

# It's hard to start swimming if you don't have water

Challenges student writers face when composing the scholarly essay

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Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada



# Faculty of Education & Writing Research

Disciplinary Case Study of  
Undergraduate Writing in  
Nursing Education



# Today's Presentation

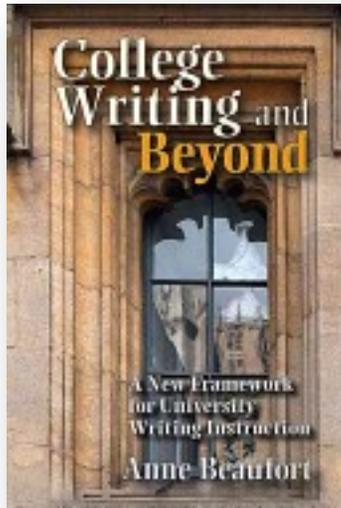
Challenges *students* faced  
when learning to write  
one assignment: the  
scholarly essay



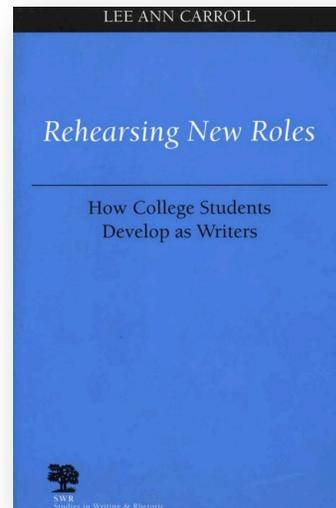
# Methodology

- **INTERDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORKS:** Rhetorical genre, Situated learning, Institutional ethnography
- **31 PARTICIPANTS:** 25 students and 6 tutors
- **METHOD:** Observation (classroom, peer-writing sessions); semi-structured interviews; focus group; textual analysis of assignment documents
- **ANALYSIS:** Content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002)

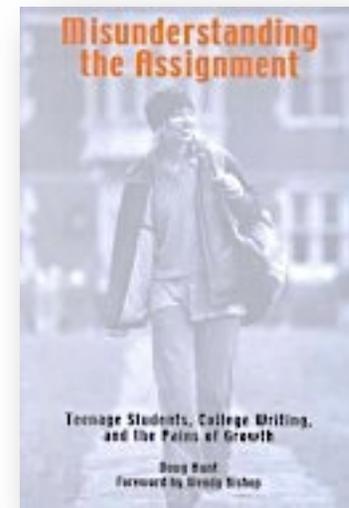
# Other Case Studies



Anne Beaufort (2007)  
*College Writing and Beyond*



Leanne Carroll (2002)  
*Rehearsing New Roles*



Doug Hunt (2002)  
*Misunderstanding the Assignment*



# Why This Study?

- ◆ Explore in detail how students write in each of the academic disciplines (Carroll, 2002, p. 89; Cooper & Bikowski, 2009, p. 219)
- ◆ Examine disciplinary writing instruction across all four years of students' major study (Beaufort, 2007, p. 15)

