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The Successful Nurse Scholar as Interdisciplinary Collaborator and Leader

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Introduction

Today the complexity of the healthcare environment is mandating a change in health care delivery from a model of isolated decision-making to an exclusionary model which involves interacting with many other team members. Nurses now find themselves on patient care teams, research teams, management teams, and educational teams. Team members may be from other health-related disciplines such as radiology, physical therapy and home care, but may also go beyond health to include fields such as technology and public relations. With the unlimited relationships and ideas made available by the internet, ideas can no longer be claimed by individual disciplines but must be shared in a collaborative way.

In keeping with the interdisciplinary team movement, nurse scholars must extend their collaborative efforts to research and authoring publications. The days of nurse researchers/academicians and those from other disciplines competing with one another for scarce resources have long past – collaboration and partnerships are unequivocally necessary (Dowd & Davidhizar, 1998)

It has been our pleasure to work together in many collaborative writing projects and to have published in a variety of publications across many different disciplines. In this article we give tips on interdisciplinary collaboration and writing as a member of an interdisciplinary team. In addition, there is focus on how experienced authors can benefit and help in reaching out to novices and assisting them not only in writing but also in learning interdisciplinary writing strategies. Successful scholars can use collaborate writing projects to advance the careers of others and to invest in the future of the profession through mentoring relationships.

Tips on Interdisciplinary Writing Collaboration

Collaboration is more than improving working relationships among professionals, however meritorious and beneficial that might be (Hobbs, 1998). Collaboration is imperative in today's society as the culture of work by individuals is transformed to work by people who connect electronically in their projects. Interdisciplinary collaboration in writing is one part of the global transformation in which societies are reaching for meaning beyond that of the individual.

While the concept of interdisciplinary writing is multifaceted, for the purposes of this article we will focus on reaching out to others, being a mentor, empowering novices, being a role model, being willing to share recognition, and agreeing on who does what.

Reach out to others

As prolific authors, we have frequently worked with colleagues in our own and on disciplines to produce a scholarly work. We have worked together as a team, added friends in our respective disciplines to team projects, and then paired up with these new friends in other disciplines to form

new writing teams. In this way we have both published papers with people we have never met but who have become acquaintances through email connections.

An appreciation of the value of writing partnerships has prompted us to reach out to others when a request for a paper comes in to us personally. For example, if a publisher has requested a paper on a certain topic, we may send out an email "call for help" to see who among our acquaintances is interested in the proposed or requested topic. One enthusiastic junior faculty member responded to one such call for an interested author with, "Pick me, pick me, can I help you with that topic?" and was delighted at this opportunity.

Selecting appropriate partners for interdisciplinary collaborative writing projects is based on the goal of the author and the stage in their career. When authors are in the career development stage, partners are selected who are more advanced in their careers and who possess the skills that they themselves do not have. When successful nurse scholars are seeking to help others and facilitate their careers, the selection process is quite different and will be motivated by the goals of both the prospective author and the desire of the experienced author to mentor others.

Be a Mentor

The benefits of team writing has resulted in our offering to write with novices who need help. Novices, while having lack of experience, bring personal ideas for topics and as well as ideas that experienced authors may not have thought of. Working with novices is both stimulating and fun, since an experienced author vicariously benefits from the successes of mentees. When seasoned authors take young writers under their wings to teach them the steps in the process of writing, how to handle problematic situations, or how to negotiate the writing process maze and deal with problematic editors and publishers, supportive mentoring occurs which benefits both. Seasoned writers can help with the intricacies of the writing process, teach novices to deal with rejection, and help them overcome the blocks that often cause young writers to give up. We have both experienced the magnified pleasure that comes from helping a new writer become an author. For those who have written many publications the thrill of a first publication can be re-lived in the mentee!

In nursing, there is a tremendous lack of scholarly work by those who are nurse clinicians and have the perseverance and determination to remain "at the bedside." These individuals offer a wealth of data for the profession, but for many reasons most fail to write for healthcare publications. A review of the literature indicates that this failure is due to 1) lack of higher degrees, 2) lack of instruction in writing, 3) lack of time, apprehension about "writing for publication", and 4) lack of models willing to serve as mentors (Davidhizar et al, 1998; Bechtel & Davidhizar, 2005). For nursing to develop innovative patient care standards, senior nurse scholars need to mentor nurse clinicians who have the critical thinking and clinical judgment abilities necessary to develop innovative practices. In this way, that patient care innovations can provide the base for research and advancing the profession. Nurse researchers need clinicians to develop strategies that optimize and link both research and practice, while nurse clinicians can help advance nursing by being members of collaborative writing teams.

