Exploring Summative Written Assessment In Undergraduate Nursing

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*This work was partly supported by an Australian Learning & Teaching Council (ALTC) Fellowship.

Introduction to the case

The renewal of undergraduate programs is a complex and accelerating “high-stakes” process of modern educational change (see Gordon & Whitchurch, 2010). Programs have become increasingly fragmented by the modular design of courses, geared to the requirements of professional associations and reliant on a diverse, casualised and mobile teaching workforce. The latter teach larger numbers of students with more diverse educational histories whose learning and social experiences at universities influence institutional funding. Thus defining, implementing and sustaining the quality of programs require the regular, systematic and consensual inputs from multiple stakeholders.

At Griffith University, programs are reviewed annually and after every five years. This process entails appraisal of changes to structure and content, cross-campus consistency, signature experiences, delivery modes and admission requirements, resourcing, and/or professional inputs and accreditation (GU Assessment Policy, 2007). Program submissions record reviews of the curriculum, a term which include content-focussed disciplinary interests, the re-positioning of courses and pedagogies (Hicks, 2007). Submissions only broadly address summative assessment by including course assessment plans naming the type of assessment task, length, weighting and alignment with learning outcomes. University policy mandates that Course Convenors assume responsibility for (course-level) criterion-based, summative assessment detailed in Course Outlines. Final student grades are approved by Faculty Assessment Boards who deliberate on the overall achievement of students by totaling subscores documented in Mark Entry Spread Sheets (MESS).

This case study documents some of the activities of the ALTC fellowship entitled, A programmatic approach to developing writing embedded in nursing courses. It includes the combined achievements of the Bachelor of Nursing (BN) Curriculum Development Working Party members (MW, EP, MT, JB, CF), of forming a special interest group to support learning, teaching and assessment (LH, MW) and research support (CA).

First is a brief review of research literature relating to the role of writing in nursing curricula. Second, the development of the revised BN curriculum is summarised. Third, a Griffith study of writing is presented in three parts (a) writing tasks across 2008 courses are mapped to emphasise how summative assessment unfolds across the three-year program, together with (b) a summary of actual student achievement in the same year and (c) initial engagement with nursing staff. Fourth, a platform for the development and implementation of assessment literacy in 2011 is presented.
The roles of writing in the nursing curriculum

Contexts of nursing and assessment

Nursing education is very demanding on students and academic staff. The BN curriculum is typically multidisciplinary and challenges students to master a broad range of disciplinary knowledge from the sciences and social sciences. Further, nursing students need to be prepared to work in health care settings that are increasingly diverse, and both technically and culturally demanding, while student cohorts themselves have a wide range of prior academic achievement, age groups, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

Extended writing tasks are a major component of nursing curricula, and writing remains a challenge to many students and teaching staff. The same is likely true for most elements in most universities. Brennan (1995) reported that nursing students in both pre- and post-registration courses find writing essays difficult because they were unaware of assessment requirements, the importance of feedback and the processes of writing. For these students, writing essays is seen as a task and not as a learning opportunity. Ethnographic studies have identified mature females and those from low socio-economic backgrounds as two groups who find essays difficult to understand, alien to their academic identity and difficult to manage logistically (Lillis & Turner, 2001).

The design of assessment affords an important key point of leverage in the curriculum. Well designed writing activities can support language development, deep understanding and critical thinking (Lindblom-Ylänne & Pihlajamäki, 2003). The validity of direct assessment of writing is influenced by multiple and complex interacting variables identified from empirical studies. Murphy and Yancey (2008) include here: the writers and their knowledge of the subject, their culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background and how they interpret task requirements; markers and their disciplinary, CALD and teaching expertise; contextual factors including the topic, scoring system and whether tasks are timed or not; and features of the writing task e.g. rhetorical specifications and stimulus material.

Writing as a literate practice within the curriculum

Students, their discipline teachers and teachers from writing centres can have widely differing views about how writing is conceptualised, taught and assessed (Haswell, 2008). Writing is nursing could be approached from three perspectives or models based on the influential work of Lea and Street (1998). From case study research in higher education, these authors defined three, nested levels each with distinct implications for how writing is taught and assessed.

