



An Open Letter to Student Authors: Addressing the Challenges

**By: Sandra P. Hirst RN, PhD, Rebecca Stares MSW, Carol-Lynne Le Navenec RN, PhD
University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada**

Corresponding author: Sandra P. Hirst. Email: shirst@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

In this article, we examine the challenges post-secondary students face as they transition from writing as an academic requirement to its use as a strategy for their life-long learning and professional development. We offer strategies to address these challenges. We make several assumptions. The first is that students hold a set of personal beliefs about academic writing, which influence their motivation and engagement in the writing process. The second is that writing is a strategy to promote competency in professional practice. The third is that the barriers and challenges to successful and sustainable writing can be overcome.

Keywords: lifelong learning, students, professional development

For new authors, the experience of writing for publication is often a frightening one, yet it is a valuable skill for professional development. New authors often emerge from student roles; they write numerous papers during their academic programs to demonstrate their learning about a subject. However, many papers are not suitable for publication due to the differing objectives when writing for publication versus writing to fulfill course requirements. At the same time, in the 21st century, members of regulated health and human service professions need to consider publication as a pathway to maintain their licensure, demonstrate their commitment to the development of the profession, develop a professional voice and identity, and advance clinical and policy-based ideas.

In this article, we examine the challenges influencing the development of writing as an ongoing learning activity and a strategy for professional success. We make several assumptions. The first is that the root source of motivation to write is a set of beliefs about writing held by both the students and the educational institutions. The second is that writing is a strategy to promote competency in professional practice and represents a process of lifelong learning. The third is that the barriers and challenges students face in writing for publication can be overcome.

Background

Writing occupies an important and central position in post-secondary education because it is often the principal method that faculty educators use to evaluate student performance, students use to communicate their learning, and the basis upon which their degree is awarded. As Kuiken and Vedder (2020) wrote “academic language proficiency, particularly academic writing, appears to be significantly related to academic achievement” (p. 1). Upon graduation, educators often hear that course papers and other written assignments are deleted from computers or placed in recycling bins. Yet, health care and human service professionals are expected both to communicate, often in writing, with colleagues and clients throughout their careers; and to maintain their competencies through various learning activities. Students need to be motivated to enter, persist, and succeed in this often-confusing space that we call academic writing. Jefferies, et al. (2018) in reporting the findings of their study on academic literacy noted that students need assistance to develop academic literacy skills when they commence their undergraduate nursing degree, to facilitate their professional development. To help these students become good writers, it is necessary to go beyond simply assigning writing tasks or handing out how-to documents. Educators must start conversations with students, and with a shared vocabulary, to create a space in which students can begin to understand how academic writing expectations and skills can impact their professional development. In this space, students can reflect on this understanding and relate them to their previous experiences to begin to understand the transition process and how it can support their professional development.

As editors of the *International Journal of Nursing Student Scholarship*, we are committed to helping faculty and students learn more about the publishing process. We believe that the process of publishing is a step forward in students’ life-long learning process, including their professional development and contribution. We also believe that academic writing and writing for publication share specific characteristics, both are a unique genre of writing because each is governed by specific and similar conventions and rules. Our journal is intended for student authors at the undergraduate and graduate levels of their education to develop competencies and successes as a published academic writer.

Addressing the Challenges

When students struggle with academic writing, what determines whether they give up or embrace the obstacle and work to overcome it? Barriers may occur due to anxiety (Huerta et al., (2017), lack of motivation (Ling et al., 2021), English as a second language (Abadikhah et al., 2018), perceived lack of time or confidence (Staudt et al., 2003), and difficulty in integrating sources effectively and appropriately into their writing (Cummings et al., 2016). However, there are also strategies to support students in overcoming barriers and to meaningfully engage with written scholarship. Explored within the next several sections are some of the challenges and strategies that faculty and students can employ to address them.

Post-Secondary Role Transition

Writing is a process that is influenced by students' perspectives, beliefs, behaviours, and values, which have been shaped by such individual and external factors as previous academic success, family, culture, peers, and mentors. Baker (2013) used the term *emotional transition*, viewing transitions as processes of change and focusing on students' sense of self and learning identities. The changes that students experience in their transition to university include changes to ways of learning, to academic pressures, to new physical instructional locations, to ways of demonstrating knowledge and what is perceived as knowledge. Such changes lead to the formation of new identities, which impact students' emotional lives (McMillan, 2013). This change into a post-secondary role can be extended into the change into a professional identify and from academic writing to manuscript writing. As Willems et al. (2021) argued, the constructs of academic adjustment and academic integration can provide complementary perspectives on the academic transition of students to a particular profession.

