

EDITORIAL

The Textbook: contribution to nursing knowledge and practice

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Just to say at the beginning of this editorial – it is not my intention to offer guidance on how to write a book but is in fact to share my recent observations regarding why books for nurses are important to ongoing scholarship of the discipline.

These observations are set against the backdrop of our history as a developing profession and yet there appears to be minimal history of the textbook in nursing.

The reason for choosing the topic initially arose because of a colleague in another health care profession asking me why did I write books? At first, I offered a very glib response, simply stating I enjoy being able to write what my own observations and perspectives are on a topic, or a group of topics based on experience, knowledge and of course best evidence. Also, as an educator I enjoy being able to put forward ways of engaging with student nurses and registered nurses, so that they can consider options in their practice as well as gain new knowledge for that practice. Underpinning this of course is my belief that it's also a way of continuing to contribute to the profession and career that I began in 1967 through sharing my knowledge and experience with nurses, as well as enabling them to consider alternatives ways of thinking about their practice. Based on my own interests, stimulated by a wealth of books in other disciplines as well experts in the field such as anthropology, I have been fortunate to have been able to write and publish books that can also offer them a view or lens through which to consider their practice in innovative ways and in doing so moving forward nursing knowledge and practice (Holland 2020).

What do I mean by this statement regarding moving nursing forward? If we look at the latter issue, I will use the example of the work of Patricia Benner, particularly the *From Novice to Expert* book (Benner, 1984). How many of you reading this editorial are aware of the name of the author but maybe less so the book title? Her research was based on the foundational knowledge of Dreyfus

and Dreyfus, one a mathematician and system analyst and the other a philosopher, '*who developed a model of skill acquisition based upon the study of chess players and airline pilots*' (Benner, 1984, p. 13). Her findings enabled her to present to us a way of looking at the journey of a nursing student when they begin a new clinical placement as a novice to offering further stages of experience and 'knowing' as they continue their journey to becoming a qualified nurse. Importantly for nurse education, this 'staged' view can also apply to a nurse who enters a new clinical field where they have little experience. The end stage is becoming an expert.

This of course is a very minimal way of describing the work of Benner as published in her book, but the point being made is how has the book based on her research contributed to the development of nursing worldwide? I would say phenomenally when undertaking a wider search of the literature, including of course other published books stemming from this initial work and theoretical research findings as well as many published journal articles which present both critique and new ways of thinking on the value of a novice to expert approach to nursing education. One such paper (Hargreaves & Lane, 2001, p. 389) offers a very insightful analysis combining 'a narrative from a post registration student' and the literature and led me back to the excellent study by Martha Macleod (1996) on ward sisters' everyday experience and practice and most importantly how experience and learning are made visible through their narratives.

However, this very focused book by Benner (1984) is not one that a 'beginner' learner nurse will need to have as a foundation textbook as it were, for which accessing knowledge of subjects they will be learning about and skills they will need to gain to qualify and register as a nurse undertaking a graduate level programme is required. But of course, many will become familiar with Benner's work as their nursing curriculum for practice learning may well be structured around the novice to expert journey. So, what do I mean by a textbook?

I found a definition that I felt encapsulated my understanding of this second type of book – in that:

“A textbook is a book containing a comprehensive compilation of content in a branch of study with the intention of explaining it.” (Wikipedia, 2024).

Here we have two key words – a compilation of content – and a branch of study – and focused in such a way as to explain it – and in our context here – nursing. Before unpacking this definition further, I undertook a preliminary search as to whether there was any work published on the history of the textbook in nursing – or the history of the nursing textbook. My initial findings found very few references to the textbook in nursing over time. I couldn’t understand why not given the plethora of books on the History of Nursing – and some wonderful, focused nursing history books (Borsay & Dale, 2015; Brooks & Hallett 2015; Masakure, 2020). I need to say at this point that I have a long-standing interest in collecting nursing books and textbooks published at different times in history – these being very different to the nursing history ones focused on specific times in history. I am also a long-standing supporter that all nursing curricula should include the history of nursing globally, but especially that of an individual countries’ own history.

To be able to understand our past is to put our present in context and I offer what one can argue is the most famous of all ‘textbooks’ for nurses as a lens to this ideal, namely Florence Nightingale’s (FN) Notes on Nursing (Nightingale, 1859). Of course, what we now have as a nursing textbook can offer not only a comprehensive ‘guide’ to nursing practice through a compilation of content that many call a foundation knowledge for nursing, but as well we now have the means to access this textbook via a range of different options as well how to read it.

Without focusing on the detailed content of FN Notes on Nursing – we can put her publication into perspective of the time it was written, at the earliest development of nursing and her school of nursing, as well as the position of women in society at that time.

Her words were: *The following notes are by no means intended as a rule for thought by which nurses can teach themselves to nurse, still less as a manual to teach nurses to nurse. They are meant simply to give hints for thought to women who have personal charge of the health of others* (Preface). The content of her guide is of course a compilation of her notes of what it (namely nursing) is or what it is not – and meets that idea of a textbook, albeit not as we see it today.

As I continued to write this Editorial, I began to realise of course that I had in fact enough content to write a full article! But for now – it is a raising awareness Editorial. So how to conclude!

I realised of course that even for an Editorial that posed a question of their contribution to nursing, that I had to undertake a cursory search of the research literature for any reference to the research involving nursing textbooks. A search of Scopus led me to some thought provoking work over a period of time and in different countries but here are only some of them (Boshma et al., 2009; Ferrell et al., 1999; Hickey, 2010; Kirchoff et al., 2003; Sohn, 1991). Unfortunately, I am unable to offer a review of these in an editorial.

I hope that many of you will access some of these to read (and search for others) and for some of you to consider adopting your own research into nursing textbooks in general and like some of these authors consider how the nursing textbook in specialist subject fields has contributed to moving forward nursing knowledge and practice historically.

I look forward to hearing from anyone who wishes to share their current research into the focus of this Editorial.

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