Study skills: The lowest level equates writing with “study skills” - atomised, transferrable skills (or discrete technical competencies). When students fail to demonstrate these skills in assessment, they are labelled as deficient and in need of remediation to “fix the skills”. This approach configures writing as technique and separate from the learning of content. It is also likely to marginalise non-traditional students.
**Academic socialisation:** Writing goes beyond the teaching and assessment of writing skills. It equates with being socialised into the academy – writing proficiency is non-problematic as students are acculturated into “being a university student”. Success in academic writing is supported by teaching and assessment that is explicitly supported through expertise in academic or scholarship skills. This approach ignores disciplinary differences in knowledge making, discourse and practices. Learning to write is presented as generic and transferrable, and taught largely by support staff.

**Academic literacies:** At the highest superordinate level, writing is considered as a social, literate tool for meaning making which is strongly nuanced by the discipline. Writing becomes problematic in that students need to develop a repertoire of discursive competencies that reflect discipline-based knowledge, identity and power. Learning to write is located where and when learning of content is required. Therefore, this requires an embedded teaching and assessment under the direction of disciplinary academics.

This three-model framework has been widely used to explore and develop teaching and assessment practices around writing within courses and programs across both disciplines and countries (Alston, Gourlay, Sutherland & Thomson, 2008).

**Context of this Case Study**

**Revising the BN**

The existing, three-year undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing degree program was implemented in 2005, and received a successful mid-term evaluation by the Queensland Nursing Council (now superseded by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council). Between January 2007 and December 2009, Professor Marianne Wallis led a Working Party to review and revise the curriculum to be implemented in semester one, 2011. This group included the HOS, Gold Coast, Logan and Nathan campus Program Convenors and RWM.

Curriculum changes were strongly influenced by the proposed National Safety and Quality Framework (Australian Commission for Safety and Quality Healthcare, 2009) and the National Patient Safety Education Framework (Australian Commission for Safety and Quality Healthcare, 2005). The organising themes upon which high quality care is premised, include:

- client and family focus
- driven by information and based on evidence
- organised for safety and quality.

Importantly, Griffith nursing graduates will need to develop appropriate professional practices based around these themes. Writing plays an important reciprocal role in the development of reflective and high-order thinking (Dexter, 2000). In more concrete terms, students will need to master a range of genres and text types suited to diverse professional and social purposes and communication modes (Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Luthy, Peterson, Lassetter, & Callister, 2009).
Empirical Evidence for Students’ Writing Success

What do we know about the ways in which writing is taught and assessed in the existing BN degree program?

RWM with support from CA analysed the 2008, course-level summative assessment in the BN program across Nathan, Logan & Gold Coast campuses. This entailed:

1) auditing and mapping assessment tasks requiring substantial writing for each semester
2) using non-adjusted MESS data, statistically analysing student achievements on all written assessment tasks to identify particular writing challenges for students, then
3) engaging the Working Party and teaching staff (on 29th September 2009) to identify a range of assessment options for the revised BN.

Results

The audit revealed that summative written assessment tasks:

- were common (20 tasks representing 7 types of assessment)
- often demanding (modal value = 50% weighting)
- used criterion-referenced marking with a wide variation criteria and definitions of standards
- were unevenly developed across the program, with highest loads in Years I & III
- required writing per Year Level was 5,500 words (Year One), 6,600 words (Year Two), 11,700 words (Year Three). These numbers are approximate.
- were commonly designed around “essays” or “assignments”.
- used various category labels without apparent standardisation of assessment names
- unevenly supported the development of academic literacies through formative assessment and a range of summative tasks requiring production of print, oral and multi-media texts i.e. some courses used explicit teaching to support the development of academic literacy, other did not.
- the processes writing-to-learn in nursing were seldom espoused or documented in courses.

Written assessment is mapped across the existing BN program (Figure 1). Analysis of assessment results demonstrated that students’ achievements were mainly consistent within and across the three campuses (for essays, mean ± SD = 66 ± 15%, n=9), and students marks for writing were the same as or higher than exams in about 80% of cases.
Caveat

How do these results help Program Convenors understand the range of impacts on student learning?

