



Writing-up and writing-as: Rediscovering nursing scholarship

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SUMMARY

Nursing is a relatively young academic discipline which only moved en masse into the higher education sector in many countries during the 1990s. Perhaps in a bid to enhance and accelerate its credibility, the nursing academy has embraced the values and practices of evidence-based medicine and the associated 'gold-standard' experimental research paradigm as its dominant discourse. Empirical scientific research has become the most valued and highly rewarded activity for nurse academics to pursue, and the tenets and standards of research have come to define the entire academic project of nursing. As a result, there has been a gradual shift from nursing as an academic discipline founded on scholarship to one based on research. Research is no longer seen as merely one aspect of the scholarly work expected of an academic, and is now often regarded as the main (and sometimes the only) activity necessary to gain promotion. I argue in this paper for a more positive view of scholarship; indeed, that scholarly activity is both the foundation and the creative driver of the academy. I suggest that the 'gold-standard' academic output of the research report is restricted in the contribution it is able to make to the development of the discipline of nursing, and that a far broader and more critical academic base is required. Whilst empirical research supplies the basic building blocks of the discipline, it is critical and creative scholarship that provides the plans and designs that turn these piles of bricks into useful structures.

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Introduction

In 1963, the bio-scientist Bernard Forscher wrote a letter to the journal *Science* in the form of a parable or cautionary tale in which he compared researchers to brickmakers, and theorists to builders 'who constructed edifices, called explanations or laws, by assembling bricks, called facts'. He concluded:

The brickmakers became obsessed with the making of bricks. When reminded that the ultimate goal was edifices, not bricks, they replied that, if enough bricks were available, the builders would be able to select what was necessary and still continue to construct edifices. It became difficult to complete a useful edifice because, as soon as the foundations were discernable, they were buried under an avalanche of random bricks. And, saddest of all, sometimes no effort was made even to maintain the distinction between a pile of bricks and a true edifice (Forscher, 1963, p. 339).

Forscher's point was clear: he felt that the production of research findings was taking precedence over using those find-

ings to develop the nascent discipline of bio-science; that any possibility of constructive development was being swamped by the sheer number of published research papers; and that the random accumulation of research findings was sometimes being mistaken for the construction and development of theory.

When Forscher's letter was originally published in the nineteen sixties, nursing could lay claim to very few bricks (research-based facts) and even fewer edifices (explanations or theories). However, nearly fifty years later, I would contend that the discipline is strewn with random bricks of various shapes, sizes and materials, that most edifices remain uncompleted, and that it is increasingly difficult to tell the difference between a building and a pile of bricks. In some cases, the intention to build anything from the growing piles of bricks has been abandoned completely in favour of merely rearranging the piles in the guise of systematic literature reviews. Rather than designing bricks specifically for the buildings we plan to construct, we are reduced at best to making what we can from the piles of random bricks that have been left lying around in the brickyard. The cause of the problem, I believe, lies in the relative value that the academy as a whole attaches to builders (theorists) and brickmakers (researchers). In particular, I would suggest that the scores obtained in the succession of Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs)

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conducted in the UK¹ since 1992 have come to be seen as the defining criteria of academic quality, and that (to continue Forscher's metaphor) strategies and systems to measure the research output of academic departments value and reward bricklayers well above and beyond architects and builders. This has resulted in an unbalanced and, I will argue, unhealthy discipline in which not only do we have more research findings than we know what to do with, but perhaps even more pernicious and dangerous, the values and standards of the research laboratory have come to dominate over those of the academy, to the extent that many believe that the values of the laboratory *are* the values of the academy.

The tyranny of research

It could be argued that the discipline of nursing has been particularly exposed to the demands of the research culture. Nursing is a relatively young academic discipline which only moved *en masse* into the higher education sector in many countries during the 1990s. Perhaps in a bid to enhance and accelerate its power and credibility, the nursing academy has embraced the values and practices of evidence-based medicine and the associated 'gold-standard' experimental research paradigm (and, in particular, the RCT) as its dominant discourse. Empirical scientific research has thus become the most valued and highly rewarded activity for nurse academics to pursue, and the tenets and standards of research have come to define the entire academic project of nursing. This attempt to align itself with the power-base, authority and academic credibility of the discipline of medicine has had a number of important and far-reaching consequences for nursing scholarship.

