



**Internal boundaries and external constraints: a confidence issue or skills ‘gap’? Perceived and ‘real’ barriers to learning among first year nursing students.**

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# Introducing ourselves

- Carolyn Britton, Senior Lecturer/Study Skills Advisor, Faculty of Health & Life Sciences
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# Background to the study

- Why we did it
  - Interest in teaching and learning
  - General concern about standards of academic writing
  - High failure rate of first assignment
  - High demand for study skills support
  - Opportunity to get faculty funding for small scale research project

# Aims of research

- To explore the understandings of academic writing and the perceived needs for support of a group of level 1 nursing students.
- To explore the barriers to successful academic writing among these nursing students
- To provide support and develop strategies for improving academic writing

# Literature review

- Background literature on issues around academic writing standards in higher education – academic literacy
- Literature on academic writing within disciplines
- Literature on barriers to academic writing and support strategies
- Literature on transitions to h.e.

# Methodology

- Qualitative research:
  - Exploratory study which sought to give voice to the students' own views of academic writing, thus addressing a gap in literature.
  - Action research element, in that research subjects would be invited to participate in a writing group, to explore ways of developing their academic writing skills.

# The sample

- Pilot study - 3 students from nursing and allied health professions, recruited from those who failed their first assignment with a mark of 35% or less.
- Main study - 8 adult nursing students, recruited on the basis of self selection from those who identified themselves as needing additional support for academic writing on the basis of a formative piece of writing.

# The sample

Respondent number	Prior education	Age
1	Foundation course (Level 0)	Under 25
2	Degree	Mature
3	Degree	Mature
4	A-levels	Under 25
5	1 year F.E. course	Mature
6	1 <sup>st</sup> year of A-level	Mature
7	Foundation course (Level 0)	Under 25
8	GCSEs	Mature
9	Degree (not completed)	Under 25
10	GCSEs	Mature
11	Degree	Mature

# The research process

- 3-stages:
  - pre-intervention semi-structured individual interviews
  - writing group sessions (weekly one hour sessions over 4 weeks)
  - post-intervention semi-structured individual interviews

# Emergent themes

## Choice of nursing as a career and identity

- ‘I always wanted to be a nurse since I was really young and really interested in like caring for people and doing biology..’
- ‘I have been working as a care assistant and a support worker. I just think well, why not get a qualification and try to do my best’.
- ‘It was a complete career change for me.... but the last 5 years I have been volunteering...I just wanted to do something that was a bit more beneficial

# Emergent themes

Prior educational experience and academic writing histories:

- ranged from none at all to final year dissertations for two participants.
- even the students with degrees were not sure whether their skills were transferable to academic writing on the nursing course
- what emerged is a picture of a group of learners from diverse backgrounds with different writing histories which do not necessarily translate into differences in confidence in writing academically

# Emergent themes

## Confidence

- Not knowing the rules: 'I've got a feeling it might not have been quite formal enough but then it wasn't really a formal piece of writing...so it was difficult. The first one, you don't really know what they're expecting'.
- Adjusting to a new culture: ' I can tell that I've had a big gap between , you know, in the 7 years and I am finding it difficult to take everything in... '.
- Self-perception as lacking skills: 'To be honest with you I don't know because I tend to sort of just do it and hand it in and not really know and sometimes I find that you can do really well and other times you haven't quite got the right end of the stick..'

# Interpretation of findings in context

- Diversity of nursing students
  - Not a representative sample but mirrors RCN (2008) survey, Nursing our Future. The implication of this is that there can be no presumption of any particular prior experience, particularly in relation to academic writing.
  - Prior educational qualifications may not predict confidence levels in academic writing.
  - Orientation of vocational students to academic writing may be different.

# Interpretation of findings in context

- Transitions and confidence
  - Academic writing concerns are only one aspect of transition to higher education.
  - Practice based discipline has greater variety of textual practices e.g. report style versus reflective accounts which may create uncertainty around rules.
  - Participants perceived themselves as more confident and skilled after writing groups
  - Peer support seen as key factor

# Conclusions and directions for future research

- Questions raised:
  - How identifiable are students needing additional support?
  - What is the relationship between prior educational experience and confidence in academic writing?
  - How to support diverse students – discipline specific strategies?

## References

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