How does the writing done in nursing courses prepare nursing students for the writing that they will have to do on the job?

Introduction

The health care field is very dependent on competent nurses. Nursing is a difficult career to get into, especially with the heavy course load that students are expected to carry by colleges and future employers. Getting into the limited space available at nursing schools seems impossible, but once one is accepted into a program, the toughness does not stop there. In the four years of a BSN traditional track nurse, 66 credit hours must be completed in order to graduate with a degree (ODU Nursing). Out of those 66 credit hours, one can wonder what is actually useful towards a nursing career. At Old Dominion University, 9 English credit hours are required for nursing students (ODU Traditional Track). Having 9 English credits required seemed universal, after looking at the requirements at Plymouth State University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Simmons College (PSU, VCU, SC). Basic knowledge English classes, essay, and research paper writing courses are required for most nursing students to take. Within the writing courses, nursing students have to complete a variation of different styles of writing. Out of pure curiosity, the author wanted to know if the writing done by nursing students in college prepared them for the writing done in the field.

Most research on nursing students has been done on the amount of stress that they face, like the articles, “Perceived level and sources of stress in baccalaureate nursing students” by DL Beck and R. Srivastava and “Does mindfulness decrease stress and foster empathy among nursing students?” by AE Beddoe and SO Murphy. None have really been done on a reflection of how helpful the required general education requirements are. Across the boards, competence is stressed in a nurse. These core math, English, and random elective courses increase competence, but do they help in the field, or are they just to weed out the weak? Since these courses are required, nursing students find ways to cope with the stress of all classes. In a recent study, it was shown that participants that meditate regularly have better coping skills (AE Beddoe). These courses may just tack on unneeded stress to already highly stressed and anxiety-ridden students.

Having a well-rounded education can aid a person. When colleges put so much stress on general education courses, it is because it will give a student a more expansive collection of knowledge. Nursing students need classes like English to be able to communicate properly with patients and to be able to read research or instructions. A study, completed in July 2013, showed that nurses are not competent in ways of reflective writing. The study, “Understanding the process of writing papers reflectively,” by Krishna Regmi and Jennie Naidoo, also looked at the lack of reflective resources for health care professionals to look at. Most health care professionals looked at only English-written writings within these sources: PubMed, Medline, King's Library, Excerpta Medica Database, Department of Health database, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature. It was also noted that most of these professionals would only look up terms or free text (Naidoo and Regmi).
Literature Review

Many articles can be found and examined that relate to the topic of writing that nurses do. A particular article, by Lee Spears, discusses that most nurse managers and educators had said that they had not received their undergraduate program did not prepare them for their writing as nurses. They also expressed a need for a professional writing course. Spears completed this study by examining the writing done by 54 nurse managers and 13 nurse educators. He found out that most of these individuals were not correctly creating professional documents. After Spears reviewed the work of the people under study, he interviewed them. That is where they revealed that their undergraduate program did not sufficiently help them to be prepared for the types of writing that would be required of them as educators and managers (Spears). However, this article was written from a business standpoint, not an education standpoint.

Another article that discussed writing as a nurse was, “The academic writing experiences of a group of student nurses: a phenomenological study” by Dean Whitehead. Whitehead was trying to see how the pre-licensure nursing students learned their writing skills and how they were enforced into the nursing program that they attended. The author also looked at how this writing education impacted the clinical and collective learning experience. He explored the subjects using a phenomenological study, a study that looks at experiences and consciousness. The study examined the writing that students' did and how they dealt with it, based on the skills and knowledge that they already had. Through his research, Whitehead discovered an overwhelming amount of nursing students do not know how to do the writing asked of them. Students are expected to know how to perform these writing tasks quickly or automatically. He found a lot of students struggling because of lack of training in writing. He mentions that a lot of nursing students drop out, or do not get into their programs because of academics. Whitehead also found that nursing students understand the need for writing. And according to Whitehead, they are struggling with not having these proper skills (Whitehead).

Numerous popular source articles were found, discussing the different types of writing that nurses are required to do, and the emphasis on the importance of having grammatically correct writing, among many others. According to OWL by Purdue University, there are important parts to the types of writing that nurses do. These parts were organized into subsections. In the subsection, "Three General Rules", the Purdue OWL discussed being precise, objective, and reminded readers to remember "your critical audience". Purdue OWL goes on to discuss about how nurses should include specific events and actions that happened while you are interacting with the patient. The source also noted that it was important to list materials used and patient reaction to the materials (for example: a dressing change). In the next subsection, "Writing in the Field", Purdue OWL talks about the kinds of writings that nurses will complete in the field. It discusses charting, careplans, and narratives. The charts that nurses use, according to Purdue OWL, are flowcharts and many different companies use different charts. It says nurses should be able to understand all types of flowcharts. Careplans are listed as a "definition of problem, solutions, and evaluation of success". It also notes that nursing diagnoses are different than medical diagnoses because nursing diagnoses are more like written action, which the solutions must be specific to each patient, and evaluations must be written numerically. The narratives are written in second person, using standard abbreviations. The narratives are important because they are a source of communication between health care providers. In the final subsection, "List of Nursing resources", Purdue OWL lists many resources with links to more information and specific examples (Purdue OWL: Writing as a Nurse).
Another source discussed the importance of writing correctly, "Good Writing Skills Are Essential" on the website allnurses.com. This resource talks about the writing that you do, reflects you and your education. It emphasizes the use of correct spelling and grammar by using an example of writing, that a director of nursing had written, "'There is a new attendance policy for all nursing staff. It's attached to the email. A copy will be placed in your hr manual. You are expected to review as are changes. Everyone has a new record for their attendance. Also, the committee on worker safety are about to announce it's decision, everyone will be given their own personal copy of the committee's report. If there are any questions, feel free to contact me or hr.'" The article then asks the reader how they would judge this writing, and to reflect upon what kind of person the director of nursing is, without even knowing her. allnurses.com continues to state how having professional writing in the workplace is highly beneficial for a nurse, increasing credibility and image (allnurses.com).

