

Enhancing academic and professional literacy in Swedish specialist nurse and other professional education programmes: a teacher's perspective

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Abstract

This opinion piece focuses on the vital integration of academic and professional literacies in specialist nurse education and other professional education programmes within higher education in Sweden. In this opinion piece, we argue that extended learning, practise, and support can enhance the academic and professional literacy competence of specialist nurse students and other students in professional educations. To offer student specific and targeted support, educators, researchers, and policymakers can engage in collaboration, as well as inspire and empower their teachers through ongoing professional development. We also argue that the relationship between these two literacies should be highlighted in higher education to clarify the importance of academic skills within specialist nursing and other professions. We therefore suggest higher education could be more active in implementing and visualising intended learning outcomes with progression and learning activities regarding academic literacy as well as professional literacy curricula in professional educations. This approach, with an emphasis on systematic monitoring and research, ensures proficiency in effective communication, evidence-based practice, ethical responsibility, continuous learning, and quality assurance.

Keywords: academic literacy; higher education; professional education; professional literacy.

Introduction

Oral and written communication are key components for patient safety in today's fast and highly demanding health care system and important working tools for nurse specialists. Historically, Swedish nursing education was more practically oriented. However, over the past few decades it has become increasingly academic (Borglin, 2012; Borglin and Fagerström, 2012). The late twentieth-century reforms in the Scandinavian countries transformed nursing education from an apprenticeship to a higher education model, resulting in increased economic, administrative, and professional autonomy for the nursing profession, as highlighted by Karseth (2004). This is supported by Råholm et al. (2010), who claim that nursing education must be grounded in scientific as well as practical knowledge to ensure students acquire the essential skills for the profession.

Diversified recruitment

Another change witnessed in Swedish higher education is the intentional effort to enhance diversity and appeal to applicants from various backgrounds, known as diversified recruitment (Blåsjö and Wittek, 2017; Björklund, Magnusson and Ferström, 2023). However, there are signs indicating that individuals seeking professional education expect their studies to entirely focus on the profession. Previous research, as well as our own experiences, shows that students are expected to master both academic and professional literacies without these literacies being integrated into the teaching of the professions (Wingate, 2006; Mitchell, Blanchard and Roberts, 2020). *Academic Literacy* involves academic reading and writing, skills that benefit specialist nursing (Jefferies et al., 2018). Additionally, specialist nurse students have legal requirements in their future profession i.e., mastering professional writing, known as *professional literacy*. This involves understanding complex work-related documents, reports, scientific articles, and effectively communicating within the context of the profession (Sørensen et al., 2012). Academic and professional literacy are already a part of nursing education; however, they are not explicitly stated in study plans and curricula. This, in turn, makes it challenging for students (and others) to get an overall picture of the education.

Academic literacy and professional literacy

New students might face difficulties in adapting to the language and discourse of their education. However, over time, students tend to become more adept at understanding and establishing the interconnected relationship between academic and professional literacies within their future profession. As students gradually integrate themselves into their professional roles, the link between academic and professional literacies becomes clearer (Tyndall and Skott, 2017), enhancing their ability to evaluate both their own and others' professional and academic actions (Mitchell, Blanchard and Roberts, 2020). Therefore, it is significant and crucial for students to integrate both academic and professional literacies as a natural part of higher education.

The special nurse education

Swedish nursing education at the undergraduate level currently results in dual degrees: a bachelor's degree and a professional degree. In Sweden specialist nursing is a profession where an undergraduate nurse specialises in a specific area, such as anaesthesia or psychiatry, resulting in a postgraduate diploma in specialist nursing. These highly trained and specialised nurses can provide advanced healthcare services, often working closely with physicians and other healthcare professionals. They play a crucial role in patient care, diagnosis, treatment, and health promotion. The Higher Education Ordinance states that specialist nurse students must have the capability to communicate in different ways, in diverse contexts, and with different groups or persons (The Swedish Constitution Law, 2022). Students who choose a specialist nurse education typically have several years of work experience as a registered nurse. All nurse specialist education requires a combination of area knowledge, professional skills, and academic and professional literacies. Upon graduation, students possess a higher level of competence and increased nursing responsibility in their specialist area compared to undergraduate nurses (Kennedy Sheldon and Hilaire, 2015; Coster, Watkins and Norman, 2018).

To establish a nursing diagnosis, the specialist nurse, like a lawyer, needs to make rapid decisions. In law, the determination can be about absolute right or wrong (positivism), while nursing adopts a more salutogenic (humanistic) perspective (Coster, Watkins and

Norman, 2018). The humanistic approach places high demands on the specialist nurse's literacies as they utilise various channels and modes to capture and communicate oral and written information. Another aspect of the specialist nurse profession is documentation in patient journals, regulated by the Patient Act (The Swedish Constitution Law, 2022). Specialist nurses must document in a manner that enables other professionals to understand the shared information (The Swedish Constitution Law, 2022). This implies that a specialist student nurse with high academic literacy is likely to develop robust professional skills and, thereby possess the capacity to increase their professional literacy. Specialist student nurses, therefore, require various types of support to develop their communication skills, utilising a range of modes for diverse audiences.

