

Overcoming Writing Challenges in Bilingual Nursing Students: A Funds of Knowledge

Collaboration with Pre-Service Education Students

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To support bilingual nursing students who have historically struggled with writing challenges, a pilot program was developed that provided individual tutoring from students in the university's Education program. Education pre-service teachers who are being trained in bilingual and/or English as a second language (ESL) education methods are well suited to bolster the linguistic development of students in nursing programs. We focused on writing because, while students may speak English well, writing is an area of special concern in nursing and other health professional programs (Fuller, 2012; Mbulu, 2015; Starkey, 2015). Student interest in the program was evaluated along with program effectiveness and sustainability. Positive feedback from the pilot indicates that further research is needed to determine if pairing nursing students with education students trained in second-language instructional methods is a strategy that results in improved course writing assignments. Whereas we use *ESL* to indicate programmatic and instructional approaches, the terms *bilingual* and *EL* (English learner) are used in this study to describe students who come from a background where English was acquired as a second or additional language.

To help increase the diversity of nursing and other health professions Washington State University Tri-Cities campus and College on Nursing developed and implemented the *Nursing Pathways Project* funded for seven years by the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA) Bureau of Health Professionals Workforce Diversity grants program. The purpose of the funding program is to increase the diversity and numbers of BSN nurses coming from and working in rural and underserved communities to improve health disparities. *Nursing Pathways* students were considered disadvantaged (designated by HRSA criteria) and the majority were

either Hispanic or Native American. Pre-licensure and RN-BSN students engaged in activities that included academic preparation, financial and social support, cultural and language adaptation and assistance, and mentoring by nursing student peers and the project team. While these interventions addressed academic, personal, and social challenges students face in the university setting, they did not address in-depth the specific needs for intensive writing assistance of the bilingual student (Junious, Malecha, Tart & Young, 2011; Weaver & Jackson, 2011).

Background

The current nursing workforce in the United States is challenged by an under-representation of registered nurses (RN) who reflect the cultural, linguistic, and economic characteristics of the communities they serve. Unfortunately, the current state of the nursing workforce does not mirror the diverse profile of the overall U.S. population. Whereas 17% of the U.S. population was reported as Hispanic/Latino, only 5.4% of the total nursing workforce was part of this demographic group (National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, 2015). While there are multiple factors that shape post-secondary access for ethnic minority groups (Johnson & Castellon, 2014), the movement to increase diversity in the nursing workforce specifically necessitates providing additional academic support structures for EL students who speak English as a second or additional language during nursing education programs (Olson, 2012). Hispanic students, particularly those from rural and underserved communities, often come to post-secondary education with limited English proficiency and face academic and cultural barriers for successful completion of their nursing programs (Junious, Malecha, Tart & Young, 2011; Starkey, 2015).

Adequate language and cultural support is imperative for the didactic setting, standardized testing, and improving communication in clinical settings (Hansen & Beaver, 2012). In particular, challenges with literacy-based skills have been identified as a major barrier to the successful completion of pre-licensure nursing programs, not only in the United States, but also other English-speaking countries who are also experiencing increasing enrollment of international students (Betts, Shirley & Kennedy, 2017; Junious, Malecha, Tart & Young, 2011; Starkey, 2015). Studies show that while early identification for literacy interventions are valuable, this type of program alone may not be responsive to the individual needs of EL students (Crawford & Candlin, 2013; Donnell, 2015; Junious, Malecha, Tart & Young, 2011; Olson, 2012). While EL students often struggle with both reading fluency and comprehension, they also tend to take additional time in translating between English and their native language, especially when learning technical vocabulary and negotiating the syntax and grammar needed for decoding nursing documents such as care plans (Guhde, 2003; Olson, 2012). Considering that these trends echo similar academic struggles facing language minority students in the K-12 system (Baker & Wright, 2017; Johnson, 2014) and the limited expertise of nursing faculty in EL education models, we developed a pilot with the idea in mind that development and implementation of formal collaborations between the academic fields of Nursing and Education were feasible. Although the literature has much about EL students in nursing and the need to provide support, innovative and sustainable collaborations between university departments is not common.

Promoting Collaborative Support

Nursing education literature shows little use of support programs between departments or colleges for EL student support. ESL support programs usually rely on supplemental academic

resources. Additionally, faculty development programs have focused on developing teaching strategies for language difficulties, test-taking skills, and cultural differences in communication patterns and social norms rather than writing (Donnell, 2015; Dudas, 2011; Greenberg, 2013; Hansen & Beaver, 2012; Starkey, 2015). Using the need for writing skill enhancement among EL nursing students and education students needing clinical hours, we developed a sustainable project leveraging the expertise and needs of university students from the College of Education and College of Nursing for the benefit of all.