Methods

The point of this study was to collect survey-based data based on the question, “How does the writing done in nursing courses prepare nursing students for the writing that they will have to do on the job?” In collecting research, the author ran into trouble because of the IRB restrictions. This survey and study was in direct violation of, “…survey research that seeks to identify participants within a specialized population…requires approval.” With this specific study and the style of collection, snowball sampling was the best way to collect data.

This study will be based on a survey completed by nursing students who have graduated nursing school within the past five years. The school or state that the students graduated and are certified in, do not matter. The survey was distributed using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a way of collecting research, by gathering future subjecting from acquaintances. A lot of this collection is done by social media. (Snowball Sampling). The author asked nurses and health professionals on my Facebook page to ask around their workplace if any recent nursing school graduates, who had graduated within the past five years, would complete a nine question survey that the author had set up on SurveyMonkey. The survey included fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, and scaling questions about the writing done in nursing school and reflecting upon the writing done in the field. The survey can be viewed on: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/9V7LZTH. And the questions go as follows:

1. What was the main type of writing done in your nursing courses at nursing school?
   This was a fill in the blank question.
2. In most papers, how did you write?
   This was a check all that apply question, with the responses, “descriptive,” “long, extensive,” “short, to the point,” “mostly full of terminology,” and “easy for most people to comprehend.
3. What were the most important parts of your papers?
   This was a rating question, with the responses, “easy to understand,” “length,” “description,” usefulness (to yourself and/or who you were researching for,” and “just because it was assigned/just to get it done”.
4. What is the main type of writing you do as a nurse?
   This was a fill in the blank question
5. Do you ever use the types of writing that you did in college, today?
This was a multiple choice, with the responses, “yes, every day,” “sometimes,” “once,” and “never.”

6. When giving patients documents, how do you give them?
   This was a multiple choice, with the responses, “Orally,” “On paper,” and “both.”

7. Have you ever given patients information that you have written yourself?
   This was a yes or no question.

8. How do you provide difficult information to a patient to make them understand?
   This was a fill in the blank.

9. Do you think writing in nursing school (in nursing and English courses) prepared you for the writing that you do every day?
   This was a multiple choice, with the responses, “Yes,” “Kind of,” and “Not at all.”

By clicking on the analyze tab, within the “Creator’s” portion of SurveyMonkey, the results are completely tabulated and analyzed. The author also analyzed the results from the fill-in-the-blank responses by looking at them and tabulated the similar answers.

Using the snowball sampling method, the author contacted two nurses who have been working in the nursing field for well over 30 years. She contacted her aunt who worked over 30 years in Concord Hospital Day Surgery in New Hampshire, having connections at both the main hospital and Concord Hospital-At Horseshoe Pond. She also contacted a family friend who works at Sentara Leigh Hospital’s Emergency Room in Norfolk, VA, having connections with some of the Sentara Hospital system. Ritchotte asked these nurses, so that she would not know the people who were filling out the surveys. The subject nurses were from New Hampshire and Virginia, but all attended different nursing schools. The survey was completed by mostly females, as male nurses are rarer. With nurses varying from five years to fresh out of school, it allows this study to provide a variation of nurses.

Results

With the research collected using SurveyMonkey, the author was able to analyze and comprise charts and tables using the responses of the nurses. The survey was set up allowing different answers to be input and 15 surveys were received back. Each of the surveys were completely filled out and all of the answers were tabulated and recorded. The survey was split into two pages. The first page asked questions about nursing school and the writing done there, while the second page concentrated on the writing done currently as a nurse and a reflection upon how the writing helped.

