked systematic feedback from nursing faculty about changes in student readiness, we still saw significant changes in student self-assessments of their writing abilities and in their confidence from the beginning to the end of the course. Further, the focus group data was compelling: What the students said about the impact of the course and about their confidence in completing assignments, points to its success in preparing them for subsequent nursing course work and even for future professional practice.

As we look to future assessments, ideally, students could compile ePortfolios with all their writing. We could then sample and assess their writing at various stages of the curriculum, which would allow for assessing the vertical nature of the curriculum by monitoring student success and

persistence to graduation. We also would solicit faculty perspectives on students' strengths and challenges and on their development and growth as writers.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Educating Nurses<sup>[7]</sup> recommends multiple educational entry points for nurses while providing a seamless progression to higher degrees. The writing course supports such a progression by teaching skills necessary for nurses to advance in their education and to disseminate new knowledge in the discipline. Based on the survey, interview, and focus group responses, students felt well prepared for the writing requirements of the RNC program after completing IHHS 200. Further, this sense of preparation persisted throughout the program. The skills learned reduced the need for nursing faculty to teach writing skills, allowing them to focus more fully on enhancing understanding of professional concepts in nursing. Andre and Graves<sup>[31]</sup> note that "discipline-specific writing courses . . . will help students to develop the research and writing skills needed to succeed both academically and in a career in which nursing scholarship and evidence-informed practice are increasingly valued and expected" (p. 91). This statement is supported by our students' comments at the end of the RCN program and by the evidence of their preparedness, confidence, self-sufficiency, mastery of writing strategies, enhanced ability to navigate academic resources, and reflective mindset.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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