

To write or not to write: a nurse's account of writing for publication

Maeve O Halloran, Owen Doody

Abstract

Writing for publication is often seen as an arduous, daunting task reserved mainly for those in academia. This paper represents the first author's experience over the past 2 years of working on writing papers for publication in the context of personal and academic development. The aim is to reflect on the first author's journey towards publication with the intention of encouraging nursing staff to make their work visible and validate their practice through publication. This personal journey was made easier by the encouragement, help and support of the second author, a university lecturer acting as a mentor, advisor and critical friend. This paper is also intended to assure and give courage to those who have considered writing about their practice but are reluctant to do so.

Key words: Nurse experience, Reflection, Practice-based publication, Writing, Journals

Introduction

In February 2012, I made a big decision to leave nursing practice. It was a challenging time, but it also afforded me the opportunity to do what I had been talking about and considered on numerous occasions: 'to write about my practice'. Saying this, and the actual realisation of undertaking writing for publication, are very different things. In reality, even though I had decided to write, I was suddenly catapulted into a life of not physically 'doing', which had been my working life as a clinical nurse manager and intellectual disability nurse for the previous 26 years. As a practitioner, I had gained experience of the broad spectrum of conditions within intellectual disability nursing and been involved in many innovative practice developments during my career. I have always been passionate about the expertise and knowledge of intellectual disability nurses and their contribution to clinical practice.

Yet while it is recognised that nurses are involved in many innovative projects that can be a powerful source of knowledge for other nurses, writing for publication may be seen as a more daunting process and one that many nurses are unfamiliar with. I agree with Wollin and Fairweather (2007) that the dissemination of knowledge within clinical practice is just as important to the development of the profession as formal theoretical knowledge gained in an educational setting. Reaching out to a broader audience is good for the development of nursing as a profession because it adds to the general body of nursing knowledge.

In Ireland, nursing is still relatively new to the academic domain within higher education establishments. As a result, writing for publication is still in the early stages of growth and development. As nursing was primarily seen as a 'vocation', I believe it is important to defend the care we provide to people with an intellectual disability by providing primary evidence to support that care. On leaving clinical practice, my aspirations were eventually to undertake my PhD. This resulted in me investigating different universities and brought me to a lecturer from the Department of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Limerick, Ireland. I arranged to meet and discuss a research topic area, methodology and the challenges that lay ahead.

However, this discussion did not go as well as I expected. It became clear that I needed more time to develop my research topic and gain greater clarity of my research question. But the lecturer did pick up on my passion and asked if I had ever considered developing my writing skills in order to start publishing on practice issues. My reticence was obvious throughout our discussion and, although I had read copious amounts of literature on how to structure a paper in the past and was clear on some topics I could share within the profession, the fear around developing the content of a paper or publication was evident. It was also emotionally driven in the form of my lack of confidence in my writing ability. The prospect of writing for publication was something I had considered but was fearful about, so this meeting created an ideal opportunity for me. Through our shared interest in the development of intellectual disability nursing and a belief that there is a need to make the work of intellectual disability nurses visible by highlighting nurses' daily practice (Doody et al, 2012) as well as the lecturer's previous knowledge of the 'writing for publication' process and a willingness on both our parts, I embarked on the journey to write my first paper for publication.

There are many formal papers available to guide novice writers in the process of writing for publication (Dixon, 2001; Fahy, 2008; Happell, 2008; Price, 2010; Fowler, 2011; Happell, 2012). Many of these papers deal with such themes as starting out, how to structure your paper, choosing the right journal, and writing for your audience. However, they do not necessarily deal with developing content beyond a suitable idea and format and this was the area where I believed I would struggle. This paper does not aim to reiterate the structural elements of writing for publication, but instead to present a personal account of one nurse's journey towards publication with the aid of a third party who provided support, feedback and encouragement throughout.

Starting out

While I had developed and mastered the skills of writing academic assignments based on practice within educational courses, and also used my writing skills on a daily basis within practice, I had never written a paper for publication. Writing for publication takes a different format and process, which includes the sharing of knowledge, expertise and skills with other nurses in a broader sense. Through publishing one can make a positive impact on clinical practice in the future. There is often a fear of writing for publication. This may be based on a lack of belief in one's own ability, or a failure to see that one's practice might be worthy of sharing. This certainly was true for me and, in order to change this, I needed to 'reconstruct' myself and change my way of thinking. Writing for publication would meet my desire to share knowledge, add to the knowledge base within the profession, and provide new evidence for practice.

As a starting point, it is generally advised that novice writers start by writing from their own personal experience, knowledge and expertise. To give myself the feeling that I was going to work, I developed an office within my home to create a space for writing. In the initial stages, I sat many times without doing anything, just thinking 'what am I doing here?', 'this isn't me', 'I'm a practitioner, not a writer'. However, holding on to such misconceptions, as I did, can block nurses from moving forward and sharing primary evidence with the broader profession of nursing. Nurses can thus miss out on communicating knowledge and skills, invoking debate and, above all, improving care in an holistic sense.

