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Student Assignments and Writing for Publication

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Writing scholarly papers for publication is not a skill that is generally taught formally to nursing students. Instead, nurse academics set assessment pieces, and nursing students direct their efforts toward successfully completing these assessments to fulfill the requirements of the course. Few students would consider the possibility of publishing their assignments. Reasons for this may include a lack of confidence, time or aspiration to publish, or an inability to achieve a work-life balance, including meeting the competing demands and priorities of study, work and family (Cleary & Walter 2004). Another reason is a lack of student know-how to get started on transforming an assignment to a manuscript of acceptable quality for submission to a peer-review journal (Rew 2012). This situation is problematic, however, as there are many benefits for students who publish, and also for the academics who support them.

For the students, the benefits of publishing a paper includes bolstering their levels of confidence and knowledge, and showing them how they can contribute to the profession. More informally, there is also the thrill experienced by everyone who sees their name in the print for the first time. No less, and in light of the considerable amount of time spent by many students on their assignments, achieving publication provides a powerful means of endowing value on their work, apart from the grade given by the academic (Devitt, Coad, & Hardicre 2007).

Career wise, a record of peer-reviewed publications is important for the student because it demonstrates scholarly activity which, in turn, can open up options and inform decision-making related to future careers (Oberlander & Spencer 2006). Building a capacity for scholarly writing is also an important way of enhancing the capability of future leaders (Shirey 2013). Perhaps most notably, sound scholarly writing is beneficial as it has the potential to add to the body of nursing knowledge, the status of profession, and also the broader health community (Rew 2012, Shirey 2013).

Even so, before steps are taken to provide the necessary mentoring and support to students to write for publication, it is important to reflect a moment on the challenges involved, and faculty should consider their motivation for involving themselves in such activities. Questions to be considered include: is it fair to expect students to publish papers if faculty are not publishing papers from their own programs of research? Is it fair for faculty to push students to publish to meet their own academic requirements (faculty should publish their own research and not rely on students for their writing/research outputs)? Who will benefit most from the publication? Who will be the first, second, and subsequent authors of the publication? Indeed, authorship, for example, must be appropriately attributed and all authors must qualify for authorship – it is unacceptable for faculty to accept honorary authorship or attribute students research ideas to themselves (Cleary, Jackson, & Walter 2012, Cleary, Jackson, Walter, Watson, & Hunt 2012). It is recommended that these issues be discussed at the outset with the students involved to ensure the process is clear and transparent and that it complies with accepted ethics and publishing standards.

Another challenge is that publishing is not always a priority for students. For example, the assignments they write are primarily a means to an end: this is, the qualification they are seeking. Motivating students to concentrate on writing for publication, then, may be difficult. Likewise, challenges are presented by the very nature of assessment tasks, which produce assignments that may not be easily transformed into a publication (Rew 2012). There is a need, then, to set assessment tasks that produce papers that can be readily adapted and complex enough to contribute new or fresh knowledge to the literature. This is key, as a criteria for publication in the scholarly literature is the requirement that a paper contribute a new perspective on an issue. Journal editors and reviewers do not want to receive a deluge of papers that do not meet such basic criteria for publication. Such assignments could include case studies, philosophical discussions, opinions pieces, letters to the editors, and literature reviews, in addition to data driven papers (Rew 2012). Another option is that some journals have a special section available for student papers, and it could be worth targeting those journals, especially for the truly novice student author.

Alternatively, when custom written assessment tasks have not been used, the challenge will be to come up with a "spin" or "slant" for the paper to enable consideration for publication (Rew 2012). Of course, this is a requirement for all journal articles, even those written by experienced authors, and so faculty can use the opportunity to support students through the process of writing at a greater depth.

For students, the challenges are just as diverse. For those who are undertaking higher degrees by research, the levels of 'saturation' of topic or content may be such that the student feels unable to write any more than the minimum requirements of the course. Addressing such challenges may include taking a cooling off period or finding a fresh approach to a topic that, for the student, may feel tired or overdone. Other students may feel that there is no encouragement for them to write. This is significant in light of the suggestion made by some commentators that a publication is more likely to be achieved from a dissertation or thesis if the quality of supervisory relationship is good, and both the student and supervisor are enthusiastic about publishing (Cleary, Jackson, Watson, & Chan 2013, Timmons & Park 2008).

There are a number of strategies that can be taken to help students transform a quality assignment to a standard that is publishable as an article. These strategies are not unlike those used to support faculty in their writing, and many include providing them with the time-out they need to do this work (Devitt et al. 2007). Achieving this can require some innovative thinking. For example, while strategies to support the writing of academics is common in most universities, less frequently does one see workshops for students on how to convert an assignment to a publishable paper. This raises the question of what it is that is preventing the provision of such workshops.

Once the time has been set aside for the students to work on their articles, they must first identify the intended audience and the target journals. As for all authors, it is essential to consult the Guidelines for Authors, and meet the criteria of these guidelines. Subsequent to this, the following questions provide a first step to help academic mentors and students alike with the process of revising assignments for publication:

1. Is the topic interesting, important or a phenomenon of concern to the discipline?
2. Is there a clearly stated purpose and aim?
3. Is the introduction compelling?
4. Are the terms used clearly defined and logical?

5. Is there a logical flow of ideas that reflect the purpose and aim?
(Rew 2012, p. 273).

It also is necessary to consider and, if appropriate, incorporate the feedback received on the assignment through the assessment process. Indeed, the process of transforming an assignment into a manuscript for submission to a journal should commence only after the assignment has been graded. This is to avoid the potential for prejudicial grading if faculty are included on the author team prior to marking (Fowler & Davis 2013). Feedback provided through the assessment process may well provide guidance on how to improve the paper; and identify any missing content.

Time must then be spent on refining or polishing the manuscript. Many people tend to under-estimate the amount of time it can take to polish a manuscript to a publishable standard. It is advisable that the academic mentor works closely with the student during this stage – and also upon receiving feedback from the peer reviewers – so they do not feel discouraged or disheartened. This includes assuring the student that there is great satisfaction in working on a piece of writing until it finally 'gets over the line' and publication is achieved.

Students are well positioned to develop the requisite skill set to write for publication especially if supported by faculty and sound mentoring practices. Scholarly writing is a skill that can be encouraged right from the beginning of career, even from student days. Indeed, a high level of literacy is a competency required for all nurses, irrespective of their setting or perceived status and it is important that the voice of all nurses, including students, is heard within the broader health care, academic and policy settings (Shirey 2013). The principles outlined in this paper provide some practical tips towards ensuring this occurs.

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