On the first page, question 1 asked what the main type of writing done in nursing school. This being a fill in the blank answer, the responses were mixed. Seven nurses answered with “research-based papers”, with two extending that response to “heavily research-based.” Two answered with “case studies” and two others answered with “care plans.” The remaining four nurses answered discussing the need to be informative throughout the papers and clinical logs, and stressed the use of APA formatting. The second question asked how writing was done in most papers. Ten nurses responded, saying that the papers had to be descriptive, six said long and extensive, five said easy for most people to comprehend, three said short, to the point, and finally, one nurse said that papers were full of terminology (Figure 1). For question three, the most important parts of papers, the average showed that ability to understand, descriptions, length, and to get the assignment completed were all equal parts important to each other, ranking as being “important”. Usefulness, to the student and professor, did rank in as being most
important. The answer, “just because it was assigned/just to get it done”, received varied responses, though. The responses ranged from one voting that it was not important, two said it was neutral, three said it was most important, three again said that it was a little important. 40.0% voted that it was important, that was the highest percentile of votes for that response.

On the second page, question 4 asked what the main type of writing done as a nurse was. This was another fill in the blank answer, with four responding with nursing or narrative progress notes. Seven responded with charting. The remaining four responded with factual, descriptive, and technical assessments. Question 5 asked if the writing done in nursing school was used as a nurse. 53.3% responded no, while 40.0% said sometimes, and 6.7% voted that it is used every day (Figure 2). Question 6 asked how documents were given to patients. 100% responded that documents were given both orally and on paper. It was asked in question 7 if any information was provided to a patient that a nurse had written themselves. 60% responded no, while the remaining nurses responded with that they had written out directions for medicines, procedures, foot care, instructions, discharge information and tips, additional information on disease processes, and tailored information from reputable sources for patient-specific needs. Question 8 asked how the nurse would provide information to help a patient understand the material. 53.33% responded orally, 25% responded with that they used handouts and written materials. The remaining nurses discussed that they used the patient education portal or the teach back method. Question 9, asked if the writing courses taken in nursing school, via nursing courses and English courses, had prepared these nurses for the field. 40% of these individuals said yes, another 40% said kind of, and the remaining 20% responded with no (Figure 3).

Discussion

To interpret these results, the author looked at all of the answers and analyzed them. Based on the responses received from the survey, it is determined that the writing courses are mostly helpful and help to prepare for the writing done as a nurse. The nurses in the survey answered that they mostly completed papers in college, but most nurses use charting and progress notes. It was not noted that this was learned at all throughout the courses taken in college. The results are similar to that of the article by Lee Spears. Spears found that the writing taught in the undergraduate programs did not prepare the students to become managers and nurses. It is also mentioned in his article that students felt like some writing was given to them to complete, but never taught to them. The results collected through this survey agreed with the research done and information found by Lee Spears.

These results also echoed the work of Dean Whitehead. This article was about how nurses cope with having these new forms of writing being given to them instead of taught to them. He found that a lot of the nursing students that he tested did not know how to complete writings that they are expected to execute quickly and completely. The results from the survey taken by Ritchotte show that nurses do understand how to do this paperwork and writing, however the survey does not mention whether or not the nurses struggled when first entering the field. The nurses from Ritchotte’s survey knew how to chart and complete various progress notes and assessments, according to the results. The nurses were proficient and felt like the writing done in nursing school prepared them, but also did not include if the charting, note, and assessment writing skills were taught to them in the nursing courses or English courses.

In the article from allnurses.com, an example is given of how grammatical and incorrect writing can cast a shadow in the professional world. In the writings, notes, assessments, discharges, etc., that the nurses from Ritchotte’s survey provide to patients, they must have to
use proper grammar and spelling. According to the allnurses.com article, their credibility could be compromised with lack of correct grammar and spelling. The article discusses how the professional nursing career could be compromised due to judgment from peers and administration. This can also affect another life, as well. Directions and tips could be misinterpreted. All of the nurses said that they provided information to patients orally and in written form. The importance of these notes is substantial and a misinterpretation could have high risks. All of these problems could be solved by looking to the OWL by Purdue, “Writing as a Nurse” website.

The writing done in nursing courses, that prepare nursing students for the writing that they will have to do on the job, are research papers, care plans, critical logs, and case studies. These papers were written with the usefulness in mind, as well as keeping it easy to understand, and making them descriptive. The writing done in nursing courses prepared nurses to do charting, patient assessments, and progress notes. Nurses also use the knowledge learned in collegiate courses to help them tailor discharge and treatment instructions to patients, having to write them descriptively and easy to understand.

Conclusion

In conclusion to the question, “How does the writing done in nursing courses prepare nursing students for the writing that they will have to do on the job?” The writing in nursing courses prepares the students for the information given and asked of them as nurses. This writing does not prepare them for the types of writing that is done on the job. According to this research and the works of Dean Whitehead and Lee Spears, the types of writing required of nurses are never taught to them. Nursing students are expected to know how to chart, and how to take these detail-oriented notes, that are so crucial to know how to do. It would be highly beneficial to have a course, or a few hour-long sessions discussing and teaching nursing students how to do these important types of writing required of them in the field.

All other writing should by no means be eliminated. The papers, research-based, case studies, and care plans alike, clearly benefitted the nurses in this study. The papers are used to teach the students the information and allow the students to immerse themselves and absorb the information crucial to this career. Having these sessions to teach the nursing students how to record, write down, and complete the types of writing required of the nursing field, can only be beneficial.
References