

Developmental Reading and Nursing Program Partnerships: Helping Students Succeed in Reading-Intensive Coursework

RYAN D. COSTANZO
MOUNT ALOYSIUS COLLEGE

AMANDA FITZPATRICK
MOUNT ALOYSIUS COLLEGE

While clinical competence and hands-on ability are crucial to nursing, students in college-based nursing programs face almost certain failure if they lack skills and strategies for textbook reading. Faculty and staff at a small liberal arts college with a two-year nursing program used focus groups consisting of first-semester and final-semester students to identify 17 reading strategies used by successful students. Underprepared readers must be taught these same strategies for how to deal with the intense reading associated with undergraduate nursing, and such instruction should be mandatory and provided prior to entry into nursing coursework. Developmental reading educators are urged to partner with their colleagues in nursing to support underprepared readers who aspire to become nurses.

Introduction

Wolkowitz and Kelley's (2010) research has identified knowledge of science and a strong reading ability as two of the major factors contributing to nursing students' initial academic success. While hands-on ability is crucial to nursing, students face almost certain academic failure if they lack skills and strategies for textbook reading. Mount Aloysius College¹—a comprehensive, co-educational, liberal arts and sciences college founded in west central Pennsylvania in 1853 by the Sisters of Mercy—is home to approximately 2,500 students. Small class sizes and a solid reputation in the health sciences attract many of our students,

¹ We wish to thank the Nursing Division, the Office of Admissions, and the Office of Institutional Research for their assistance with this article.

including those who choose the two-year associate's degree in nursing. Some, however, struggle. Nursing students who utilize tutoring services often report to tutors and instructors that they find it difficult to complete the assigned readings outside of class, and those who provide tutoring services to nursing students note that struggling students often demonstrate ineffective approaches to learning from their textbooks in conjunction with time management issues.

Two-year nursing programs at undergraduate liberal arts and sciences institutions are reading- and testing-intensive programs. Students who aspire to earn nursing degrees quickly find themselves overwhelmed if they cannot manage their assigned textbook reading. Nursing programs like the one offered by Mount Aloysius College require students to demonstrate hands-on ability, but the students must also understand the reasoning behind medical procedures and pass classroom examinations based on textbook content. Nursing students are further required to be well-versed in the natural and social sciences, and so they must be prepared to handle the reading demands of their pre- and co-requisite content classes, including anatomy and physiology, chemistry, microbiology, and psychology.

Developmental reading educators have an important role to play when it comes to preparing these aspiring nurses. We believe that developmental reading educators can provide an invaluable service to underprepared students by collaborating with nurse educators to provide mandatory, effective remediation prior to students' entry into a nursing program. In this article, we will offer our rationale for such instruction, we will share what we learned as a result of focus group interviews of nursing students, and we will offer some suggestions for developmental reading instructors.

Mandatory Reading Strategy Instruction for Nursing Students

A question of pedagogical and programmatic importance at our institution is this: What can be done to facilitate academic success in a demanding pre-professional health science program that requires a high level of skill and strategy for textbook reading? Underprepared students need explicit instruction on necessary textbook reading skills and strategies prior to their entry into the

nursing program, which, due to the quick pace and intensity of the lessons, does not allow them extended amounts of time to decide how best to handle the reading load. Students who are neither skillful nor strategic textbook readers run a high risk of failure, and the task facing educators is to select and implement preventive measures that offer those at-risk students the opportunity to succeed. Our argument is that mandatory placement into developmental reading courses is an efficient and effective means of preparing students for what lies ahead, provided that such courses offer students the opportunity to engage with the kinds of texts they will deal with as students in an undergraduate nursing program. Learning to engage with authentic texts in ways that successful nursing students report doing is critical for the underprepared reader, and reading educators should take every opportunity to share with underprepared readers what successful nursing students actually report doing to master course content.

