Bringing Nursing to the Public

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ABSTRACT

For the past 5 years, an unusual program has been evolving in the University of Basel's Institute of Nursing Science master's program in Basel, Switzerland. A special course designed to help nurses master public communication skills requires students to play the roles of journalist, exhibition curator, conference organizer, radio reporter, and news producer. Two faculty members, an experienced radio and newspaper journalist and a nurse scientist, teach and support the students. By developing their competence in media relations, participants prepare themselves to tackle the course's long-term goal of bringing the nursing profession into the public eye.

Nurses and midwives form the largest category of health care workers, with more than 14 million nurses worldwide providing up to 80% of all direct patient care (World Health Organization, 2007). The World Health Assembly recently reaffirmed the crucial contribution of nursing and midwifery professionals to the health systems and the health of the people they serve. The "Islamabad Declaration on Strengthening Nursing and Midwifery" (2007) indicated that efficient and effective nursing and midwifery services are finally being recognized as critical to achieving the general health of all nations.

Although these statements represent important milestones, an individual might ask what the current public perceptions are, how moderately informed members of the public see nurses and nursing, and how nurses can foster greater public awareness of their contributions. After all, only by understanding and informing public opinion can nursing professionals build a foundation of public support.

Unfortunately, analyses of media coverage in various countries suggest that the public has little understanding of what nurses actually do. This knowledge gap engenders serious social and political consequences, beginning with the popular image of nurses as maids and surrogate mothers rather than professionals coordinating and delivering complex task sets in conjunction with other health care providers (Buresh & Gordon, 2006). One study of more than 2,000 health-related articles culled from 16 major news publications found references to nurses in only 4%, with even those few mentioning nurses and nursing mostly in passing (Center Nursing Press, 1998).

No group absent from public awareness can contribute enough to debate on the allocation of social resources. This is particularly true for nursing, a profession which, in most countries, depends on public funds for education, research, and practice. However, unless nurses learn not only to speak out about their needs, but also to enlist the media to amplify their collective voice, they will soon find themselves without adequate funding to perform their work.

Giving Nursing a Voice

In contrast with members of many other professions, nurses have traditionally been reticent, even on matters where their input could support needed change. This point was recently taken up by two American journalists, Buresh and Gordon, neither of whom is a nurse, who made nurses' silence the focus of a series of articles on the nursing profession's relationship with public communication and the media. In 2003, they first published *From Silence to Voice: What Nurses Know and Must Communicate to the Public*, offering nurses a systematic approach to recognizing and overcoming communication-related issues, whether individual (e.g., patient confidentiality) or collective (e.g., outmoded societal values affecting nurses and nursing).

The value of this approach is clear. As one of Buresh and Gordon's best-known contributors, Benner noted in her Foreword:

> Today, the need for nurses to talk about their work is ever more urgent. Cost-cutters in many countries are threatening the integrity of nursing practice, nursing education, and even nursing research.

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> If patients are to get the care they need, nurses must tell their stories in credible, effective ways. (Buresh & Gordon, 2006, p. x)

Buresh and Gordon offer insights to professionals who want to learn to reach out to, speak with, and develop contacts with the media; to present themselves more professionally in their workplace settings; to work with public relations professionals; or to create media campaigns around particular political objectives.

Directly in line with these goals, the Institute of Nursing Science at the University of Basel in Switzerland has developed an unconventional training concept, from which the course Bringing Nursing to the Public has evolved. This one-semester course is embedded in the advanced nursing practice curriculum module, and is mandatory for all master's students (**Table**). It was first taught in the winter semester of 2003-2004.

The course is one of a small number of offerings designed specifically and systematically to address nurses' public communication issues. The two lecturers, an experienced journalist (C.K.) and a nurse scientist (R.S.), used the course to help nurses use their voices to inform and transform public understanding of nursing practice wherever they work. They did this by letting students experience for themselves what it means to work in public communication. This reversal of roles (i.e., acting as information distributors rather than as consumers), addressed students' and nurses' anxiety about making contact with the media, demystifying and thus tempering negative images of the media, and heightening students' competence in interacting with journalists and producers. Students finished the course with a set of effective tools and techniques to be used when interacting with the media and the public.

Most importantly, the course allowed students to relax and enjoy themselves as they worked in groups to create their own media products. However, this is not simply a laboratory exercise. A real-life experience is the objective, with the immediate goal of publication or broadcast media exposure. So far, all groups have achieved this objective by the end of the semester, finding places for their products at radio stations, newspapers, and magazines.