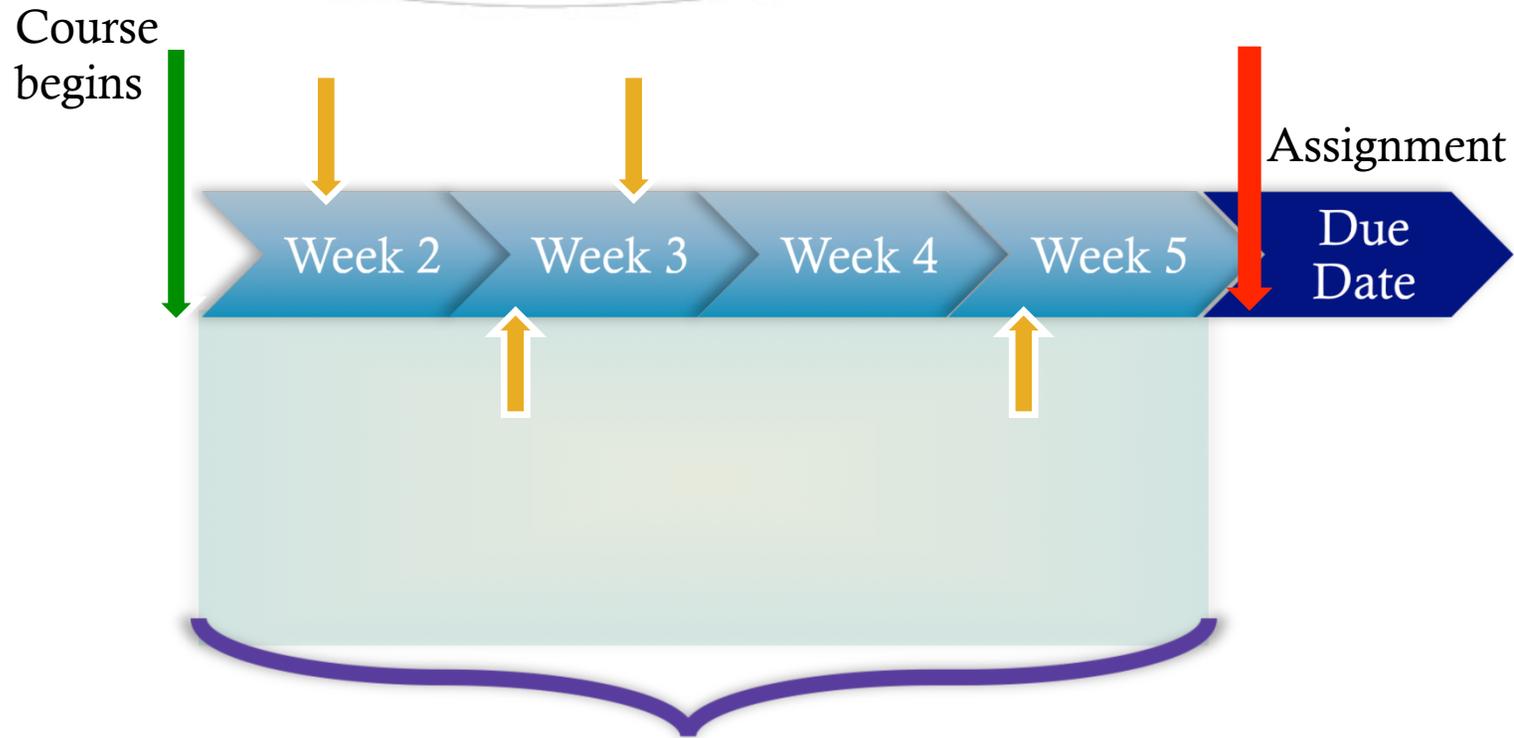


# What Did I Study?

- ◆ **Research question:** *How do students learn what they are asked to write in one undergraduate nursing curriculum?*
- ◆ **Social processes of learning:** *before the assignment is turned in for a grade*