First, there is always a tendency for key questions, projects and programmes of research to be shaped by the dominant methodologies of the discipline. In nursing, then, where the 'gold-standard' methodology for producing best evidence is now the randomised controlled trial, and where proposals for funding might be expected to stand more chance of success if they adhere to this 'gold-standard', there is a danger that many important questions which cannot be framed in terms of experimental research methods will remain unanswered, and even unformulated. We can hardly expect to find answers to fundamental questions concerned with *understanding* and even *causality* if the only research methods that the discipline is willing to support financially are clinical trials and other quasi-experimental designs which are intended merely to measure and compare outcomes. Indeed, one of the guiding principles of positivism, as laid down by its founder Auguste Comte, is that the positivist researcher 'gives up the search after the origin and hidden causes of the universe and a knowledge of the final causes of phenomena' (Comte, 1830/1988). There is a danger, then, that decisions about what should count as the important issues of knowledge and theory generation in nursing might be made not by nurses according to their practice needs, nor even by theorists in order to build and test theoretical constructs and models, but by researchers according to what can be measured and evaluated using scientific research methods.

However, we should not fall into the trap of focussing exclusively on the positivist research community, and it is not my purpose in this paper to debate the merits and demerits of qualitative versus quantitative methodologies, but rather to consider the ef-

fects of empirical research *in general* on the discipline of nursing. It is my contention that the 'gold-standard' values and procedures of empirical research have had a hegemonic influence on the discipline of nursing as a whole, to the extent that 'scientific rigour' has become the watchword for quality control for *all* academic endeavour, including non-empirical writing and theorising. On the face of it, it is perhaps difficult to object to rigour as an academic criterion, although this could, of course, simply be another sign that the merits of rigorous academic work have been so entrenched as to be more or less given. However, if we examine what is usually meant by 'rigour' when the term is applied to research projects, we can perhaps begin to understand why it might be damaging to the discipline to employ this criterion for making judgements over and beyond certain experimental research methods. When researchers refer to their studies as being 'rigorous', what they generally mean is that they have followed certain rules or guidelines which are considered to be necessary guarantors of validity, such as correct sample size, proper randomisation of the study participants, and so on. To be a rigorous researcher is, as the word suggests, being rigid and inflexible in matters of study design and execution. When studies are being judged and evaluated, it is rigour that is usually the first (and sometimes the only) criterion that is considered: the logic of experimental research dictates that if the rules of good research design are rigorously followed, then the study is necessarily sound and the findings accurate. Conversely, studies which do not adhere rigidly to these rules of good design would not be sanctioned to be carried out, let alone published. It is therefore tempting to regard nursing as a robust and thriving science simply because it claims to promote rigorously the scientific method in the guise of the randomised controlled trial and other quasi-experimental designs, and to reject any scholarly activity that is not suitably 'rigorous' as unscientific and thus of little or no value to the discipline. In the rush to become accepted as a full member of the academy, nursing has perhaps fallen into the trap of mistaking piles of bricks for buildings, that is, of believing that an academic discipline can be judged solely by the scientific research papers it produces rather than how it uses them.