Assessment practices are influenced by institutional and disciplinary traditions, professional requirements and the actions of individual teachers. At a program level, many of the features of assessment regimes that contribute to the “assessment climate” are likely determined by institutional mandates (Gibbs & Dunbar-Goddet, 2009). This includes practices like the variety and volume of assessment, use of explicit criteria and standards and the alignment of assessment to learning outcomes. Yet, the existing BN program strongly emphasises under a variety of labels, traditional essays as a ‘default genre’ (Womack, 1993). It thus affords students a range and depth of assessment tasks that might be considered as a disciplinary “signature” (Bond, 2007). At face value, course-level assessment data did not identify any particular concerns about students’ writing achievements. However, these results do not illuminate how teaching staff understand academic literacy in nursing education or how teaching supported success in assessment. As students progress through the current BN program, they will likely encounter diverse, even incompatible teaching and assessment practices around writing.

Staff engagement

The Working Party sought from RWM observations of the existing BN program and suggestions for improvements. In response, a document was constructed, delivered and discussed on (1st September 2009). This included a summary of data (above), two overarching, broadly themed questions and associated observations, plus a series of exploratory questions with which nursing staff might engage. These were then presented to all nursing staff (29th September 2009) as a means to initiate substantive conversations and actions around the teaching and assessment of writing in revised curriculum. Details follow.

Broad Theme Questions and associated observations

Q1. What our previous curriculum did or did not do around the development of writing and literacy

Observations

1) Nursing staff do have in-house expertise around literacy education.

2) Development of undergraduates’ writing proficiency across the program is supported through formative learning-teaching activities and resource e.g. tutorial quizzes, workbooks, support from Learning Services via in-class tuition and guides to writing.

3) The program supports the development of multi-literacies through the provision of learning opportunities around speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and use of multimedia.

4) Comparing the program in 2006 and 2008, the number of courses with summatively assessed writing – did not change (11 courses), decreased (5 courses, all from Year One) or increased (1 course in Year One).

5) The program seems to afford similar emphasis on writing across the three campuses.
6) The program has a strong emphasis on assessed writing – those courses with assessed writing averaging about 50% weighting.

7) The program has an uneven focus on assessed writing – with an excessive loading in the first semester of Year One, and fewest opportunities for students to develop advanced writing skills in Year Two.

8) Assessment program uses a limited range of writing genres – with the essay being the most common and over-represented assessment instrument – and apparently non-standardised weighting allocations e.g. % for number of words in similar tasks.

9) The ‘specified criteria’ (Sadler, 2005) marking model is common though with variations in use of quantitative and qualitative standards.

10) Apart from an increased requirement for writing from Years One to Three, it is difficult to appreciate (from the course documents) how the current program structure systematically develops writing (and multi-literacy) proficiency.

11) In order to meet the NSQF-themed requirements of the revised program, how writing is assessed will need revision e.g. inclusion of essential vocational writing genres. This is likely to have implications for how writing is taught and how in-house and service expertise in writing/literacy education is used.

12) The scope of writing practices within nursing (as reported in research literature from nursing education and writing) indicate that broadening the range of teaching and assessment of writing in the undergraduate nursing program would be beneficial to students, staff and patients.

Both the Working Party and teaching staff expressed concerns around:
- the ability of some students to write effectively, and
- wanted to learn more about diversifying written assessment tasks.

Q2. **Discuss options for how to improve this through teaching and through assessment items attached to courses in this curriculum.**

**Observations**

1) Academic literacies framework (Lea & Street, 1998) was presented.
2) Base learning-teaching-assessment activities might be re-configure to align with this framework.
3) A wider range of writing forms (text types) might be explored.
4) Design, implementation & evaluation approached through scholarship of learning, teaching and assessment around writing can be supported through the ALTC fellowship.
**Exploratory questions**

1. What does it mean to become academically literate in nursing?
2. How will writing be systematically supported through the revised program to include an appropriate balance of developmental, academic and professional discourses?
3. How does the model for effective communication in nursing accommodate the development of writing such that they also support NSQF themes?
4. How will the principles of effective communication in nursing be articulated through the program?
5. Who are key academic staff interested in further developing and sustaining a scholarly culture around teaching and assessment of writing?
6. How might the expertise of nursing and Learning Services staff be more effectively co-ordinated?
7. What other expertise in Australian nursing is needed?
8. Are there opportunities to collaborate with other Australian nursing schools that the fellowship can support?
9. How might an ALTC-Exchange site be organised to support the writing needs of staff and students (and possibly employers) in nursing across Australia?

