

## **Creating an Online Professional Writing Course for Mid- to Late-Career Nurses**

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**Abstract:** This paper details the results of a project to develop an online professional writing course for mid- to late-career nurses enrolled in an online bachelor's degree completion program. Course design took into account principles of adult learning theories and attempted to provide an online learning experience that promoted self-reflection as well as connections between course material/assignments and students' prior experience. Additionally, students were provided with targeted discussion prompts to assist in drawing connections between course material and workplace practice. Although students expressed initial concerns over the online learning environment, they eventually evaluated the course as a positive experience, as well as reporting direct connections between course material and its influence on their workplace practice.

### **Introduction**

Over the last few decades, economic conditions have caused an increase in the median age of workers. The number of workers over the age of 55 is increasing at a higher rate than any other age bracket (Alley & Crimmins, 2007). Many of these workers also are returning to school to acquire either degrees or skills needed to continue in their jobs. The American Council on Education stresses that higher education needs to focus more on these life-long learners and that by the year 2030, 25% of the population will be over the age of 60 (Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson, 2007). However, little classroom-based research exists in the field of writing studies to provide an insight into these students, particularly in online learning environments.

This paper details the results of a project to develop an online professional writing course for mid- to late-career nurses (ages 39-68, with 12-44 years on-the-job experience) enrolled in an online bachelor's degree completion program. The students were all working registered nurses who began their careers with an associate's degree or license. The original requirements for their program called for a traditional, second-semester composition course that taught writing argumentative essays. Instead, the course that was ultimately developed focused on professional writing, with many of the writing tasks specific to the students' workplace.

Specifically, this paper will discuss:

- Students' pre-class attitudes towards the course and online learning experience.

- Principles of adult learning theory that informed and helped to shape an online professional writing course for mid- to late-career students.
- Use of “targeted” discussion prompts (prompts that specifically required students to make connections between the online experience and their workplace practice) to promote greater involvement in the class.
- Students’ post-class reflections on the course and online learning experience.

### **Research on Adult Learners in Online Courses**

The number of online courses offered in higher education has risen significantly in the last decade or so, with 6.1 million students taking at least one online course as of fall 2010 (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Erickson and Noonan (2010) document an increasing number of adults over the age of 50 in online courses. Consequently, as these late-career workers return to school, many will find themselves taking online courses for the first time. These students face some unique challenges, as many have not been in school for a number of years and, most likely, have little experience in online courses.

Much research exists concerning adult learning in traditional classrooms over the past few decades. A popular and early theory of adult learning is that of “andragogy,” the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1972). According to this construct, adult learners have a need to know how learning is conducted (what will occur and why it is important), are self-directed, have rich prior experiences that impact the learning situation, have life situations that create a need to learn, learn best when knowledge is presented in a real-life context, and are motivated to acquire new knowledge that will help them to solve problems in their lives (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Additionally, Lieb (1991) found that adult learners tend to be anxious or nervous when facing a new learning situation while Fidishun (2000) acknowledged that adult learners want to use their prior knowledge and experiences in the classroom and be recognized for having those resources for learning.

Adult learners, particularly mid- to late-career adults in online learning environments, face several challenges. The Pew Internet Research Project reported in 2012 that 77% of adults over the age of 50 use the Internet on a daily basis (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). While this is a fairly large percentage of potentially late-career adults online, very little of this activity consists of taking online courses (AARP, 2007). Therefore, any successful attempt at online course design for this population of students must take into account their unfamiliarity with the online course environment and be based on an understanding of adult learning theory. Cercone (2008) details 13 such considerations for designing an online learning environment. These considerations include actively involving adult learners in the learning process while encouraging them to reflect upon previous experience and how it connects to their present learning situation.

Additionally, adult learners should be encouraged to see the link between learning and how it applies to their lives, and have the ability to self-reflect on the learning situation (pp. 154-159).

There are many tools available in the online learning environment to accommodate adult learning styles. However, recruiting these learners to an online learning may be challenging. For example, Lakin, Mullane, & Robinson (2008) found that adults who reported not participating in online courses often cited lack of computer skills and loss of face-to-face connections as key reasons. Thus, designing online learning experiences that capitalize on and accommodate adult learning styles in effective ways may provide a bridge for these students.

### **Student Demographics**

The students enrolled in this course were seven mid-career (aged 39-49) and 11 late-career (aged 50-68) working nurses (median age for all students = 55). All students were female. Their total number of full-time years of work experience ranged from 12-44 years (median = 25). In terms of previous experience with online courses, 11 of the 18 students reported taking at least one previous online course. The seven students with no prior online experience were new to the program, and this was their first class. During the first week of class, after having a chance to review the course syllabus, students were asked to complete a brief survey that asked about their personal expectations for the course, any initial concerns they had about the course, and their previous online course experiences.