Tapping into Institutional Funds of Knowledge

While common institutional practice for supporting university students involves dedicating some type of tutoring position within the auspices of a student services department, our approach to ensuring student success was based on an innovative collaboration between the College of Education and the College of Nursing. In order to mitigate academic writing challenges faced by bilingual (Spanish/English) Latino students in the nursing program, we sought out a bilingual student in the College of Education teacher preparation program who would be able to simultaneously apply her training as an educator while drawing on her own language learning experiences and fulfilling her own programs requirements to effectively provide tutoring support.

The conceptual framework for the collaboration drew on the concept of “funds of knowledge to acknowledge” the set of strategies employed by both the tutor and the students to create a unique learning environment (González et al., 2005). The notion of funds of knowledge encompasses an individual’s historically accumulated set of abilities, strategies, or bodies of knowledge (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). In the context of our tutoring program, our funds of knowledge approach included academic and personal background knowledge, accumulated

life experiences, skills used to navigate everyday social contexts, and world view(s) structured by broader historically situated sociocultural forces. Applying a funds of knowledge approach to understanding students' overall sets of abilities and experiences helps teachers draw on these skills in classrooms to motivate their students during academic activities. This point is of significant relevance to the effectiveness of the tutor when scaffolding the Nursing students personal linguistic background to academic settings.

Kyle et al. (2005) explain that a "deeper understanding of the funds of knowledge held by families became a source [that] teachers drew upon in the immediacy of teaching, making subtle adjustments and connections to help children feel known and a part of the learning taking place" (p. 44). Inspired by this orientation to K-12 classroom pedagogy, our project is based on developing a model for training tutors in university teacher preparation programs to recognize and integrate nursing students' funds of knowledge in their instruction. In this type of academic context, not only can tutors draw on linguistic and personal funds of knowledge to engage the nursing students, they can also apply their "scholastic funds of knowledge" (i.e., the accumulated set of school-based skills, aptitudes, and habits students draw on when accomplishing *academic* tasks) to facilitate the students' learning processes (Johnson & Johnson, 2016, p. 107). Moreover, our emphasis on cultural competency by drawing on students' funds of knowledge as an essential component to supporting EL students addresses Rogan and San Miguel's (2006) finding that EL students often want to belong but continue to feel excluded.

While the funds of knowledge concept has been widely embraced within the K-12 community (Hogg, 2011; Rodriguez, 2013), much less documentation exists for post-secondary levels. Examples funds of knowledge within higher education contexts demonstrates how college students benefit from this type of support (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018). The concept

can also include *institutional* funds of knowledge—i.e., the accumulated set of social experiences, academic skills, and culturally situated world views held by students across academic units within a higher education setting. By using this framework, academic units can draw on the institutional funds of knowledge of students from other academic units for the collective purpose of supporting the scholastic progress of all students. There is a bidirectional benefit to departments and individual tutors by promoting the collective professional growth of students from both programs.

Methods

The purpose of this pilot project was to provide additional support and resources for bilingual BSN students who were also 1st generation college students and from communities traditionally underrepresented in university nursing programs. This support was in addition to the traditional academic assistance available on campus. A faculty member from the Bilingual/ESL Education program was responsible for choosing the tutor from the teacher preparation program. The tutor was in junior standing at the university and in her 2nd year of the teacher preparation program. The tutor's education emphasis involved training in bilingual and ESL education methods (Echevarria et al., 2013; Egbert & Ernst-Slavit, 2010; Freman & Freeman, 2006; Freeman et al., 2016; Herrell & Jordan, 2011; High, 1993). Being a bilingual Latina and first-generation university student herself, she was well prepared to work with students from multi-cultural and multi-lingual backgrounds. The tutor was provided with an hourly stipend and committed to being available up to 18 hours a week during the academic year.

The nursing students were made aware of the opportunity to work with an ESL tutor by faculty, staff, or by their peer mentors. Given the distance between the nursing building and the main campus where the education department was located (about 20 minutes each way) varying

student schedules, the tutor was available by email, phone, or Skype. These flexible methods of support access also align with findings of the positive impact that technology-based tutoring has on nursing students from an ESL background (Rogan & San Miguel, 2012).

Over the course of the academic year, 11 Latina nursing students (4 pre-licensure BSN and 7 RN-BSN) received tutoring on a weekly basis during the academic year seeking assistance for 16 courses, writing a job application cover letter, a power point presentation, and a scholarship thank you note. Each student required tutoring between 1 and 9 ½ hours per course for a total of 81 hours each. One pre-licensure BSN student received assistance for eight courses using 28 tutoring hours.

Results

The student tutor funds of knowledge program corroborated the literature that documents the challenges EL students have with the academic writing demands of nursing courses (Donnell, 2015; Fuller, 2012; Starkey, 2015; Weaver & Jackson, 2011). Results were gathered through individual interviews with the tutor and the students separately. The tutor reported that the bilingual nursing students had significant writing challenges with grammar, tenses, APA formatting issues, and the use of appropriate punctuation. The tutor also noted the biggest challenge was the use of past and present tense rules—a common issue for EL students (Guhde, 2003; Olson, 2012). Because this tutor had been trained to recognize and address these types of issues as part of her teacher preparation program, she was able to meet the challenge suggesting that ESL programs teaching ESL instructors must include writing strategies in their curriculums.