# What Did I Study?



Social process of teaching and learning to write



# Writing Culture in Nursing

**>100** <sup>writing</sup> assignments

**14** recurring genres

**6**-week courses



# 12 Scholarly Essays

④ **Scholarly Essays:** one in each year level

◆ **Value:** 30% to 60%

◆ **Length:** 2 to 12 pages

◆ **Rubrics:** 1 out of 4

◆ **Purpose stated:** 1 out of 4



# Conceptual Challenges

- ◆ **Evidence-based practice**

- Disciplinary (*not professional*) conventions

- ◆ **Reflective writing in scholarly writing**

- Personal+academic+professional

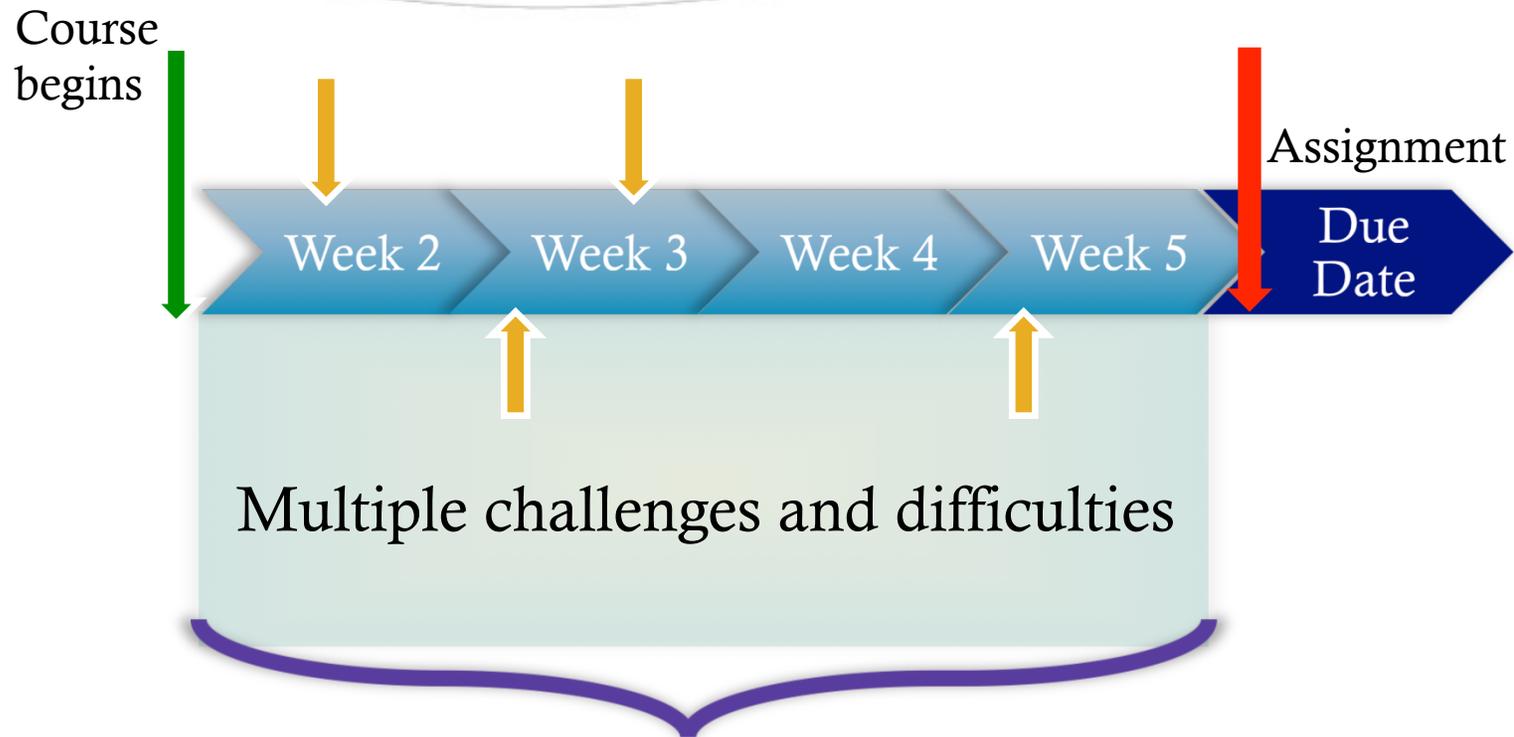


# Concrete Challenges

<b>Lower Years</b>	<b>Upper Years</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• APA format</li><li>• Summarize / paraphrase</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communicating relevance of scholarly essay</li></ul>
<b>Across All Years</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Revolving definitions of “scholarly” &amp; “research”</li><li>• Reading academic/professional documents</li><li>• Procrastination</li></ul>	



# Challenges Compounding



# Student's (trying to) Write the Scholarly Essay

- 💧 **“Trouble getting started”**
- 💧 **“I’m stuck”**



*“It’s hard to start swimming  
if you don’t have water or  
know what liquids you’re  
going to be swimming  
through . . . . At least give us  
a ground so that we can step  
on something to start with.”*

*~Katie, Year 2*



# On-going Interaction

## Classroom nursing instructor

- ◆ *“Our relationship with [the tutor] is central to our learning.” ~Anita*
- ◆ *We look to [the tutor] to help us write clearly about the content.” ~Andy*



# Understand Writing in Nursing

## 💧 Water

- 💧 Learning to write the scholarly essay has to be interpersonal *between the student and his or her nursing tutor*

## 💧 Ground

- 💧 Nursing tutor + writing specialists



To help nursing students like Katie overcome academic writing challenges, we need to teach in tandem with the classroom instructor about conceptual+concrete challenges that affect the student's preparation for professional practice.



Thank You!

**I welcome your feedback**

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