Scholarship in the 'contemporary university'

It is my contention that the rise of scientific research has been tyrannical in its suppression of traditional ideas of scholarship in favour of the values of the scientific research laboratory. As the educationalist Ronald Barnett asks: 'Can scholarship be taken seriously in the contemporary university, or do the contemporary discourses and ideologies of the university squeeze it out?' (Barnett, 2005, p. 4). Not so long ago, this question would have seemed faintly ridiculous; scholarship was so foundational to academic life that it was simply taken for granted. Scholarship has traditionally been defined rather tautologically as what scholars do, and includes the methods and values of the academy as well as the body of work produced by the application of those methods. As Boyer (1990) pointed out, 'scholarship in earlier times referred to a variety of creative work carried on in a variety of places, and its integrity was measured by the ability to think, communicate and learn' (p. 15). A traditional understanding of scholarship might therefore include the application of various methods of inquiry approved as 'scholarly' by the academic community, perhaps including critical commentary, philosophical speculation and debate, rhetorical and polemical argument, as well as primary and secondary empirical research. The term 'scholarship' would also, of course, describe the resultant body of work, which would have to be available for scrutiny and critique and approved by academic peers.

But if scholarship was once used as a term to describe the methods, practices, values and output of academics, its current meaning

¹ Although this paper is written predominantly with the UK situation in mind, I am aware that a number of other countries are introducing similar systems for assessing research output. These include New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong and the Netherlands. It is perhaps notable that in the USA, which has not yet adopted such a system of research assessment, nursing theorists (and theories) are far more abundant and are held in higher esteem than elsewhere. However, even in the USA, the research agenda is coming to predominate, driven by the need to win National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants.

has become very restricted and somewhat pejorative. Ernest Boyer, writing from a US perspective nearly twenty years ago, bemoaned a 'restricted view of scholarship' in which 'basic research has come to be viewed as the first and most essential form of scholarly activity, with other functions flowing from it' (Boyer, 1990, p. 15). In the intervening years since Boyer described research as a form of scholarly activity, the tables have been turned to the extent that scholarly activity is usually now regarded as a (rather lowly) form of research. For example, the definition provided for the recent Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which has had a huge influence on academic planning and strategising in the UK, subsumes scholarship under the broader remit of research, and defines it as 'the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines, in forms such as dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases' (RAE, 2005). This shift suggests that the primary activity of university academics, at least in the UK, is no longer scholarship but research. Thus, in response to the RAE definition, some UK universities are offering a 'scholarship' career pathway for those academics who are not meeting the research publication requirements of a 'full' lectureship. As Andreson (2000) pointed out, the terms 'research' and 'scholarship' have for some time been used 'to distinguish between the people who really do the research and the rest who merely need to "keep up"' (p. 63).

As we might expect of a definition which is intended primarily as a way of operationalising and measuring research 'quality', the RAE definition of scholarship relates it to particular published outputs, and as such it would appear that the majority of university academics would probably engage in little or no scholarship during their entire career. Furthermore, by narrowing down what counts as scholarly output to contributions to dictionaries, catalogues and databases, scholarship has, *by definition*, been more or less removed from our scholarly journals. This exclusion of scholarship from our so-called scholarly journals serves, in turn, further to lower its worth, since academic papers are increasingly being assessed according to the 'impact factor' of the journal in which they are published.

For the purposes of the RAE, then, scholarship is a subset of research, and not even a very important or valuable one. Seen in this way, the job of the scholar is to follow behind researchers, tidying up their loose ends, summarising their findings into catalogues and databases, and acting as general housekeepers to the 'intellectual infrastructure' of the discipline.

The language game of the write-up

I have suggested that the demise of scholarship in recent times is a consequence of the focus demanded by the various RAEs on output over process and on research output over 'scholarly' output, where scholarly output is defined in terms of academic housekeeping and is published predominantly in media other than academic journals. What is therefore valued in the contemporary university is not just published writing, but a specific form of writing, namely the research report or 'write-up'. I wish to suggest that the 'write-up' has particular features which single it out from other forms of academic writing such as the discussion paper, the critique or the polemic, and that these features, *by their very nature*, have promoted it to its position as the dominant academic 'language game'.

