

Improving and Assessing Writing Skills and Practices of Pharmacy Students

Suleiman I Sharif* and Rana Ibrahim

Department of Pharmacy Practice & Pharmacotherapeutics, College of Pharmacy, University of Sharjah- P.O. Box 27272- Sharjah, UAE

The development of pharmacy profession has placed more prominence on students' verbal counseling skills in administrative and clinical pharmacy coursework, bringing communication skills to the forefront of pharmacy education. Less emphasis have been placed on writing skills by pharmacy educators, although in all practice settings pharmacists have many duties that include writing, such as writing annual reports assessments, letters to editors in journals, letters of recommendations, articles to be published, or proposals for new clinical services. Some pharmacists' job descriptions require writing especially those in administration and drug information. It is believed that writing must be integrated into pharmacy curricula as a major component of pharmacy education for the sake of student fostering course material and becoming a professional.

Published studies aimed to assess the writing perceptions and practices of pharmacy students as a step in evaluation of the importance of writing in and to the profession. The University of Wyoming, school of pharmacy introduced a writing program including the development of W3 courses in a variety of disciplines. They administered a survey of writing self- assessment to second year pharmacy students in a required public health course. 75% of students surveyed rated writing skills as important to pharmacy practice [1].

They used the method of testing for improvement in writing by comparing two similar writing assignments, one written early in the course and one near the end. A positive relationship exists between writing self-confidence and writing ability showing that instructors can make effective use of a self-confidence survey in courses that require a significant amount of writing. Pajares and Johnson report a clear relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing performance [2].

Pharmacy students go through many tasks during their study that depend on good report writing. These include assignments given in each of the study courses, case reports and graduation projects. Moreover examination papers that include a part in the form of essay questions require a good writing skill. Clinical apprenticeship also involves writing reports and documenting the various stages of the training. It has been suggested that inadequate writing skills and its consequences will pose problems throughout the future practice of the profession [3]. As such poor writing skills will certainly reflect on the pharmaceutical care delivery. Faculty need to stress on good writing skills throughout all course activities. Faculty correct examination papers by merely looking for correct answers regardless of how this answer is expressed in writing [4].

Parts of student's assignments and reports are basically extracted from well written and published academic reports and some faculty do not even bother to check for plagiarism. Moreover, evaluation of graduation reports depends on how close supervision is exercised by faculty. Sometimes students projects, particularly those based on literature surveys are judged on basis of quantity rather than the quality of work and the adequacy of writing. Hobson and coworkers emphasized the presence and value of writing in all aspects of pharmacy practice and that pharmacy students should learn to write well during their years in the pharmacy curriculum [5].

As pharmacy educators at the school of pharmacy, University of Sharjah we have observed that students in general have difficulty expressing themselves on exams when they are faced with an essay question requiring rationalization and writing their answer/opinions in a proper legitimate way. In our study which is a part of ongoing research on writing skills, the midterm exam of a course on endocrine pharmacology offered to third year pharmacy students was composed of multiple choice and short essay questions carrying almost similar weight of marks and totaling to 30% of the total marks for the course. The total number of students attending the exam was 44. Students scoring less than 60% are given "F" for failure. On counting the marks obtained for the part of the multiple choice questions alone and the total marks for both parts, 1 (2.2%) and 6 (12.6 %) students failed respectively. On the other hand counting marks scored for the short essay part alone, the number of failures increased to 17 (38.6%) students. It appears that most of the student's grades were actually gained from the multiple choice part of the exam. Students were trained on answering essay questions by giving them a series of open book exams and a significant improvement was observed in answering the short essay questions part of their final exam on the same pharmacology course.

It is agreed upon that we are facing real challenges in developing students' writing abilities. Pharmacy schools graduates should be able to handle written documents at proficient levels consistent with their developed-degree status. Upon reflection of the general opinion of pharmacy organizations, individual colleges of pharmacy identify the ability to write well as an important educational goal [5]. Importantly, graduates' ability to write documents at a professionally acceptable level is now a consideration in pharmacy colleges' accreditation process [6].

In order to graduate pharmacists with good writing skills, colleges of pharmacy have approached the teaching of writing from different perspectives [7]. Stressing writing throughout the curriculum as institutional initiatives to course-based and skill-specific programs are practical efforts to develop students' writing ability. There is a great call for investigational projects intended to categorize the writing responsibilities that pharmacists carry out in a variety of practice settings.

The faculty of Massachusetts, College of Pharmacy voted to adopt a writing proficiency requirement which requires students to pass a writing proficiency examination or successfully complete the follow-

*Corresponding author: Suleiman Ibrahim Sharif, Department of Pharmacy Practice & Pharmacotherapeutics, College of Pharmacy, University of Sharjah- P.O. Box 27272, Sharjah, UAE, E-mail: sharifsi@sharjah.ac.ae

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up composition course for the exam in order to graduate. Passing the writing proficiency requirement is a prerequisite for pharmacy ethics which is a required fourth year course with significant writing. This is a very good way to assure that students who are weak writers improve their writing before graduating and engaging in clinical work. Having a writing proficiency requirement has many disadvantages but the advantages are more prominent. Not having a writing proficiency exam obliges faculty to deal with weak writer in their courses. If pharmacy students are estimated to master written communication as a desirable outcome of pharmaceutical education, we should be able to evaluate their level of writing. Pharmacy faculty could collaborate with composition faculty familiar with scientific and technical writing to employ a writing proficiency exam and a follow-up writing course [8].

Pharmacy students should engage in writing exercises to stimulate critical thinking skills and general communication abilities [5]. Pharmacy educators can use different approaches to include more writing in their courses. One of the approaches is to determine the kinds of writing that will be most efficient for the purpose of learning material and practicing the writing skills that students will require in the workplace. Professional pharmacists can be surveyed in various settings to know what kinds of writing are essential. Students in the pharmacy curriculum can be assigned professional types of writing including flyers, brochures, proposals, and reports as part of their academic coursework. Research about how writing ability develops and how students achieve confidence in their writing skills, would disclose what kind of pre-professional training in writing pharmacy students should attain; since self-confidence in writing appears to be associated with writing ability.

Another approach is to find out the sources of student error in

order to determine how to assist students in reducing errors from writing. Pharmacy educators could expose students to repetitive tasks of writing assignments or papers, giving informative feedback to allow them to become more comfortable with the vocabulary and modes of thoughts of pharmacists. Because of the complexity of writing which involves creativeness, knowledge, inspiration, skill development, and training in the discipline it is sometimes challenging to verify what factors lead to improvement of students' writing skills in different pharmacy courses. Finally, it would be important to evaluate how writing skills develop over the period of several courses or throughout the whole pharmacy curricula.

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