



Letter from the Guest Editor

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Only a few years ago a professional alliance between a Dean of Nursing and a professor of English might have seemed highly unlikely. What would they find to talk about? What interests could they possibly have in common? What kind of research could they jointly pursue? Why would they want to?

Because of our involvement with the writing across the curriculum program at our university, the guest editors of this special section on nursing in *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*, Gail Poirrier (Nursing) and Ann Dobie (English), have discovered more commonality in our professional concerns than we ever dreamed. As a result, we have enjoyed almost ten years of working together on research projects investigating a wide variety of topics related to nursing (and its teaching) and writing.

The relationship began with a request from Gail, then Head of the Baccalaureate Program in the College of Nursing, to the Department of English for a writing workshop to help students prepare research papers using appropriate documentation forms. Ann, Director of Writing, responded with presentations for undergraduate and graduate students. They were followed by an invitation to offer a few writing-to-learn strategies for students who were interested in improving their study habits. The project could have ended at that point, except that Poirrier saw the possibilities for improving pedagogy throughout the college by revising course descriptions, and eventually the entire curriculum, to include student writing.

Building on the success of the student oriented presentations, we decided that the next step in implementing writing in nursing was to address the faculty. We did so with writing workshops for the nursing instructors. The step was a big one, for with it came questions about how to implement writing-to-learn strategies in their classrooms. Where were the studies showing that writing enhanced learning? How could they make room in their already crowded syllabi to include writing activities? When would they find time to read and

grade what students wrote? Would students take writing seriously in a nursing class?

Each question offered its own topic for research, research that looked at theoretical issues but also had very practical applications. The teachers were raising important professional and pedagogical issues that impacted their own classrooms and students. They deserved good answers, but we soon found that the published literature about writing-across the curriculum did not always provide them. As a result, we began our own research into the relationship between writing, nursing, and the teaching of nursing. It led us to investigate the impact of writing on student attitudes and performance, to compare writing programs that incorporate writing and those that do not, to question the effects of writing on the development of careers in nursing, to study how successful cross-disciplinary programs survive, and to explore numerous other topics.

We published our findings in journals (including this one), as chapters, and as books. Presenting our work at conferences and meetings, we became increasingly aware that nursing faculty seemed particularly eager to include writing in their courses. It was apparent that at any meeting where WAC programs were discussed, nursing instructors were there. They, more than professors in other fields, seemed to recognize the value of asking students to explore their own attitudes and ideas in writing, the importance of developing writing skills to communicate with clarity and effectiveness, and the significance of connecting classroom learning with life experiences.

Their interest in WAC comes from several different sources. Chief among them is the fact that nursing involves the use of many types of written communication: reports, articles, policies, procedures, patient care notes, computerized charting, and more. The healthcare system itself requires diverse communications skills ranging from the proficient use of computer information systems to synthesize patient histories with the analysis of research findings to support healthcare providers? treatment decisions based on outcomes, to an ability to sort out and use information to facilitate patient education. In addition, nurse practitioners today must be able to manage and use large volumes of scientific, technological, and patient information to provide more cost efficient, effective and integrated or coordinated healthcare to consumers. In short, nurses are routinely called upon to use their communication skills, written and verbal, for the following purposes:

1. To promote consistent quality care;
2. To maintain continuity of care;

3. To provide evidence of critical thinking that accompanies the utilization of the nursing process;
4. To establish accountability for care;
5. To develop nurse-patient and nurse-other health care provider relationships.

In all such instances, they are expected to employ the critical thinking skills associated with writing-to-learn and writing to communicate, including the self-conscious arrangement, manipulation, and presentation of discourse for a particular audience to achieve a specific purpose.

Another reason for increased interest in WAC among nursing educators is the new focus on critical thinking in nursing education. Since much of what students learn today will be obsolete tomorrow, we now recognize that nurses must be prepared to be independent thinkers and to attend to learning that goes beyond assimilation of data. Writing is one means of developing those skills because it gives students a way to think on their own. It asks students to make discoveries and reach their own understanding of course material.

As students develop greater comprehension of subject matter and begin to think critically about what they have to say, they have more to communicate to an audience. Their increased mastery of theory and practice gives them ideas and opinions that they want to share with others in the field. Learning to write for a professional audience, then, takes on more importance. Being able to use the conventional forms and styles for addressing others in the discipline, another concern of writing across the curriculum, becomes a necessity.

Finally, research is essential to any discipline. In the field of nursing it requires practitioners to stay abreast of changes and identify gaps in the knowledge base, as well initiate their own projects. To introduce nursing students to the process, instructors turn to the use of writing activities that provide students with opportunities to critically examine subject matter, look clearly at issues, explore alternative solutions to problems, and share ideas with peers and other audiences. For example, students can engage in writing research critiques as a means of getting involved in using research by exploring the literature and latest research findings and thinking about those findings in terms of clinical application. All are important steps to using research in practice that nursing accrediting and governing organizations emphasize as a standard of performance.

As a result of the widespread interest we found nurses and nursing faculty to have in both writing to learn and writing in the discipline, we proposed to the editor of *LLAD* a special issue that

would address their concerns. A glance at the list of research topics we still hope to carry out told us that there is ample material, as well as interest, to fill an entire journal with articles dealing with writing and nursing.

Those which we offer readers in this issue validate our sense of the depth of interest there is in writing in nursing. They explore a variety of topics from several different perspectives. Some of them are directly addressed to practicing nurses and nursing faculties; others provide teaching strategies that are easily adaptable to other fields. We think that you will enjoy the balance of ideas and approaches that they provide.

Most of all, we offer these articles in the hope that they will increase awareness of the importance of providing opportunities for nursing students to write about what they know, how they feel, and what they are learning.