Writers become lifelong learners as they continue refining their abilities to creatively encounter, to make sense of, to engage and to depict life. Wood (2018) acknowledged healthcare professionals have valued knowledge, and that writing enables "their voice to be heard by a wider audience and to share best and evidence-based practice" (p. 20). For Roush (2017), writing and publishing captures the essence of practice, and offers the "opportunity to make a difference in an untold number of patients' lives (p. 64). Letting voice emerge through the creative writing process requires openness and discernment. The desire to reclaim, to derive confidence in and to develop one's voice is the beginning of coming into one's own writing.

Finding the Motivation

A reasonable starting point is the perception that writing has value. If writing stops with graduation, then there is less motivation to master the skill and engage in writing as part of the lifelong learning and continuing competency process. Most students appeared to believe that it contributes to achieving academic, while faculty members add the value of vocational goals.

However, post secondary education rarely includes explicit writing instruction, despite the essential contribution of writing skills to learning and the need for good writing skills in sustainability to reach a broad audience of both scholars and practitioners. In an analysis of 27 international master's programs, while nearly 30% of student course time was spent on research specific content, not one program featured a course specifically on writing (O'Byrne et al., 2014).

Research has highlighted the benefits of collaboration between expert and less experienced writers. Carpenter and Peña (2017) reported that role modeling experiences typically emerged in post secondary environments or were influenced by them. Participants, in their study, described the role of an institutional agent (e.g., faculty member) who served as a facilitator to foster self-authorship development through challenging assumptions and supporting internal reflection. Similarly, as students learn to integrate writing into their professional lifestyle, mentors can help overcome the negative emotional responses which may accompany negative feedback or rejection. Negative emotional responses can have adverse consequences on student motivation (Winstone et al., 2017).

Peer Support

Some researchers (Wilson et al., 2015) have reservations about the effectiveness of the revision comments made by students. Students also reported a feeling of unfairness and believed that peers tended to give them low scores because they were competitors (Wilson et al., 2015). It has been indicated that these practices can be compromised by students' lack of trust in peers' abilities to provide effective feedback (Lee, 2015; Wang, 2014). Students believe that their peers often offer unconstructive and unhelpful advice, addressing surface problems and mechanical errors at the expense of more meaningful issues such as the development of ideas, organisation, or the overall focus of what they are trying to write (Liu & Hansen, 2002). Vickerman (2009) reported that 45% of students indicated a neutral stance or disagreement that peer assessment had enhanced their content knowledge.

Evans (2015) showed that peer review did not provide equal benefit to all as the quality of feedback varied between students. Sometimes peers may focus too much on surface-level errors (Tsui & Ng, 2000) when their own writing skills are undeveloped, or when unaccustomed to providing critical feedback. Ruegg (2018) compared changes in self-efficacy over a period of one academic year between two groups of Japanese university students. One group received teacher feedback on every preliminary draft for the one-year period while the other group gave and received peer feedback on every preliminary draft over the same period. It was found that the teacher feedback group increased in writing self-efficacy significantly more than the peer feedback group.

We should note that there is contrary evidence. Student peer review can be a useful formative assessment method that provides feedback to improve learning experiences (Mulder et

al., 2014). Regarding psychological impact, students have felt ownership over their writing, affective support, and learning orientation in peer feedback practice (Lee, 2015; Zhao, 2014). Because peer assessment is a fundamentally social and collaborative learning activity, learners' interpersonal beliefs can impact its outcomes (Panadero, 2016). For example, with good support and training, undergraduate ecology students were able to provide a valuable contribution to their peers learning and to their own educational experiences (Harland et al., 2017). Reddy, Harland, Wass, and Wald (2020) reported on the experiences of undergraduate science students who were systematically trained in peer review over three years. Students saw peer review as a type of research inquiry that led to a deeper understanding of (a) disciplinary knowledge, (b) being a peer reviewer, (c) knowledge about self, and (d) knowledge of others. Similarly, in an article describing how peer review was used as part of a major assessment for a third-year social studies unit, many students felt it had helped direct their learning (Moore & Teather, 2013).