Wittgenstein (1958) coined the term 'language games' as a way of describing the different modes of discourse that we use in speaking and writing, and Lyotard (1984) later applied them to scholarly discourse. Language games are the narrative forms that we engage in when we communicate with one another, and include the denotative (describing), the performative (acting out through language), the prescriptive (giving orders), the interroga-

tive (asking questions) and so on. Each language game has its own rules and protocol, which are understood by all the players, and in everyday life we employ a variety of different language games, depending on the situation. Lyotard suggested that language games are composed of three elements: the sender of the message, the receiver of the message (the addressee) and the message itself (the referent). Normally, the decision taken by the addressee as to whether to accept or reject the referent will be based to some extent on the content of the message, but will be largely dependent on the status of the sender. So, for example, the prescriptive utterance 'move along, there is nothing to see' might be spoken either by a policeman, by a paramedic or by a member of the public at the scene of an accident. However, whether or not spectators believe and act upon the message depends on whether they accept the status and authority of the speaker as legitimate to make such a request. Put another way, the rules of the language game of prescription (giving orders) determine who might legitimately utter the phrase 'move along, there is nothing to see'. Similarly, this paper might be seen as a denotative narrative that is intended to describe my vision of the state of scholarship. Whether or not you are persuaded by my points will depend to some extent on the strength of my arguments, but also on your perception of my reputation, qualifications and position in the academy, that is, on my intellectual and academic authority. There is nothing in the arguments themselves, no cast-iron guarantors of truth that compels you to accept my message. Generally speaking, decisions about the validity or truth of the narratives we use to convey knowledge and ideas rest with the judgement of the receiver.

Lyotard (1984) argued that modern science has come to be dominated by a single language game, that of a particular type of denotation or information-giving. The scientific write-up or research report therefore has only one function, to tell or inform, and is a one-way communication between the writer, who sends the message, and the reader, who receives it. Furthermore, unlike most language games, *scientific* denotation locates the validity of the message entirely in the message itself and not at all in the sender. Thus, the scientific write-up or narrative must include, along with the message conveying the findings of the research, a second narrative assuring the reader of the validity of those findings (usually in the form of a 'methods' section). The write-up is therefore not a simple 'little narrative' but rather a 'metanarrative', a narrative that includes a justification of its own truth-status. The scientific denotative write-up tells the reader not only about the findings of the study, but also why they must be accepted as accurate or truthful. Neither the sender nor the receiver of the message have any influence over its truth-value; it matters little whether the research report was written by a research assistant or an eminent professor, nor by whom (if at all) it is read. Indeed, it is possible that a published research paper which has been read by no one except the reviewers might still be rated very highly according to the metrics employed for research assessment purposes. As Lyotard pointed out, 'scientific knowledge is in this way set apart from the language games that combine to form a social bond' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 25). The research report carries its own guarantee of truth regardless of social or professional relationships, in keeping with the evidence-based practice dictum of rejecting clinical or professional authority in favour of objective scientific evidence.

We can perhaps begin to see why scholarly writing has come to be restricted in scope and devalued in importance. On the one hand, in a discipline that values only 'hard evidence', it appears to make no tangible contribution to new knowledge; and on the other hand it is not a self-validating metanarrative but relies on persuasion and rhetoric for its effect. We might say, following Toulmin (2001) that scholarly writing appeals to human *reason* in an age of technical *rationality*.

Towards a 'new scholarship'

My aim in this paper is to begin a process of rehabilitation for the traditional idea of scholarship in nursing, which is to say, for the discipline to embrace and value a variety of language games other than scientific denotation. In the current research-driven academic climate, where success is measured largely in terms of performance in a research assessment exercise, my starting point has to be with the RAE definition of scholarship discussed earlier. I would suggest that the definition is broadly accurate in its assertion that scholarship is concerned with 'the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines'. However, I would be reluctant to define scholarship in terms of particular forms of published output. Rather than concede that most academics do not engage in scholarship and urge them all to write dictionaries and catalogues, I will suggest that we need to redefine and reconceptualise scholarship in such a way that it regains its place as a core activity of academic life.