Empower Novices

Novice writers are empowered by working with veteran authors. Novices are encouraged when experienced writers share experiences of rejection. After all, if admired experienced writer have had rejections, then becoming a successful writer seems more realistic and encourages novices to "break into" the field of writing. New writers often feel that their inexperience will handicap them in the

publication process - who would accept an article from someone who has never published? Having a few publication successes in a co-authored relationship encourages and helps new writers establish the track record, confidence, skill, and empowerment needed to launch a writing career.

Be a Role Model

Experienced authors who work with novices are role models in many ways. Novices can learn from stories of rejection and failure so that pitfalls of writing and discouragement at rejection can be avoided (Davidhizar, 2005). Experts can role model problem-solving skills for writer's block, enthusiasm for writing, and generally provide "tips of the writing trade" which have resulted from lived experience. While many writers are born loving to write, "I love writing" can spur on a mentee who is ambivalent and needs encouragement to try their wings.

When mentees participate on interdisciplinary writing teams with experienced people, this gives opportunities for the experienced authors not only to teach writing skills but also to role model collaborative skills. Collaborative writing skills are a different skill set. When experienced authors role model how to collaborate effectively, this can be invaluable for promoting interdisciplinary writing.

Share Recognition

For nurse scholars who are veteran professionals and authors, sharing authorship with novices enhances rather than detracts from their CVs and careers. For novices, being listed as a co-author can have a dramatic effect. Mentees have said to us, "You'd be willing to write an article with me? I can't believe you would do this. I would be so honored." Assisting novices to advance in their profession by writing gives mentors vicarious pleasure and extends the veterans into the future of nursing. Using the Novice-to Expert framework of Benner (2001), experts help with knowledge development and advancing others on their career ladders.

Agree on Who Does What

Roles of writing partners include leader, cheerleader, writer, critical thinker, literature reviewer, statistical expert, freewriter (writer of first draft), polisher and critiquer (Davidhizar & Dowd, 1998). In a collaborative project, everyone participates but may contribute only by performing one of these roles. The ideal writing collaboration has partners with each of these skills so that all the important parts of bringing a manuscript to successful publication can be accomplished.

In a project where mentorship is a goal it is important that veteran authors "pull back" and avoid "rewriting" everything that novice authors contribute. At an early stage of mentoring, mentors may rewrite everything done by novices but, as collaboration becomes more equal, they must allow the novices to try their wings. Mentoring, after all, assists other to develop. Veteran writers must "guide" not "do", and "facilitate" not "tell."

One of the pitfalls of collaborative projects is that the work ends up being done by one willing person on the writing team. In some cases, unfortunately, the novice does the majority of the work and does not even receive authorship of the paper. It is essential in writing a collaborative paper to have a clear delineation of who does what part of the work. In our writing relationship, sometimes one partner initiates the paper and does the first draft and sometimes the other adds and edits. The next time, the other partner may initiate while the other adds and edits. In some cases, an outline is drawn up, the work divided equally, and each fills in their part. Over the years, who does the most on papers equals out so that both partners share equally in the work.

The same is true in authorship listing. In a paper where one author has the major idea and starts the work, that person usually is listed as first author. In other cases, it is felt that, because of the discipline of the paper, first authorship by the person in that discipline may be advantageous for the credibility of the paper with the editor and readers. Because the partners in the writing project usually trust each other, both are pleased to share the work and recognition rather than being concerned about the hours each has invested in the project.

A successful writing collaboration requires that each writer not be too sensitive to the suggestions and edits of others on the team. People who do not accept suggestions well usually do not choose to be on writing teams, since collaboration by necessity involves give and take.

Successful writing with another is an art that is not learned spontaneously. Partners must be carefully selected to match the authors' goals, roles delineated and timeframes designed, and then there must be commitment to stick with the plan that was made in order to meet a realistic publication deadline.

Conclusion

Writing with others, and particularly those from other disciplines where the focus is slightly or significantly different, is enriching since different perspectives can cause creativity to flourish. Working with others can provide synergy for the development of new ideas and can cause old ideas to be rearranged in a different format. In this way, collaborative writing results in a whole which is more than the sum of the parts. For scholars who enjoy writing, this working with others doubles the fun!

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