When comparing experienced educators and novice student comments, there is some evidence that peer comments can be more helpful than those provided by teachers (Cho et al., 2006). Huisman et al. (2018) reported in their study, which compared the writing performance of undergraduate students (N = 83) who either provided or received anonymous written peer feedback in the context of an authentic academic writing task. Findings showed that both providing and receiving feedback led to similar improvements of writing performance. Students may understand what their peers are saying more easily than expert comments because peers share problems, languages, and knowledge (Cho & Macarthur, 2010).

Understanding the Process

For students, the challenges are diverse. For some students, the level of 'topic saturation' 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 not feel overdone. Heyman and Cronin (2005) recommended publishing literature reviews, should innovative perspectives prove difficult. Other students may feel that there is no reason for them to write; overemphasizing clinical practice or failing to consider publication as a means of continuing education, professional development, or as occurring in compliance with their regulatory body's *Standards of Practice*. Publishing is not always a priority for them. For example, the assignments they write are primarily a means to an end: specifically, the undergraduate degree they are seeking. Wood (2018) noted "a lack of confidence or knowledge of the process, and insufficient time prevents practitioners from writing" (p. 20).

Consequently, for faculty, motivating students to concentrate on writing for publication may be difficult. In addition, challenges are presented by the nature of assessment tasks, which produce assignments that may not be easily transformed into a publication. Helping students to foster a lifestyle of writing, and engage in writing as a continuous process, may be essential in

transferring academic writing values to publication. Motivation is a primary factor underlying instigation, direction, and persistence of on-going learning behaviour. Goldman, Goodboy, and Weber (2017), in their study found that the fulfillment of students' psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence) would mediate the relationship between personalized education practices and intrinsic motivation.

Gearing up for Publication Success

The following tips are suggested for novice writers.

- Find yourself a partner who you respect and whose company you enjoy.
- Be confident in your own abilities.
- Keep track of your ideas for future papers.
- Assess what you do well and determine areas that you need to improve upon.
- Set reasonable expectations. There may not be such a thing as a “perfect” paper.
- Create a writing routine; identify specific writing times and space for yourself.
- Set due dates.
- If desired, find a mentor or take a writing for professional publication course.
- Do not be defensive about suggestions, such as edits coming from an editor or reviewer.

Conclusion

For a variety of reasons, student writers experience challenges as they attempt to negotiate traditional post-secondary academic expectations and translate their skills into professional publications. Developing more complex understandings of the value and process of writing and more comfort in the processes is essential to increasing motivation and positive engagement. With the support of ourselves, as editors of the *International Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, we believe that we can facilitate sustainable academic and professional success. We wish to clearly voice our belief that student voices matter, and that their perspective is to be valued both in the academic setting and in professional communities of practice.

References

- Abadikhah, S., Aliyan, Z., & Talebi, S. H. (2018). EFL students' attitudes towards self-regulated learning strategies in academic writing. *Issues in Educational Research*, 28(1), 1-17.
<https://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/IJAL/article/view/6860>
- Baker, S. (2013). Transitions and shifting understandings of writing: Building rich pictures of how moving from school to university is experienced through exploration of students' discourses of writing. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 7(2), A35-A49.