I therefore wish to frame scholarship in terms of process rather than outcome; that is, I would prefer to regard it as something that academics do rather than something they produce; as the language games that they use in their communications; as something that *happens* in the academy. I would also suggest that, given the way that the term 'research' has been narrowed down to refer primarily to empirical data collection, that it is unhelpful to regard scholarship as a subspecies of research. If anything, it might be more helpful to return to the traditional definitions of research as merely one of a variety of scholarly endeavours. However, for the purposes of this discussion, and in keeping with current practice in UK universities where academic contracts are increasingly being distinguished as either 'scholarly' or 'research', I will maintain a separation between the two activities.

The educationalist Lewis Elton has observed that "'Scholarship" does not have a well defined meaning, but it is at the same time crucially important as a concept, belief and practice' (Elton, 2005, p. 109), and that it consists of 'new and crucial interpretations of what is already known . . . an activity that is necessary as a precondition for both good research and good teaching' (Elton, 1992, p. 252). Similarly, Boyer (1990) proposed a return to older definitions of scholarship as including the integration, application and transmission of existing knowledge. Scholarship, then, is the name given to those things which happen in the academy that serve to create, develop and maintain the intellectual infrastructure of the discipline, and might be regarded as everything that an academic does *apart from* teaching and research or perhaps as all the language games an academic plays apart from scientific denotation. As Elton (1992) suggested, it is the foundation for research and teaching; it *makes research and teaching possible* by exploring, developing, maintaining and (perhaps most importantly) challenging the framework and structure, the rules and assumptions, on which the discipline rests. It is through scholarship that the research agenda is set and the rules and conduct of empirical research are agreed. If research is the discipline looking outwards, then scholarship is the discipline taking a critical look at itself.

Writing-up and writing-as

Scholarship, I have argued, is something that happens; it is a series of conversations that the academy has with itself in order to discover what it thinks, and these conversations required a variety of narrative forms apart from denoting or instructing. The conversations that constitute scholarship occur primarily through writing, which is not to say that scholarship is merely a form of writing, or that it is simply what is written. Rather, writing is the *medium* through which scholarship most often takes place; we might even say that scholarly writing is the process by which the

academy *thinks*. As we have seen, writing (and in particular, the writing of research reports) is also the activity upon which academic success rests, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. We have also seen that the various RAEs across the world, along with the pressure to obtain external funding, place a strong emphasis on *research* as the dominant and most important form of academic activity. Thus, although I have argued for a conceptual separation between research and scholarship, it might be politically and personally expedient to frame scholarly writing (at least semantically) as a form of research. Since scholarship aims to produce, develop and critique knowledge and theory primarily through the process of writing, I will coin the term *writing-as* research in contrast to the output of empirical studies, which I will refer to as *writing-up* research.

Clearly, there are some important distinctions between *writing-up* research projects and *writing-as* research. In the former case, the writing is not a formal part of the empirical research process, and yet the research is not complete until the project is written-up. We might here borrow the term coined by Derrida (1974) for this ambivalent relationship and refer to writing-up as a *supplement* to the research, both a part of the greater whole and yet separate and removed from it (as, for example, in the relationship between the 'colour supplement' magazine and the Sunday papers). In contrast, *writing-as* research is an integrated and unified process insofar as the writing *is* the research.

A second distinction between *writing-up* and *writing-as* lies in the language games which the writer is playing. I have already outlined Lyotard's argument that writing-up is restricted to a single language game and takes the form of a metanarrative that requires neither the academic status of the writer nor the consent of the reader in order to assert its truth-value. In contrast, *writing-as* is a form of social engagement in which knowledge is conveyed as 'little narratives' and in which both the writer and the reader play important roles in validating that knowledge. This social engagement can take a variety of forms from persuasive rhetoric (denotative language games), open, Socratic or rhetorical questioning (interrogative), and even hectoring polemic (prescriptive). However, in all of these language games, the power to authorise the account lies with the reader. We can see, then, that the little narratives of scholarly writing deal in uncertainty and depend upon sources of knowledge located towards the bottom of the so-called 'hierarchy of evidence' which are not considered to be inherently valid, but which require a subjective judgement on the part of the reader. As Lyotard pointed out, the research community (and hence the discipline of nursing as a whole) tends to attach very little value to these narratives, which it classifies as:

belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives [other than science] are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children (Lyotard, 1984, p. 27).