We are not the first researchers to propose interventions that would benefit underprepared nursing students. Cramer & Davidhizar (2008) and Symes, Tart, Travis, and Toombs (2002), writing for *The Health Care Manager* and *Nurse Educator*, respectively, recognize the need to incorporate reading, studying, and test-taking strategies into the nursing curriculum. While Symes et al. (2002) are primarily concerned with improving academic performance within a nursing program, Cramer & Davidhizar (2008) take on the issue of improving performance on the nursing licensure examination (the NCLEX-RN). DiBartolo and Seldomridge, in a 2008 article for *Nurse Educator*, outline a number of additional research studies dealing with efforts to improve NCLEX-RN pass rates. In their conclusion, DiBartolo and Seldomridge (2008) argue "that nursing programs planning to implement intervention strategies should require participation and offer them to all students" (p. 825). This appeal for nursing students' mandatory participation in remediation was also made in the earlier article by Symes et al. (2002). More recently, at the Michigan Developmental Consortium's 2011 spring conference, Dr. Kay McClenney, Director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement, expounded upon the need to make remediation and participation in other essential student services mandatory because, as she put

it, “students don’t do optional.” Students, if given the choice, will often avoid the developmental courses into which they have been placed, as noted by Boylan in his 2009 article published by the *NADE Digest*. Undergraduate nursing programs demand a high level of sophistication when it comes to reading and test-taking, and because students may underestimate the demands of such programs, it is essential that those deemed at-risk be required to enroll in a developmental reading course wherein they gain practice with the fundamental skills and strategies that successful nursing students incorporate into their own reading and studying routine.

Effective developmental reading courses are designed with content area courses like nursing in mind (Mealey, 2003). As educators who provide tutoring and classroom instruction to both nursing students and developmental students, we wish to offer our support for cross-disciplinary collaboration between developmental education departments and nursing departments to aid in the retention and training of capable but underprepared nursing students. Cross-disciplinary collaboration between developmental education and nursing has been of benefit to students at our institution by enabling us to identify the reading and study strategies required for academic success in nursing and to promote our students’ use of these reading and study strategies in a mandatory developmental reading course.

Nursing Students’ Reading and Study Strategies Uncovered

Underprepared students need to know what reading and study habits are required for success in nursing, and perhaps the best way to learn about the demands of an undergraduate nursing program is to ask nursing students. Indeed, nursing students’ insights regarding reading and studying in their program should be shared with all students—especially those identified as at-risk or underprepared—who intend to pursue nursing as a major. First-semester (n=7) and final-semester (n=10) nursing students at our institution volunteered to participate in separate focus group interviews and in so doing, they shared their insights on the reading and study skills required for success in the two-year nursing program. Analysis of the transcripts generated from these

group discussions of 17 total students uncovered 17 strategies for mastering course content:

1. Re-reading and reviewing the text.
2. Answering end-of-chapter questions.
3. Cross-referencing instructor-generated notes and the instructor’s lecture with the textbook.
4. Predicting potential test questions when reading.
5. Highlighting and underlining critical portions of the text.
6. Creating personal study notes from the textbook.
7. Analyzing text structure while reading (e.g., distinguishing between main ideas and supporting details).
8. Analyzing pictures, charts, graphs, tables, diagrams, etc., to increase comprehension of concepts discussed in print.
9. Skimming the chapter prior to reading it more carefully to get a sense of the material.
10. Reading prior to class in order to follow the (textbook-focused) lecture more easily.
11. Gauging comprehension by taking online tests; using electronic sources of information (e.g., CD-ROMs, DVDs, websites) to improve comprehension.
12. Referring to other print sources to gain background knowledge or strengthen overall comprehension (e.g., workbooks, handbooks, other textbooks).
13. Making flashcards to allow for self-testing.
14. Reciting information aloud to assess comprehension.
15. Studying with classmates in pairs or groups.
16. Recording (textbook-based) lectures for later reference.
17. Connecting clinical experiences to textbook reading, and vice-versa, thereby reinforcing the textbook’s role in achieving professional competence.

It quickly became clear that success in the undergraduate

nursing program required a high level of engagement with textbooks. None of the students interviewed deemed it likely that students would be able to pass their classroom examinations without properly utilizing their textbooks.