One of my strengths is reading. I have always read for both practice and pleasure, and always tried to base my work on best practice. If I came across anything new within practice, I would have to find out as much as possible about it from the literature. In addition, during my

academic studies, I had gathered and read an abundance of literature. As one of the first steps to writing is to complete a review of the literature to reveal the current knowledge on the topic of interest, and as I enjoyed reading, I developed a false sense of security. However, this was short-lived, as I began to read more and more articles on my topic (or related to my topic) and move no further along the writing process. I was a well-read novice writer, passing my days in contented reading with not one word put to paper.

Luckily for me, to ensure I remained focused, my mentor and I established a progress update system where I would have to inform him of my progress on a weekly basis, with the option of telephone conversations in between. For me, this was a necessity as it helped me develop a timeframe for completing tasks such as conducting my literature review, deciding on the journal that I would submit to, and completing a first draft. I found the change from academic writing for assignments to writing for publication difficult, even though they both draw on evidence-based practice. This transition involved new skills that I had to learn, such as looking at the layout of existing papers, author guidelines for submitting a paper, and developing my reflective writing skills. These skills are essential to save time later when making cuts or revising the layout. So, equipped with this knowledge and the voice of my mentor saying 'just put it on paper and send it to me', I took the step towards writing for publication.

Even though I know now that his comment to put it on paper and send it to him was more to do with creating a 'safe' environment for me, it was something I found difficult. These reservations can block a person's willingness to take the step to write. Also, while my past writing consisted of academic assignments and practice-based projects that enabled me to fulfill the requirements of the university assessment criteria and my role as clinical nurse manager, they were something I had become familiar with and competent in doing over time. So, reassuring myself that I too would improve my skills in writing for publication, I took the first step and began to write about an idea based on an innovation in practice. I did so with a feeling of security in the mentor/mentee relationship and a growing belief in my own ability.

Structure

My first paper was written about a practice-based initiative aimed to support people with Asperger syndrome (O'Halloran and Doody, 2013a). After completing a broad outline to guide my writing, I identified the existing literature that was pertinent to my paper, based on a thorough search of the electronic databases using keywords to guide my search. The idea for the paper was how, as a nurse practitioner, I had responded to the social needs of children with Asperger syndrome in an innovative way, and I wanted to share that experience. The paper was reflective in nature, where I spoke about the project and its origins, the obstacles encountered, and the learning that occurred as a result.

Throughout the writing process, I was guided gently by my mentor, who gave suggestions and practical support on how to build on my topic. He guided me on formatting and advised on what I should include or exclude. I developed numerous drafts and showed these drafts to my mentor, colleagues, friends and family. I now fully understand how writing is a process and how the final product is the sum total of a number of phases comprising a lot of writing and rewriting. Through constructive feedback on the drafts, I began to develop my own reflective writing skills. I had to learn that feedback is not a personal attack and that I needed to read my own work with a critical eye and not just for errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation. There were times when I was overwhelmed by the suggestions and amendments

to the paper, but I always trusted that the guidance I received did not disrupt the integrity of my work or the message I wanted to convey.

Target audience

When writing, it is essential to be clear as to whom your intended audience is, as this will determine what journals you will be deciding to publish in. I learned this by default, as in the initial stages my eagerness to write resulted in me bypassing this advice and therefore spending hours revising my paper to submit to my chosen journal. While I had a broad outline to guide my writing, I discovered that it is essential to identify possible journals broadly suitable for your paper, and then decide which is the most appropriate. In hindsight, it is also always advisable to have a back-up plan if your first selection does not work out, so select a number of potential journals to which you could potentially submit your paper.

Having identified the relevant journal, I was able to work on the paper using the author guidelines section of the journal. This section gives focus and direction from the beginning and saves time on reformatting at a later stage. Because I wanted to share my knowledge with other clinical practitioners, direct care providers and families, I needed to ensure my paper was written in a particular style, using the right amount of detail, and included the prescribed word count. As a result, I decided to publish in a practice-based journal whose circulation included my target audience.

Journal style

When I was contemplating which journal my paper would best fit, my mentor advised me to make contact with the editor of one of my selected journals, identify my topic area, seek their advice on its suitability, and attach the abstract for their review. While the editor replied with a very encouraging note, they also identified the paper did not fit the aim of their specific journal. Although this was disappointing, the process saved me a lot of time, as the average waiting time for an article to be reviewed is generally 12 to 16 weeks. My mentor reassured me that this was part of the process, and when we discussed it further I could see my paper did not fully meet the aims of the journal. Yet as a novice writer these glitches can affect your emotional wellbeing and feed into any misgivings you had in your writing ability in the first place. At the time, I may have felt that my mentor should just tell me where to send it, and even when writing to the editor, tell me what to say.