- Carpenter, A. M., & Peña, E. V. (2017). Self-authorship among first-generation undergraduate students: A qualitative study of experiences and catalysts. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 10(1), 86. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0040026>
- Cho, K., & MacArthur, C. (2010). Student revision with peer and expert reviewing. *Learning and Instruction*, 20(4), 328–338.
- Cho, K., Schunn, C. D., & Charney, D. (2006). Commenting on writing: Typology and perceived helpfulness of comments from novice peer reviewers and subject matter experts. *Written Communication*, 23(3), 260-294.
- Cumming, A, Lai, C & Cho, H. (2016). ‘Students’ writing from sources for academic purposes: A synthesis of recent research’, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 23, 47–58.
- Evans, C. (2015). Students’ perspectives on the role of peer feedback in supporting learning. *Journal of Cognitive Education and Psychology*, 14(1), 110–125.
- Goldman, Z. W., Goodboy, A. K., & Weber, K. (2017). College students’ psychological needs and intrinsic motivation to learn: An examination of self-determination theory. *Communication Quarterly*, 65(2), 167-191. doi:10.1080/01463373.2016.1215338
- Harland, T., Wald, N., & Randhawa, H. (2017). Student peer review: Enhancing formative feedback with a rebuttal. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(5), 801–811. doi:10.1080/02602938.2016.1194368
- Heyman, B., & Cronin, P. (2005). Writing for publication: Adapting academic work into articles. *British Journal of Nursing*, 14(7), 400-403. doi:[10.12968/bjon.2005.14.7.17947](https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2005.14.7.17947)
- Huerta, M., Goodson, P., Beigi, M., & Chlup, D. (2017). Graduate students as academic writers: Writing anxiety, self-efficacy and emotional intelligence. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 36(4), 716-729. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1238881>
- Huisman, B., Saab, N., Van Driel, J., & Van Den Broek, P. (2018). Peer feedback on academic writing: undergraduate students’ peer feedback role, peer feedback perceptions and essay performance. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(6), 955-968. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1424318>
- Jefferies, D., McNally, S., Roberts, K., Wallace, A., Stunden, A., D'Souza, S., & Glew, P. (2018). The importance of academic literacy for undergraduate nursing students and its relationship to future professional clinical practice: A systematic review. *Nurse Education Today*, 60, 84-91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.09.020>

Lee, M. K. (2015). Peer feedback in second language writing: Investigating junior secondary students' perspectives on inter-feedback and intrafeedback. *System*, 55, 1–10.

Ling, G., Elliot, N., Burstein, J. C., McCaffrey, D. F., MacArthur, C. A., & Holtzman, S. (2021). Writing motivation: A validation study of self-judgment and performance. *Assessing Writing*, 48, 100509. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2020.100509>

Liu, J., & Hansen, J. (2002). *Peer response in second language writing classrooms*. The University of Michigan Press.

Kuiken, F., & Vedder, I. (2020). The interplay between academic writing abilities of Dutch undergraduate students, a remedial writing programme, and academic achievement. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/13670050.2020.1726280

McMillan, W. (2013). Transition to university: the role played by emotion. *European Journal of Dental Education*, 17(3), 169-176.

Moore, C., & Teather, S. (2013). Engaging students in peer review: Feedback as learning. *Issues in Educational Research*, 23(2), 196–211.

Panadero, E. (2016). Is it safe? Social, interpersonal, and human effects of peer assessment: a review and future directions. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Human factors and social conditions of assessment*. (pp. 1–39). Routledge.

Reddy, K., Harland, T., Wass, R., & Wald, N. (2020). Student peer review as a process of knowledge creation through dialogue. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1781797>

Roush, K. (2017). Becoming a published writer. *American Journal of Nursing*, 117(3), 63-66. doi:10.1097/01.NAJ.0000513291.04075.82

Ruegg, R. (2018). The effect of peer and teacher feedback on changes in EFL students' writing self efficacy. *The Language Learning Journal*, 46, 87– 102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2014.958190>

Staudt, M. M., Dulmus, C., & Bennett, G. A. (2003). Facilitating writing by practitioners: Survey of practitioners who have published. *Social Work*, 48(1), 75-83. doi:[10.1093/sw/48.1.75](https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/48.1.75)

Vickerman, P. (2009). Student perspectives on formative peer assessment: an attempt to deepen learning? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34, 221–230. doi:[10.1080/02602930801955986](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930801955986).

- Willems, J., Coertjens, L., & Donche, V. (2021). Entering higher professional education: Unveiling first-year students' key academic experiences and their occurrence over time. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. doi:[10.3389/fpsyg.2021.577388](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.577388)
- Wilson, M. J., Diao, M. M., & Huang, L. (2015). "I'm not here to learn how to mark someone else's stuff": An Investigation of an online peer-to-peer review workshop tool." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 40*(1), 15–32. doi:10.1080/02602938.2014.881980.
- Winstone, N. E., Nash, R. A., Parker, M., & Rowntree, J. (2017). Supporting learners' agentic engagement with feedback: A systematic review and a taxonomy of recipience processes. *Educational Psychologist, 52*(1),17–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2016.1207538>
- Wood, C. (2018). Writing for publication: Sharing your clinical knowledge and skills. *British Journal of Community Nursing, 23*(1), 20-22. doi:10.12968/bjcn.2018.23.1.20.
- Zhao, H. H. (2014). Investigating teacher-supported peer assessment for EFL writing. *ELT Journal, 68*, 155–168.