Students named a total of 17 strategies to master course content, but perhaps most interesting is the fact that the beginning students, of whom all but one graduated from the program, were as capable as those nearing graduation when it came to identifying effective reading and study strategies. Fourteen of the 17 strategies listed were mentioned by students in both the first-semester and final-semester groups; therefore, it is evident that students, in order to increase their likelihood of success, must from the very beginning approach the study of nursing in a manner that pushes beyond the “surface-level learning strategies” on which students so often rely (Beyeler, 2003; Holschuh, 2003), especially students who are “average [or] low-performing” (Holschuh, 2003, p. 327). Surface-level approaches to mastering nursing content do not lead to a positive outcome for the learner, and this must be made clear from the very beginning—prior to the first day of any nursing course.

The students who volunteered for the focus group interviews were highly engaged in the conversations that took place. One student viewed participation in this study as being beneficial to nursing education and the profession of nursing. He saw it as his obligation to further teacher-researchers’ understanding of how students need to read and study in order to become graduate nurses. Perhaps the best indicator of participants’ motivation and academic engagement is the fact that only one of the 17 did not graduate from the nursing program. The student in question did not pass the freshman nursing course and disclosed to the faculty prior to dismissal from the program that weak study habits were to blame. All other students who were interviewed, though, successfully completed the two-year nursing program.

The focus group participants, with only one exception, had not taken a developmental reading course at our college. But while these randomly selected volunteers were largely able to score high enough on our institution’s placement exam to test-out

of developmental reading coursework, there are clear implications for students who wish to matriculate into the nursing program but who must first enroll in a developmental reading course. Over 30% of pre-nursing students enrolled during the 2011-2012 academic year at our college were required to take developmental reading. The students who constitute this 30% need to be taught the reading and study strategies that are used by students who are academically successful within the two-year nursing program. Providing these useful strategies prior to students’ entry into the nursing program is essential given that the curriculum is not forgiving of those with weak reading and study habits.

Pedagogical and Programmatic Implications

As the focus group data indicate, students must be prepared to draw from a number of effective reading and studying strategies in order to be successful in a reading-intensive, testing-intensive, two-year nursing program. Developmental reading educators can play an important role in preparing students for success and aiding in their retention. (For additional background on retention in nursing programs, see Deary, Watson, & Hogston, 2003; see also Uyehara, Magnussen, Itano, & Zhang, 2007). We believe that developmental reading educators and nurse educators should be working together in an effort to reach those students who have the potential to become competent nurses but lack an awareness of or appreciation for the reading and study strategies required for academic success in undergraduate nursing. We encourage developmental reading educators and nurse educators to begin talking to one another about ways in which they might work in collaboration to promote and reinforce reading and study behaviors vital for students’ success.

Developmental reading educators and those who oversee developmental education programs must make certain that their courses “employ a content-based, strategic-learning approach” that relies on “chapter-length, naturally occurring, intact texts taken from content areas” as opposed to isolated skills instruction that students are less likely to deem relevant to their other coursework (Mealey, 2003, p. 210). We cannot overstate the importance of making reading and studying from textbooks the

focus of attention in the classroom. Effective developmental reading instruction takes into account students' reality. In the case of nursing, students must pass multiple-choice examinations on textbook-based information. Students who cannot learn from the book and pass the examinations will not become graduate nurses. At the same time, nurse educators must make certain that the textbook-centered reading and study strategies discussed in the developmental reading classroom are reinforced in the nursing classroom, as there is evidence that students hesitate to use strategies not valued by content instructors (Sherman, 1991, as cited by Beyeler, 2003, p. 313).

As a result of the focus-group research conducted on our campus, those intent on becoming nursing students now have an opportunity to learn exactly what their fellow students are doing to succeed. Furthermore, they are given opportunities to practice effective reading and study strategies using authentic nursing, anatomy, biology, chemistry, and psychology texts. We encourage others to engage in similar efforts to make sure that underprepared nursing students are made fully aware of what they must do in order to increase their chance at success.