Student feedback about the tutoring was unanimously positive, with all reporting that the tutor answered questions in a way that helped them understand APA format better while also

improving their writing skills. They also stated that tutoring eased their anxiety of writing essays and papers. As one student described:

Even if you are aware of all of the rules, it is easy to miss a detail after you have edited the paper several times. Having a person who is familiar with all of the rules and has a fresh set of eyes helping to identify and remediate the potential issues is wonderful. It is also nice to have a resource that is not a book or the Internet. Sometimes things are not clear in a book, having a tutor allows us to clarify without spending tons of time trying to figure it out alone.

Similarly, another nursing student stated: “Before using this tutor as a resource, I found myself questioning my work. After [the tutor’s name] reviewed my essays, my confidence in my writing began to increase as I saw my potential and improvement in writing.” When the tutor completed reviewing tutoring notes, the students’ primary issue was the appropriate use of tense despite many hours of assistance and practice exercises.

When asked what else could enhance the effectiveness of an ESL tutor in the future, students responded that introducing the tutor as a resource at the beginning of their program and posting reminders in announcements would be beneficial. They also reported their satisfaction with the service, “My writing skills improved and for that, I will forever be thankful” and “I am very happy with the effectiveness of the tutor for us. I cannot think of a way that she could be more effective.”

An additional instrument of support that did not show up on the nursing students’ academic work involved the social and cultural empathy provided by the tutor. Considering that all of the nursing students identified for academic support were Latina, we intentionally recruited

a Latina pre-service teacher to act as both a tutor and cultural liaison. Nelson and Guerra (2011) describe a cultural liaison is “someone who has standing within a community group and is willing to serve as a link between the community and the school” (p. 57). In this regard, we believe that the interpersonal understanding between the tutor and students played an important role in the process. As the tutor reported:

I was able to relate to the students by understanding the language and academic factors involved in the process of writing a paper. It was easy for me to interact with the students because I was able to understand their language-based struggles with writing, as I was once there in my beginning years of college. Linguistically, I feel like I had an empathetic perspective on their writing issues. Academically, coming from a student point of view, I was able to be the tutor but also someone who knew how to learn as a student.

Although individual academic support is a major component for promoting student progress (Weaver & Jackson, 2011), our use of culturally and linguistically relevant tutoring enhanced the overall learning experience of the students. Based on this type of individual attention provided by the tutor, all students who were served by this program demonstrated an increase in their academic work and successfully completed their courses.

Nursing Education Implications

EL nursing students encounter more than the usual academic barriers we provide support for, such as speaking, reading, and test taking, in their nursing programs. Writing for all EL students is a primary concern that must be assessed and addressed even if the student appears to communicate well in the classroom and with patients in a clinical setting. Writing requires skills

that are unique and because nursing programs, or any health professions program requires students to become proficient writers to prepare for the demands of their professional role, writing is essential. It is essential not only to get to graduation and NCLEX passing but being able to write well has implications going well beyond these important benchmarks. While nursing faculty strive to be culturally competent in meeting the needs of bilingual students, unless specifically educated in the unique needs of teaching writing and appropriate workload time, benefits for students are generally limited.

Universities, colleges, and nursing programs must have support staff for students that can provide writing support which adds to the costs of the nursing program. Using a strategy such as this pilot project demonstrates is one way to provide quality support that is sustainable and low cost. In addition, it benefits nursing and education colleges and students in a bidirectional learning process that models what we are increasingly demanding of our students- interprofessional education and practice. Although this pilot project was small and done on a campus where students were face to face, we envision this process could be done using distance learning technologies. We have done this with other learning support. Learning specialists met with students at other sites on the telephone or through video communication technology (e.g., Skype). On-screen document sharing was also effective to work on writing in real time. As distance and online learning grows, providing student services in nursing demands the creative application of technology.

Conclusions

The pilot program to promote interdisciplinary collaboration demonstrated an approach for academically supporting university students from the College of Nursing and the College of Education. Additional findings align with Hansen and Beaver's (2012) recommended language-

learning strategies for student success while also addressing the gap in specific methods to address an overall lack of effective cultural support. Our model of building on the cultural and social capital of the tutor also answers Fuller's (2012) call for Nursing educators to have specific training for working with EL Nursing students to engage their linguistic and cultural background experiences. By drawing on the institutional funds of knowledge of students in the College of Education, we were able to provide academic support grounded in shared cultural and linguistic experiences between the nursing students and the tutor, while also utilizing the overall professional expertise emphasized in the teacher preparation program. Although our particular model has focused on supporting literacy-based academic challenges facing EL students in the Nursing program, we contend that the same model can be used across multiple different university programs.

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