



At-A-Glance Overview of PhD Thesis Research Project.

Research Question	How do students, who are preparing for professional practice, develop professional identity through writing assignments in their major field of study?
Subquestions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In what ways do writing assignments prepare students for professional practice? 2. How do students connect learning to professional development through [name of writing assignment]? 3. What kinds of student-instructor interaction enable/constrain students' preparation as students advance through the curriculum?
Research Purpose	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Current research suggests two barriers prevent effective teaching in the professional disciplines: (a) lack of theory to prepare educators who return from professional practice to teach in higher education; and (b) limited research evaluating effectiveness of teaching writing assignments in the professional disciplines of medicine, nursing, law, engineering, and education. 2. My doctoral research is an in-depth case study of learning to write assignments across one professional discipline: nursing education 3. Explores disciplinary best practices, writing instruction, and student enculturation into professional nursing practice. 4. Extends understanding of the social and emotional nature of professional development through instructor and student perspectives of writing pedagogies. 5. This case study will offer insight into the interaction between reading and writing.
Method & Data Collection	<p>Case study using institutional ethnography:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Textual analysis <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. course materials (syllabus, eClass documents) b. linked or nested writing assignments c. dominant/peripheral curricular genres across all years 2. Observations <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. classroom writing instruction b. student peer-writing sessions 3. Semi-formal interviews with nurse educators (instructors) and nursing students Years 1-4 <p>Sample included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37 Participants (31 students, 6 instructors) across all 4 year levels • 5 Courses; 8 writing assignments
Timeline & Status	<p>Candidacy: completed February 2012 REB approval of study: completed February 2012 Data collection: completed May 2013 Analysis: on-going Thesis submission: projected January 2014 Doctoral defence: summer 2014</p>
Preliminary Findings	<p>A constellation of dynamics previously unknown in nursing education, revealing:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. assumptions and expectations; 2. social and emotional nature of learning; 3. trusted relationships between peers; and 4. reading and writing inexorably linked to developing professional identity.



Purpose and focus: The purpose of my doctoral study is to foster greater rhetorical and theoretical understanding of teaching methods in higher education that help prepare students for professional practice (in medicine, law, nursing, engineering, & teaching). Professional education, both pre-service and in-service, is an unexplored context in which to think about writing and how students achieve the intended learning outcomes of their baccalaureate programs. The failure to do so has had costly ramifications. Professional industries have spent approximately \$3 Billion annually on remedial writing training for new graduates in the workplace (College Entrance Examination Board, 2004, p. 29).

My doctoral research focuses specifically on one professional discipline: nursing education. At least seven different case studies¹ of writing in higher education in US, UK, and Australia concluded that their study students wanted the kind of content-based writing instruction that is employed by the Faculty of Nursing (FON) at the University of Alberta, which makes the FON a good basis for a Canadian case study. This case study will advance knowledge in 3 fields of research, nursing education, writing studies research, and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), by exploring disciplinary best practices, writing instruction, and student enculturation into professional nursing practice. The intent is to document how writing assignments explicitly prepare nursing students for professional practice and identify what kinds of instructional interaction enable/constrain students' preparation as students advance through the nursing curriculum. The study attempts to answer as complete as possible: *How do students, who are preparing for professional practice, develop professional identity through writing assignments in their major field of study?*

Background: Writing pedagogy has drawn from many schools of thought and academic communities, such as anthropology (Lave & Wenger, 1991), education (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987); discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), genre theory (Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990), sociolinguistics (Bakhtin, 1986), and rhetoric and composition (Flower, 1994). Recent perspectives from the SoTL (Shulman, 2005; Sullivan & Rosen, 2008) have focused on the concept of identity formation and were adopted in the professional disciplines (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006; Cooke, Irby, & O'Brien, 2010; Benner, Sutphen, Leonard & Day, 2009; Foster, Dahill, Golemon, & Tolentino, 2005). Current SoTL research by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching suggests two barriers prevent effective teaching in the professional disciplines: (a) lack of theory to prepare educators for teaching in higher education; and (b) limited research evaluating effectiveness of teaching writing assignments in medicine, nursing, law, engineering, and teacher education.

Writing traditions of the professional disciplines share, for the most part, a set of intentions that emphasize socio-cognitive habits integral to professional practice. In the 21st century, however, discipline-specific writing pedagogy is more problematic in that professional disciplines use particular writing genres to cultivate a professional identity and assimilate students to traditions of practice and performance, as a way of thinking. In the case of nursing, there are 2 dominant genres to assimilate and acculturate nursing students: reflective writing and scholarly writing. Unfortunately, little is known about how reflective and scholarly writing assignments are used in context and no studies, to my knowledge, ever examined them across all four years of the baccalaureate curriculum.

¹ Seven case studies included one private U.S. college (Beaufort, 2007), Pepperdine University (Carroll, 2002), University of North Dakota (Hawthorne, 1998), Harvard University (Light, 2003), Stanford University (Rogers, 2008), University of Adelaide (Wake, 2010), and Open University (Stierer, 2000).



Method & design: My case study is framed in Vygotskian activity theory and rhetorical genre studies, which compliment situated learning of genre in disciplinary practice. These provide a compatible approach to explore multiple contexts of textually-oriented and socio-cultural systems of activity, pedagogical interactions, discursive/communicative devices, and the role of identity and agency in professional nursing education. I use three complimentary analytic tools of institutional ethnography methods:

- (1) *semi-formal interviews* with nursing instructors and nursing students;
- (2) *observations* of courses with in-class writing instruction and peer-group writing; and
- (3) *textual analysis* of all course materials and writing assignment documents across all 4 years.

A case study using institutional ethnographic methods allows me to focus on the practice and function, as well as the intention and reception of the reflective journal and the scholarly paper across all 4 years. I specifically examine teaching and learning to write the assignment *before* it is turned in for a grade to help capture the professional, interactional, pedagogical, modality-based, and peer-to-peer perspectives of learning to write.

Data collection: The sample included 37 participants (6 instructors, 31 students).

Breakdown by year level: Year 1: 12 students, 3 instructors; Year 2: 4 students, 2 instructors; Year 3: 5 students, 0 instructors; and Year 4: 10 students, 1 instructor.

Preliminary findings: It was anticipated that students and instructors would recall interesting encounters with teaching and learning to write the assignments, or perhaps reveal good/poor teaching practices. Instead, I discovered a constellation of personal, political, relational, emotional, ideological, social, professional, institutional, and epistemological dynamics that were previously unknown in nursing education.

Four thematic categories are emerging from on-going analysis:

- 1) assumptions and expectations; 2) social and emotional nature of learning; 3) trusted relationships between peers; and 4) reading and writing inexorably linked to developing professional identity.

Students also reported the classroom instructor was the pivotal enabler to “feeling/thinking like a nurse.” Preliminary findings support the need to revise and reform the way nurse educators can deliver and respond to the writing demands of their students. On-going analysis also suggests that student writing and instructor response needs differed between lower and upper years.

Proposed items for discussion in the dissertation: (1) upper-lower year writing comparisons; (2) common concerns between and among nursing students and instructors; (3) participants’ suggestions to reform teaching/learning to write as an iterative process that communicates assumptions and expectations before assignments are due; (4) participants’ feedback on how to construct dialogue that builds trust between the marker and the student; (5) the social and emotional nature of developing students’ professional identity in baccalaureate nursing programs; and (6) implications of what can be learned from this case study to better prepare pre-service teachers in my home field of teacher education.

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