But this never happened. By encouraging me to contact the editor before submitting my paper, I can see now that it may have been part of his plan to allow me learn in a safe manner. His encouragement enabled me not to dwell on the disappointment, to understand the process and not to take rejection as a personal assault. I used the feedback from the editor as a means to learn more about the writing process, develop my writing skills further, and revise the paper for submission elsewhere. I finished my paper in June 2012 and submitted it to the selected journal in early July 2012, adhering to the journal's submission requirements and house style. After submitting the first paper, I moved straight on to a second paper in July 2012 and a third paper in September 2012, all of which were submitted to different journals. Continuing the writing process was difficult, as I really wanted feedback from the review process on my first paper before moving on to others. However, my mentor encouraged me to continue writing as the review process would take a number of months. Through writing and submitting papers, I have become familiar with the specific requirements for submitting papers to different journals. I also gained confidence in my writing ability and skill while being guided by my mentor, who still acts as my best critic and ensures we meet on a regular basis to review progress and set objectives for the coming weeks. These meetings reinforce

my belief that I have made the right decision and that I have now begun to contribute to the knowledge within nursing in a broader sense.

By December 2012, I still had not received feedback from the journal on my first paper and was beginning to fear the worst. I contacted the journal with an enquiry; they apologised for the delay but were still awaiting one reviewer's feedback. When I finally received feedback in January 2013, I was pleasantly surprised and excited, as it was accepted with only minor revisions. The feeling of joy and self-worth on its acceptance was something I did not anticipate and even though it is a double-blind review process, I wanted to thank my reviewers personally. By writing for publication, I did feel that I was putting myself 'out there' and felt vulnerable, as rejection would seem like my practice was not of value. The decision to continue writing while the first paper was under review was essential to maintain my momentum and ensure that if I had received a less positive response, I would not just give up. I think my mentor saw the difficulties that could lie ahead, and through identifying the different focus of the papers I was writing, I learned to identify the journals to which I would submit, and uncover their house style and requirements via their author guidelines.

Conclusion

Good writing is essential to the practice and development of nursing as a discipline (Fahy, 2008). Writing is hard work, but to succeed and have a paper published makes all the hard work worthwhile. Based on my own personal experience and circumstances, writing takes time, so, in the first place, be prepared to put in that time and effort by assigning some time each day to write. Heinrich (2008) recommends allowing as little as 15 minutes a day to write, by dividing the writing project into smaller parts that could be written within that timeframe. In practice, this knowledge was of benefit to me as a novice writer, and gave me the opportunity to develop my writing skills and complete the writing task in a manageable manner. However, in reality, I am a night owl, and as much as I try to find time during daytime hours, I still revert back to my old ways and that is okay.

Second, spend time thinking about your paper. I ponder a lot about the structure of a paper, its purpose and the messages I want to convey (Price, 2010). Third, find a mentor, advisor or critical friend who has some experience of writing for publication, as they will support and guide you, and provide you with somebody to bounce ideas off in a safe environment. Fourth, don't become disillusioned if your paper does not meet the criteria of a particular journal, take it as an opportunity to learn and move on. If there is a positive response, it generally means there will be only minor revisions. But don't underestimate the effort and time required to make them, as these revisions can often be a lot of work. Remember too that the people who review your work are looking at it favorably, with a view to publication, and recognise its value. By addressing their revisions, it will become a better and more robust paper. I believe that writing is a skill that can be learned, but it takes time and practice. It is true that writing is all about rewriting and the time, effort, skill and support required to write should not be underestimated and need to be considered before starting any paper. When contemplating writing for publication, it is good to consider a collective approach, either with colleagues or by linking with a mentor whom you trust and who has some experience of writing for publication, such as former colleagues in higher education.

Overall, this has been a positive journey that has resulted in four articles being submitted and accepted for publication (O'Halloran and Doody, 2013a, 2013b; O'Halloran et al, 2013; O'Connell et al, 2013). It has also been emotional at times, but for me this could not have been achieved without the support and guidance of my mentor. Through this process, I have

become more confident and have recently worked with the parent of a child with a disability who wished to write her story in a paper for publication. This was a vital opportunity for me to give back what my mentor had given me, an opportunity that may not have arisen if I had not begun this journey myself. Writing her story has been enlightening and empowering for her as a mother. My experience of the writing process has been shared with this parent. She was made aware of the possibility of rejection and the fact that reviewers would comment on her story. However, this awareness may not be sufficient to offset her individual reaction if a rejection or critical comments are received.

This paper is intended to encourage nurses who have thought about writing for publication. It is not meant to counteract a nurse's individual reaction if they decide to write for publication, but instead advise and encourage them from the outset. Remember, with the right support and a willingness to engage in publishing, nurses can contribute effectively to practice in a broader sense within their discipline. Finally, I agree with Heinrich (2009) when she speaks of the survival of our profession through sharing our stories, and reiterates that nurses have a choice to either 'stay silent or dare to share'.

Key points

- Writing for publication is often seen as a daunting and difficult process.
- Nurses should and need to highlight their practice through publication.
- Gaining support from a critical friend/mentor is crucial in developing an article for publication.
- Sharing one's own experience of the writing process is an important element when supporting our peers in their own efforts to publish.

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