As we can see in Table 1, students' expectations of the course content focused heavily on whether the course would benefit their on-the-job communication skills. They hoped that the course would be relevant to their needs by providing strategies for becoming more effective on-the-job communicators. Representative comments in this area included (note: all responses are unedited):

*Student 1: I hope to improve my communication skills in writing. To apply what learnt to my nursing career.*

*Student 2: I hope to learn more about communicating as a professional. I would like to become a supervisor on my unit and will need to communicate with others that are in various levels of management as well as those I am supervising.*

*Student 3: I wish to become a stronger writer in an effort to spend less time on my writing. Writing takes up a lot of my time when at work. If I can become more efficient, I will have more time to spend on other things that never seem to get done.*

**Table 1.** Students' expectations and concerns about course.

**Summary of Students' Reported Expectations for the Course:**

- To learn better strategies for on-the-job writing
- To use skills learned from course for more opportunities on the job
- To use skills to make writing at work easier, more efficient
- To improve communication skills at work

**Summary of Students' Concerns About Course:**

- Time commitment
- Technology concerns

In terms of their concerns about the course, the major concerns involved whether students felt they had time to perform well in the course because most were working anywhere from 40-60 hours per week. Some students also expressed concern about the type of "technology" that they would need to learn; primarily, this apprehension focused on using the course management system, Blackboard Learn. Since some of the students previously had taken an online course, this concern was not as widespread as the other two. All students did have available to them a standard orientation tutorial provided by Blackboard. Representative comments included:

*Student 1: I'm concerned about the amount of time that is expected to be online and participating in Blackboard. There are some weeks where I work three 12 hour night shifts in a row, which doesn't give me anytime at home to log on to the computer to do any school work*

*Student 2: I am just worried that this class will be extra time consuming for me, since I am not very good at writing.*

*Student 3: My worry about this online course is not knowing the amount of time I will need to invest in writing and getting used to Blackboard. I want to be successful in this class.*

**Course Design**

As detailed in Table 2, the course design focused around four key concepts related to adult learning theory (Cercione, 2008; Fidishun, 2000; Frey & Alman, 2003; Knowles, 1998; Lieb, 1991; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999):

**Table 2.** Adult learning concepts related to course.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Self-reflection</li> <li>2. Learner structured – need to connect new knowledge with past experience</li> <li>3. Immediacy of application</li> <li>4. Content partially supplied by students</li> </ol>
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Several features of course design invited students to engage in reflecting on how the learning experience compared with their workplace experiences (*self-reflection*) and how individual writing assignments could have potential applications to their workplace (*learner structured*). This process of reflection was facilitated both in formal and informal ways via pre- and post-survey questions, targeted discussion prompts within segments of the course, and a final course/portfolio reflection. Figure 1 illustrates how this reflection process moved from the individual student’s role as a writer to the significance of these writing tasks to their hospital unit and eventually to the profession at large. The goal of scaffolding reflection in this way was to

Audience of Self	Types of Reflection	Definition
	Self-reflection	Own perception of role as a workplace writer (strengths, limitations, accomplishments)
	“Within unit” reflection	Role as member of a specialized discourse community within hospital (reflecting on discourse conventions/practices of one’s unit)
	Community of practice within greater hospital community	Role as member of a larger organization (reflecting on discourse conventions/practices of the larger organization)
	Community of practice within profession at large	Role as member of the profession (reflecting on discourse conventions/practices of the medical community)

**Figure 1.** The range of student reflection.

provide an opportunity for students to begin with what was most familiar (their own experiences as a writer/communicator in the workplace) and then to gradually situate those personal experiences in the discourse community of the profession at large. Thus, the goal was for students to make connections between class and the workplace, identify communication

problems in the workplace, and write to effect change and improvement within the organization. In order to achieve that goal, students worked on writing tasks that addressed communication issues locally within their units, but eventually progressed to addressing issues within the profession at large. As we see in Figure 2, these writing assignments ranged from memos to research-based reports, addressing an audience of peers, patients, and supervisors.

Context	Snapshot of Writing Tasks
"Within unit"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Write a problem-solution memorandum</li> <li>- Revise existing/create new patient instructions</li> <li>- Create new procedures for tasks within unit</li> <li>- Develop a presentation for staff training</li> </ul>
Community of practice within greater hospital community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create an unsolicited internal proposal to solve a problem affecting patient care</li> </ul>
Community of practice within profession at large	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Research and produce a report on current issue in field</li> </ul>

**Figure 2.** Student writing tasks.

By working within such a framework, students were able to see how the online classroom experience had an effect on issues in their current workplace (*immediacy of application*). Additionally, students responded to communication problems in their workplace as the basis for many of these writing tasks (*content partially supplied by students*). Through this process, the connection between the classroom learning experience and workplace practice was even further strengthened.