After graduation a specialist nurse faces advanced practical challenges as well as high requirements for skills in professional literacy. As previously mentioned, well-developed academic literacy forms the foundation for the profession's practical work and professional literacy. Therefore, it is especially important to support and strengthen specialist nurse students' competence in these areas (Johnsson and Rulo, 2019). A previous study by Newell and Jordan (2015) shows that strong literacy skills might facilitate more effective oral as well as written communication competence and contribute to evidence-based knowledge and the practice of person-centered nursing.

Extended learning and practice

First, we argue that specialist nurse students would benefit from the extended learning and practise of academic literacy as well as professional literacy to further enhance their oral and written communication competence. This may empower them to navigate the complex healthcare environment and ensure patient safety. The teaching of academic and professional literacy in Swedish specialist nursing programmes should be strategically designed to prepare specialist nurse students for academic as well as professional demands. This can be achieved by implementing intended learning outcomes with progression in the specialist nursing programmes (Soderlundh, Lind and Nordstrom, 2017). The integration of theory and practice is essential, combining academic topics with practical nursing scenarios and focusing on developing critical analysis skills for academic literacy. Emphasis should also be placed on professional communication and documentation for professional literacy. For instance, simulating real healthcare

environments where students practise communicating with patients, families, and healthcare professionals. Practical assignments could mirror academic research requirements and reality-based nursing situations. Teaching should also encourage reflection and discussion for both academic and professional contexts, fostering a deep understanding of theoretical concepts and ethical considerations in nursing practice.

Globally consistent communication skills

Second, we argue that effective communication skills are globally consistent requirements across different cultural and professional contexts, for example in fields like education, business, technology, and law (Soderlundh, Lind and Nordstrom, 2017). Jefferies et al. (2018) assert that it is important for oral and written communication practices related to specific professions to be given a more prominent role in higher education, and that teachers of the profession are best suited to impart the genre, language, and vocabulary to the students. Previous research shows that higher education plays a key role in establishing students' skills in searching, reading, writing, and communicating with different audiences (Gazza, Shellenbarger and Hunker, 2013; Tyndall and Skott, 2017; Mitchell, Blanchard and Roberts, 2020). To strengthen students' academic literacy, continuous support and guidance from experienced researchers and teachers is required. However, although academic skills such as writing and critical thinking are fundamental parts of higher education studies, several students leave with issues in academic literacy (Borglin, 2012; Hillege et al., 2014). Previous research shows that students who receive tailored support in their own subject area develop high levels of academic literacy (Wingate and Tribble, 2012; Hillege et al., 2014; Wingate, 2016; 2019).

The role of higher education

Third, we argue that higher education should take a more prominent role in implementing and strengthening students' academic and professional literacy in professional education. Moreover, guidance and formative feedback on academic writing and professional tasks should be provided to support students' development in academic and professional literacy. By adopting a holistic teaching approach, professional educators can establish a

strong connection between academic and professional literacy. Learning environments, therefore, need to be designed so that students can practise using a complex mix of literacies to develop both theoretical and practical knowledge in different contexts (Rai and Lillis, 2013). To create a safe and supportive learning environment for students, it is necessary to clearly communicate the requirements for different literacies (Wingate, 2019). If the requirements in education are not clearly and consistently communicated to the students, it can lead to uncertainty and reduced motivation for learning (Ask, 2007; Wingate, 2019).

Conclusion

In summary this opinion piece highlights a holistic approach to academic and professional literacies that not only empowers individuals in their specific fields but also has a profound impact on patient care and safety. Highly literate professionals are better equipped to navigate challenges, contribute to evidence-based practice, and enhance the overall quality of their chosen profession.

Specialist student nurses are expected to master both academic and professional literacies immediately upon entering their first course, even though most of them have been working clinically for a long period of time. Therefore, we emphasise that specialist student nurses require extended support to develop and deepen their understanding of research evidence, applying it in the context of nursing practice to meet patients' needs by integrating the best available evidence (academic literacy) and professional practice (professional literacy) for high quality, patient-centered care and safety. Therefore, educators, researchers, and policymakers should decisively work towards developing, strengthening, and supporting students' knowledge base on academic and professional literacies. Moreover, university teachers should receive increased support in integrating academic and professional literacies into both practical and theoretical teaching, education plans, and curricula.

Today, numerous courses within higher education lack specific learning outcomes related to both academic and professional literacy. We argue that students' literacy would benefit from a clear progression in these skills throughout their education, which is crucial for their

future professional careers. By establishing explicit learning outcomes for both literacies, a structured framework is created, aiding students in understanding course expectations and in turn successfully completing their education. To ensure the visibility of academic and professional literacy in specialist nurse education and other professional educations, higher education needs to incorporate them into curricula and learning outcomes. A more intentional use of both academic and professional literacies in professional education can facilitate specialist student nurses in navigating and delivering quality nursing care in a complex healthcare environment.

Finally, a comprehensive approach to academic and professional literacies in higher education holds immense significance, as it not only enriches students' learning experiences but also raises the standards of their forthcoming profession. This understanding ensures effective communication, evidence-based practice, ethical responsibility, continuous learning, and quality assurance, all of which are crucial components in various professional fields.

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