**Developing “Assessment Literacy”**

**Course and assessment changes in revised BN program**

The revised BN program includes substantial year-level changes:

- **Six new courses:** 2 in Year One; 3 in Year Two; 1 in Year Three
- **Three major revisions:** 2 in Year One; 0 in Year Two; 1 in Year Three
- **Nine minor revisions:** 4 in Year One; 2 in Year Two; 3 in Year Three.

A map of written assessment was constructed from course assessment plans of the revised BN program (Figure 2).

Given that assessment drives much of academic learning and needs to better prepare learners for the work place (Boud & Falchicov, 2006), the design and implementation of the assessment program in the revised BN will be critical. More specifically, future nursing graduates will not be able to develop and implement these practices if they are not proficient writers – mastering a range of genres and text types suited to diverse professional and social purposes and communication modes (Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Luthy et al., 2009).

**Professional partnering forum**

To further professional learning of teaching staff, LH initiated a School-based “Professional Partnering Forum for Learning, Teaching and Assessment”. The mission of this forum is to promote cross-campus collaboration for the undergraduate nursing and midwifery programs focused on improving learning, teaching and assessment practices. The principal aim is to bring together like-minded people to network and exchange ideas/examples of good practice in learning and teaching,
and advance initiatives to improve the learning experience of students.

At the first meeting is on 29th September 2010, MW will lead discussions to:

- reach consensus on the name of the forum and establish overarching goals with an action-oriented focus
- establish terms of reference (e.g. frequency of meetings; reporting mechanisms to Undergraduate Programs Sub-committee/Health Group Learning & Teaching Committee)
- plan future forums
- plan initiatives for scholarship around our learning, teaching and assessment.

Developing “assessment literacy” (Boud and Fachikov, 2006) will be a focus at the first and subsequent meetings. RWM will lead workshop activities around the assessment of writing within the new BN (and Midwifery) courses using an approach aligned with current university-wide attention on assuring academic achievement standards based on the career work of Professor Royce Sadler.
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**Figure 1.** Map of 2008 summative assessment tasks requiring substantial writing.

(Writing under examination conditions is not included). Fractions indicate weighting of the assessment task.

Legend: Assign = assignment; Crit Asys = critical analysis; Lab man = laboratory manual; Present = presentation.
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Figure 2. Map of summative assessment tasks requiring substantial writing from revised BN.
(Writing under examination conditions is not included). Fractions indicate weighting of the assessment task.

Legend: Assign = assignment; Bb Disc = discussion using L@G; eTut = online tutorial; Film Asys = film analysis; Present = presentation; Ref Jour = reflective journal.
Principles of Good Practice illustrated by this case study

As a contributor to the ALTC-funded Teaching Quality Indicators Project (2007-2008), Griffith University developed *Statements and Quality Indicators of Good Practice in Assessment*. Four principles were developed.

The case study documented here illustrates **Principle 4: Assessment policies and practices are planned, implemented, reviewed and improved**. Specifically, it illustrates when this principle occurs:

**Section 4.1** when assessment practices are given consideration in cyclical reviews of teaching, programs, courses and academic units.

This is part of Griffith policy. It is worth noting here that this process places further high demands on nursing educators, many of whom may be struggling to balance their need to maintain professional credibility, and at the same time develop both teaching and research scholarship (Boyd, 2007). Given also the multi-campus nature of the degree program, the achievements of the Working Party and SONM staff are commendable.

**Section 4.3:** when professional development opportunities are provided to staff to assist them in improving assessment practices.

Professional development is planned as a series of workshops from September 2010. These are being organised by the school-based “Professional Partnering Forum for Learning, Teaching and Assessment”. At the time of writing, academic teaching staff from all the three campuses, GU Learning Service Advisors associated with the Health Group, and a staff member from the Griffith Institute for Higher Education (RWM) are contributors. This change is aligned to GU assessment reform initiated by Professor Royce Sadler.

**Section 4.4:** when staff participate in professional development activities relevant to assessment (e.g. workshops, conferences, relevant literature).

A professional learning community to develop scholarship around assessment reform is being planned. This is supported by seed funds from the Moni ALTC fellowship as a means to build sustainable relevant leadership capacity in the SONM. The process of assessment reform will be documented leading to scholarly outputs to be disseminated both within the SONM and beyond. It has potential to articulate with the ALTC-funded national priorities in Health and lead to conference presentations, scholarly articles and funding through competitive grants.
References