### **Asynchronous Discussion Prompts**

For each unit of the course, students participated in asynchronous online discussions. In the context of these discussions, students were provided with an equal number of *targeted* and *non-targeted* discussion prompts, in addition to topics they may have brought up on their own. A targeted prompt was one that invited students to engage in discussion framed around one of the four key adult learning concepts upon which the course was designed (see Table 2). A targeted discussion prompt encouraged students to articulate one or more of the following: reflect upon their own experiences as a writer; consider how that particular unit of the course connected with their prior experiences; explain how the topic would inform their current workplace practice or, conversely, how their current workplace practice could be applied to better understand the topic. Examples of these targeted discussion prompts included:

*-What do you think it means to be "ethical" in your writing? Can you think of some examples from your own workplace where someone was acting ethically (or not) through writing? How would you have handled the situation?*

*- Think in terms of your own workplace. What are some examples of either well-designed or poorly-designed documents that you have encountered? What specifically about them led you to this conclusion? What suggestions would you make for revising them?*

*- How familiar are you with the different types of reports presented here? How many of them have you encountered in your workplace as a reader?*

The purpose here was to have students draw strong connections between the course content and their current workplace practice while also situating their current workplace practice in the context of the course whenever possible. On the other hand, a non-targeted discussion prompt invited students to expand upon some general aspect of the unit under discussion without drawing any connection to workplace practice or previous experience. Examples here included:

*- If you were the intended reader of the proposal example, what would be the two most important questions you would ask about the proposed plan?*

*- Consider the sample document below. What do you think needs to be done to this document to improve upon it?*

Table 3 shows the number of discussion posts in response to both targeted and non-targeted discussion prompts. Students tended to respond to targeted discussion prompts more often (n = 987) than they did to non-targeted ones (n= 445). Thus, when given a directed choice on how they could respond to any given topic, students favored (by a 2-1 margin) situating the discussion in the context of their previous or current workplace experiences. Examples of how students framed these discussion posts in response to targeted prompts included:

*Student 1: I read countless emails on a daily basis, some formal some not so formal. It seems the ones sent from co-workers within this office are usually the more informal ones. Ones sent interoffice is usually more formal in tone and format. I must say that the patients' charts that I enter usually have notes that are clear and precise and to the point. I think that is appropriate for that type of communication.*

*Student 2: The majority of documents I read are emails from different departments which are sent out hospital wide for information only. I feel that these are well written and informative. Often administration will send out updated policies, which follow a structural format and are well written. Some of the more lengthy documents could be shorten as reading tend to lose interest if readings are too detailed and lengthy.*

*Student 3: I think so many people learn by visuals, actually watching the instructions being performed makes the task overall easier. When we admit new patients, one of the*

*admission questions is the patients style of learning, and almost every time the patient answers by stating "visuals" are the best way to learn.*

**Table 3.** Number of discussion posts in response to targeted and non-targeted discussion prompts.

	In response to targeted prompts	In response to non-targeted prompts
Number =	987	445
Median =	63	28

Table 4 depicts the number of discussion posts that were not related to any discussion prompts. These posts were instances where students introduced topics of their own. When contributing to online discussions with their own topics, students focused more attention on comments that did not connect with workplace experience or previous experience in general (n = 408), as compared to comments that did attempt to make these direct connections to experience (n = 223). In contrast to the responses in reply to targeted discussion prompts, when left to their own devices, students were less likely to draw connections between course content and their own experiences. However, when students did make these connections unprompted, their posts were very similar to the ones in response to targeted prompts—that is, the discussion focused on how course content could potentially influence workplace practice.

**Table 4.** Number of discussion posts unrelated to discussion prompts.

	Make connection to workplace experience	Did not make connection to workplace experience
Number =	223	408
Median =	9	16

### **Students' Post-Class Reflections on the Online Learning Experience**

At the conclusion of the course, students completed a brief exit survey that sought to assess their attitudes towards the course content and the online learning experience in general. The results of that survey are summarized in Table 5. When polled pre-class, students expressed concerns over whether they would have adequate time to devote to the course. Since many of the students were taking an online course for the first time, this concern seemed understandable. However, when polled post-class, all students reported that time management was not an issue for them (Q1:8=SA; 8=A), indicating that concerns the online format and course content would be a time issue decreased by the end of the course. Questions 2-4 attempted to solicit to what extent



students felt comfortable with the course technology in general, the online class discussions, and to what extent the online discussions assisted them in completing writing assignments for the