It is perhaps no coincidence that the housekeeping function of scholarship which I described earlier, where scholars are typically seen as following behind researchers tidying up their loose ends, might be regarded by the scientific community as 'fit only for women and children'.

The third and perhaps most important distinction between *writing-up* and *writing-as* lies in the relationship that these two forms have with the discipline of nursing and the academy as a whole. We might characterise the relationship between the research write-up and the scientific community as symbiotic, insofar as they are mutually supportive. Thus, the write-up adheres strictly and uncritically to the conventions of the genre. It invokes the scientific criteria of validity, reliability and rigour to support its findings, and goes to great lengths to demonstrate how those criteria are assured

through strict adherence to an approved method. Where critical judgement is offered, for example in the literature review and discussion sections or in systematic reviews of the literature, it usually takes the form of *disciplinary critique* insofar as it polices the boundaries of the dominant discipline, correcting and punishing any transgressions. As Eagleton (1996) observed, scientific critique 'is typically conservative and corrective, revising and adjusting particular phenomena to its implacable model of discourse' (p. 12). Indeed, since the validity of the scientific paper depends almost exclusively on demonstrating that the rules of the discipline have been rigorously followed, we might expect nothing less.

In contrast, *writing-as* has an altogether more critical and challenging relationship with the discipline. As I suggested earlier, scholarly writing can be seen as a series of conversations that the academy has with itself in order to discover what it thinks; it 'opens itself to debate, it attempts to convince, it invites contradiction. It becomes part of the public exchange of opinions' (Hohendahl, 1982, p. 52). Thus, whereas researchers tend to employ critique in a disciplinary way in order to reject write-ups and other forms of writing that do not adhere rigorously to accepted scientific criteria and methods, the purpose of scholarship is to question and challenge those very criteria. As Foucault asserted:

A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are, it is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest (Foucault, 1988, p. 154).

Scholarly critique therefore attempts to dig beneath the surface and examines the very roots of the discipline, what Barthes (2004) called the *doxa*, 'that which goes without saying' (p. 4). Scholarly writing, then, is truly radical (from the Latin *radix*, meaning 'root').

Conclusion

To return to Forscher's brickmaking analogy discussed at the start of this paper, I have suggested that the discipline of nursing has become swamped with research papers but that little attention has been given to constructing anything useful with them. This state of affairs, I have argued, is due partly to the excessive and disproportionate rewards attached to empirical research and partly out of a misguided belief that, in Forscher's words 'a pile of bricks' and 'a true edifice' are the same thing. As a result, there has been a gradual shift from nursing as an academic discipline founded on scholarship to one based on research. Research is no longer seen as merely one aspect of the scholarly work expected of an aca-

ademic, and is now often regarded as the main (and sometimes the only) activity necessary to gain promotion, or in some cases, to avoid being regraded onto a teaching and scholarship contract. Whilst there is nothing wrong in principle with separating out the researchers from the scholars, the latter role is too often regarded as inferior, with *regrading* being perceived as *degrading* or demotion. Part of the problem is that the role of the scholar tends to be defined not by what academics do, but by what they *do not do*, with scholarship contracts being offered primarily to those academics who are not perceived as being 'active researchers'. Furthermore, scholarship contracts usually carry with them a greater teaching load, emphasising the perception that scholarship is less demanding than research. To reiterate the observation reported earlier, a distinction is being made 'between the people who really do the research and the rest who merely need to "keep up"' (Andreson, 2000).

I have argued in this paper for a more positive view of scholarship; indeed, that scholarly activity is both the foundation and the creative driver of the academy. I suggested that the 'gold-standard' academic output of the research report is restricted in the contribution it is able to make to the development of the discipline of nursing, and that a far broader and more critical academic base is required. Whilst empirical research supplies the basic building blocks of the discipline, it is critical and creative scholarship that provides the plans and designs that turn these piles of bricks into useful structures.

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