Our focus group data also help to establish greater context for the recommendations offered in two research articles that are required reading early-on in the semester for students enrolled in developmental reading: Lynch's (2007) "I've Studied So Hard for this Course, But Don't Get It!" and Van Blerkom, Van Blerkom, and Bertsch's (2006) "Study Strategies and Generative Learning." These articles are used in our developmental reading classrooms to impress upon students at the beginning of the semester that their ideas about what is required for academic success in terms of reading and studying in college may not be accurate. We advise educators to ground their classroom discussions of effective reading and study habits in what they have learned from their own successful students as well as from published research. We also advise that the reading courses that introduce students to these effective reading and study habits be mandatory for at-risk students. Developmental reading educators and nurse educators must work together to train and retain capable but underprepared nursing students. Students who lack the skills and strategies

required for proficient textbook reading—or who misjudge the important role of the textbook within the nursing program—face almost certain failure. Developmental reading educators working at institutions with nursing programs are therefore strongly urged to partner with nursing faculty to support students who aspire to nursing as a career but who lack the skills and strategies needed to survive in a reading- and testing-intensive academic environment. Such collaboration is in the best interest of our students, who desire meaningful employment in a noble field; our academic institutions, in whose interest it is to produce graduates who are job-ready; and the nursing profession itself, which deserves only the most competent and caring of individuals to fill its ranks.

References

- Beyeler, J. (2003). Reluctant readers: Case studies of reading and study strategies in Introduction to Psychology. In N. A. Stahl & H. Boylan (Eds.), *Teaching developmental reading: Historical, theoretical, and practical background readings* (pp. 301-316). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Boylan, H. R. (2009). The mistakes we make and how we correct them: What I've learned as a consultant. *NADE Digest*, 4(2), 01-08.
- Cramer, C., & Davidhizar, R. (2008). Helping at-risk nursing students succeed on the National Council Licensure Examination—Registered Nurse. *The Health Care Manager*, 27(3), 269-270.
- Deary, I. J., Watson, R., & Hogston, R. (2003). A longitudinal cohort study of burnout and attrition in nursing students. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 43(1), 71-81.
- DiBartolo, M. C., & Seldomridge, L. A. (2008). A review of intervention strategies to promote NCLEX-RN success of baccalaureate students. *Nurse Educator*, 30(4), 78s-83s.
- Holschuh, J. P. (2003). Do as I say, not as I do: High, average, and low-performing students' strategy use in biology. In N. A. Stahl & H. Boylan (Eds.), *Teaching developmental reading: Historical, theoretical, and practical background readings* (pp. 316-329). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Lynch, D. J. (2007). "I've studied so hard for this course, but don't get it!": Differences between student and faculty perceptions. *College Student Journal*, 41(1), 22-24.

-
- McClenney, K. (2011, April). *Strengthening student success: Cracking the developmental education code*. Workshop offered at the 26th annual meeting of the Michigan Developmental Education Consortium, Center for Executive and Professional Development at Macomb Community College, Clinton Township, Michigan.
- Mealey, D. L. (2003). Understanding the motivation problems of at-risk college students. In N. A. Stahl & H. Boylan (Eds.), *Teaching developmental reading: Historical, theoretical, and practical background readings* (pp. 208-215). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Symes, L., Tart, K., Travis, L., & Toombs, M. S. (2002). Developing and retaining expert learners: The Student Success Program. *Nurse Educator*, 27(5), 227-231.
- Uyehara, J., Magnussen, L., Itano, J., & Zhang, S. (2007). Facilitating program and NCLEX-RN success in a generic BSN program. *Nursing Forum*, 42(1), 31-38.
- Van Blerkom, D. L., Van Blerkom, M. L., & Bertsch, S. (2006). Study strategies and generative learning: What works? *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 37(1), 07-18.
- Wolkowitz, A. A., & Kelley, J. A. (2010). Academic predictors of success in a nursing program. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 49(9), 498-503.

Dr. Ryan Constanzo is assistant professor of educational enrichment at Mount Aloysius College in Cresson, Pennsylvania.

Amanda Fitzpatrick, R. N., is a professional nursing tutor at the college.