**Table 5.** Students’ post-class attitudes toward course and online learning.

	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. The pace of this course was effective, and I had adequate time to complete assignments.	0	2	0	8	8
2. I was comfortable using Blackboard and other related technologies in this course.	1	1	3	8	5
3. I was comfortable participating in online class discussions.	0	0	1	4	13
4. Online class discussions helped me in completing class assignments and better understanding the course content.	0	1	1	5	11
5. The information I learned in this class will help me in my workplace.	0	0	0	4	14
6. I used one or more of the assignments I completed in this course in my workplace.	0	3	0	7	8
7. This course met my expectations.	0	0	0	5	13
<i>SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree</i>					

course and better understanding the course content. While students had expressed some apprehension about using Blackboard prior to the start of class, the majority of students at the end of the course reported that they were comfortable using Blackboard as the course platform (Q2: 5=SA; 8=A). Similarly, almost all students reported that they were comfortable participating in online course discussions within this environment (Q3: 13=SA; 4=A). A large number of students further reported seeing a direct connection between course discussions and assistance with completing their writing tasks (Q4: 11=SA; 5=A). Since almost all the writing assignments were ones that addressed issues in their workplace, this perceived connection illustrated the fact that engaging students in direct reflection on workplace issues through targeted discussion prompts had a positive effect from their viewpoint. The open-ended comments that students provided to the survey indicated in greater detail how students perceived the connection between class discussions and their workplace practice. Some representative comments here included:

*Student 1: I feel the course discussion was very organized and was geared toward nursing which was great. If I had a question or comment everyone responded promptly based on their own experiences!*

*Student 2: This course made me really think about what I’ve been doing for alot of years and made we think of how I could maybe change some things, it really prompted me to do that.*

Questions 5-6 attempted to solicit to what extent students perceived the course assignments and content in general as relevant and applicable to their workplace. Students overwhelmingly reported that the course content will help them in their workplace (Q5: 14=SA; 4=A). This connection of “course-workplace” was evident when students additionally reported that they had already used one or more of the course assignments in their workplace (Q6: 8=SA; 7=A). Finally, all students reported that the course met their initial expectations (Q7: 13=SA; 5=A), which were that the course would in some way help them become “better” and more efficient communicators on the job. Students’ open-ended responses as to how the course-workplace connection manifested itself included:

*Student 1: I just thought you might be interested: I presented my proposal to my CNO and within a week she presented it to the leadership committee. My proposal was about better patient care and government funding reimbursement for pre-existing pressure ulcers. Some changes have to be made in Cerner as well as some nursing procedures. Basically that is my proposal. I am meeting with two different groups next week because they want this implemented immediately!*

*Student 2: When I signed up for this course I was under the assumption that we would be reviewing books and writing reports on those books. It was a surprise to me to find out that I was taking a course on effective writing at work. By the end of the course, I was grateful for the subject matter in this class. This class had practical application to my current job more than an English class in reading books.*

## **Conclusion**

Incorporating adult learning principles into the online course design seemed to make the experience more accessible to students and alleviate some of their initial apprehensions about taking an online course. Providing opportunities for students to reflect upon their prior experiences as workplace writers, particularly how this current learning experience could inform their workplace practice (Cercone, 2008), were features that students responded to positively. As the course progressed, students were motivated when tasks were framed in the context of improving either patient care or their own working conditions on their unit. Thus, it was not only the ability of students to make connections between the class and their workplace, but also having these connections manifest themselves in concrete ways (i.e., having immediate practical uses for course documents) that made the online learning experience more meaningful (Knowles, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Additionally, students felt a greater sense of “empowerment” when writing projects were accepted by superiors and/or peers in the workplace.

Online discussions also provided a forum that students responded to positively. Students spent more of their discussion time responding to targeted prompts (prompts that required them to

make direct connections between the course and real-world practice) than they did to non-targeted ones. This result shows that adult learners actively do want to make these connections as part of their learning experience. However, it was evident that when not prompted, students made these connections less frequently. Therefore, while students wanted such a connection to be a significant part of their learning experience, they needed guidance to get to that point. Erickson & Noonan (2010) have previously shown that while late-career adults may need more initial support with technology in online courses, they eventually will perform at the same level or better than younger peers. This was the case for students in this particular class; as they overcame initial apprehensions about the online environment and began to see the value of this learning experience to their real-world lives, they also responded positively to the course. Eventually, they were successful in carrying that knowledge back to improve upon their workplace practice.

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