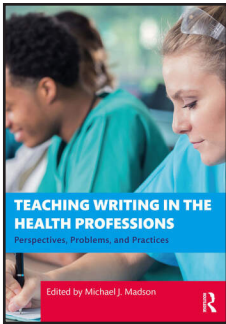


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Teaching Writing in the Health Professions: Perspectives, Problems, and Practices

Michael J. Madson, Editor

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On the first page of the introduction to this volume, Michael J. Madson asserts that “health professionals need to learn a variety of written genres while in the classroom or on the job” (p. 1). His emphasis on genre is explicit and refreshing, and the genres highlighted are many and varied, both academic and practical. This introduction effectively sets the tone for the rest of the volume, first surveying the literature on writing instruction (or the lack thereof) in health professional education; next briefly nodding toward a writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID) framework; and finally approaching the entire subject of writing in the health professions from the point of view of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Contributors include faculty in English, linguistics, journalism, and technical communication, on one side, and medicine, nursing, and public health on the other. Emphasizing his contributors’ diverse backgrounds, Madson positions this volume as part of an “ongoing dialogue to both deepen and broaden our instructional efforts”

and to address writing in the health professions both practically/ pedagogically and conceptually (p. 4).

Those two aims—practical and conceptual—help structure the collection. The first section addresses writing in medicine and public health, the second writing in nursing, the third writing in allied health and pharmacy, and the final writing in interpersonal contexts; Madson notes that he has generally arranged the chapters in each section “from lower to higher educational levels” (p. 5). This organization highlights one of the collection’s strengths, which is an emphasis on writing in the health sciences across the professional career, from first- and second-year medical students to mid-career professionals.

The chapters in this volume address sub-topics as fascinating and as varied as writing prompts, writing workshops, reflective writing, peer review, revision, feedback, the socioemotional benefits of writing instruction, and writing-related threshold concepts. Among these, three key contrasts emerge, rising above smaller details. All three contrasts relate to what could be termed the primary theme of the collection, that is, writing as an important part of the process of socialization of health professionals into different discourse communities.

1. Explicit vs. implicit instruction in writing

We know that students and health professionals write, and that their writing is evaluated, but how do students learn to write? Moving beyond the assign-and-assess model of writing into actual writing instruction is challenging. In a chapter titled “Teaching Medical Students to Write Proper Clinical Notes,” Sarah Yonder discusses the importance of a tightly scaffolded approach to teaching medical students one particular genre. Deborah E. Tyndall, addressing “Writing-Related Threshold Concepts in Doctoral Nursing Education,” criticizes the “trial-and-error types of instruction” that arise all too frequently (p. 92). And Isabell C. May and Emilie M. Ludeman argue for “the effectiveness of video podcasts,” or digital mini-lectures with slides and narration, a type of “flipped” instruction, in writing instruction (p. 125). These three chapters, and many others, argue for—and, perhaps more importantly, also show readers how to structure—explicit instruction in writing, even when programs may feel that there is no space for writing instruction in their curriculum.

2. Writing to learn vs. learning to write

If many of the contributors to this volume argue for explicit instruction in writing, they are then focused on a pedagogical approach that works with students who are learning to write specific genres for their particular fields. Nevertheless, the emphasis on reflective writing in this volume—and in the field of health sciences more generally, as advocated for by David Kember (2001) and more recently by Bruce H. Campbell (2020), among many others—suggests an alternate approach which importantly co-exists, that of writing to learn. Barbara J. D'Angelo and Barry M. Maid, in their chapter titled “Developing Students’ Professional Identity through Writing and Peer Review,” address this “writing to learn” approach and its connection to writing self-efficacy, arguing “that self-efficacy is increased when writing is used as a tool to enhance learning in the classroom” (p. 57). This emphasis on “writing to learn”—similar to explicit instruction in writing—moves beyond the assign-and-assess paradigm to view writing as a key component of a health professional program, neither a simple substitute for an exam, nor an add-on or frill, and therefore centers writing within students’ professional training.

3. Writing for self vs. writing for instructors

Given this centering of writing, all the contributors to this volume expect that students in the health professions will be writing for instructors, and many also address the role of writing that students will be doing for themselves. Such writing might include writing for whom the ultimate audience is the student’s self (reflections, drafts, etc.) as well as writing with a more collaborative, emotional, and/or professional aim (see Lucy M. Candib, et al.’s, chapter “Promoting Writing Through Teacherless Writing Groups”). In both cases, though, the focus remains on writing as a skill that benefits the writer herself—as a student, and as a professional—across the health sciences.

Happily for programs looking to adopt an equity-based framework, *Teaching Writing in the Health Professions* has an inclusive approach to the subject and writers it addresses. There is a primarily North American focus to the collection, although a chapter by Elizabeth Narváez-Cardona and Pilar Mirely Chois-Lenis addresses writing and literacy instruction in Colombian health sciences graduate programs. Expanding this focus, the first chapter in the final section of the volume (titled “Teaching Culturally Sensitive Care Through Reflective

Writing” by Cristina Reyes Smith), explicitly situates itself within “the topics of diversity, culture, and inclusion” (p. 145) and provides a theoretical justification for the important inclusion of culturally sensitive approaches to health sciences writing tasks as well as specific examples of prompts used with students. Furthermore, a chapter titled “Supporting Medical Writers in the Twenty-First Century” by Rebecca Day Babcock et al. specifically situates itself within a World Englishes framework and addresses the concerns of writers and instructors when working within linguistically diverse populations comprising ESL speakers, multilingual writers, and transnational professionals. These three chapters explicitly anchor the implicit concerns of the entire volume, which Madson amplifies in his conclusion: “Writing in the health professions,’ as an emergent interdisciplinary, needs broader coverage of the places where writing is done...[and] [f]uture studies should not be limited to the English language” (p. 193).

Ultimately, Madson’s volume is a useful resource for program directors in the health professions, of course, but also for WAC or WID practitioners at the undergraduate level, interested in the kinds of writing that might trickle down to pre-professional programs, and for composition and rhetoric scholars especially interested in genre and in multimodality. In particular, the chapter by Kathryn West and Brian Callender on graphic medicine offers fascinating connections to writing studies approaches to teaching the creation and genre analysis of memes, infographics, and graphic memoirs.

Pre-med advisors and program directors, as well as general writing studies scholars working with undergraduates may also find this collection useful when considering the type and extent of writing instruction for undergraduates planning on careers in the health professions. “I don’t really need to write much, because I’m pre-med,” student after student tells me in my first-year writing seminars. Written in accessible, easy-to-read prose, this volume provides a strong counterargument to that assertion.

References

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Author Information

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