TABLE

Nursing Goes Public Course

Instructors	Cornelia Kazis and René Schwendimann
Credits	8 credits (ECTS)[a]
Course time and frequency	1:00 to 4:00 p.m., once per week
Course prerequisites	Students admitted to their second year of the master of science in nursing degree program
Course description	This course is designed to bring nursing-related health care topics to the public, using a variety of mass media to communicate with a broad audience. Students will learn to transform nursing content and scientific knowledge into everyday language. Throughout the course, students will work continuously in small groups of 3 to 4 students to develop their mass media product until its publication or launch.
Objectives	To describe and communicate complex professional phenomena in a way that is understandable by lay people; to learn how to approach and use mass media such as newspaper or broadcasting; to develop a mass media product that can be published; to bring nursing to the eyes and ears of the public
Format	Lectures, seminar discussions, group work, and workshops using communication training and role-playing. Lecturers will provide supervision throughout the development process of the media product.
Evaluation	The mass media product will be presented by each student group to the entire class. The class and the teachers will grade the media product. Grading scores range between 1 and 6 (a score of ⩾4 is needed to pass). The mean of these grades counts for 50% of the evaluation. If by end of the course the mass media product must be accepted for publication (e.g., by an editor of a newspaper), it will be graded with a score of 6 for each of the students in the group responsible. This grade counts for the other 50% of the evaluation.
Required textbook	Buresh, B., & Gordon, S. (2006). *Der Pflege eine stimme geben: Was pflegende wie öffentlich kommunizieren müssen* [From silence to voice: What nurses know and must communicate to the public]. Bern, Germany: Verlag Hans Huber.

Note. ECTS = European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.
[a] The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System is a student-centered system based on the student workload required to achieve the objectives of a program (1 credit stands for approximately 25 to 30 working hours).

The following sections address several of the course's key points, including the onset of classes, the lecturers' contributions and their basis in literature, and descriptions of the students' works in progress and their reflections and experiences throughout the classes.

Course Introduction

It was the first day of the Autumn semester, 2006, and the course was set

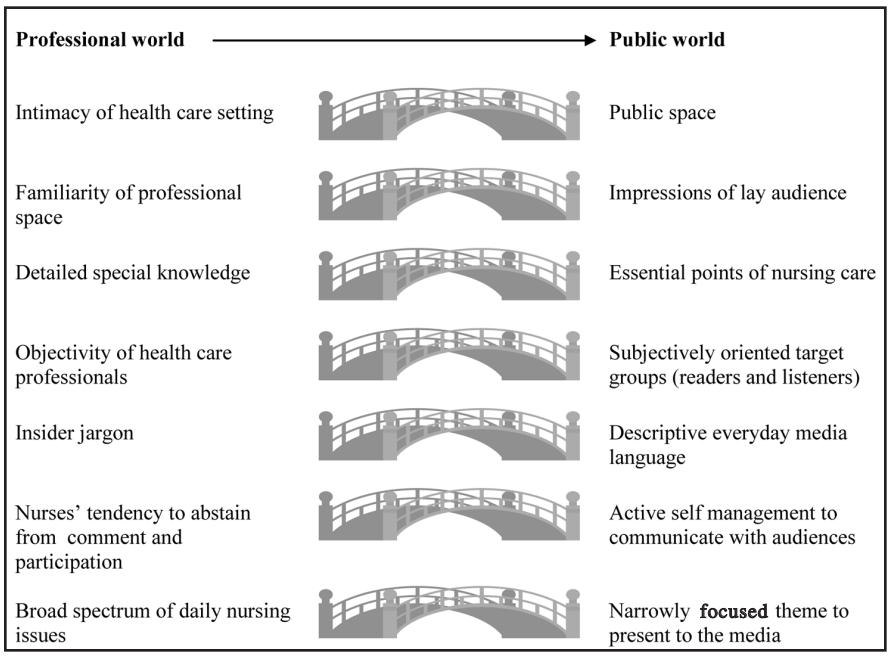

Figure. Seven bridges across the information gap.

to begin. The initial theme was Dealing with Time. The first afternoon's goal was to find an aspect of the daily routine of nursing that was current and relevant and would appeal to interested laypeople. The Nursing Science lecturer (R.S.) began by explaining the grading rules to the students (**Table**):

> Whoever manages to get his or her work published in a mass media outlet will receive a grade of six points (range = 1 to 6, with 6 [as] the highest grade), without taking the quality of the product into account.

There was palpable surprise in the seminar room. The lecturer continued:

> A second grade will be given by the lecturers and your fellow students when you present the product to the class at the end of the semester. Add them together, and you will have your final grade for the whole course.

For the students, this was uncharted territory. However, their faces expressed enthusiasm. The first step was to "take the pulse." The instructor produces a small hourglass and asks the students to say how they feel about the task of writing a newspaper article, creating an exhibition, producing a radio program, or planning a podium discussion. Students were allowed 30 seconds to give a succinct statement reflecting their feelings and opinions regarding the upcoming course. The ice was broken. Truths were revealed. This was fertile ground for journalism.

Course Purpose

The perspectives awaiting the students over the next 12 Wednesday afternoons were diverse and demanding. The lecturer told the student, "You have to cross seven bridges," alluding to an old German hit song by Peter Maffay (**Figure**). Both in personal and didactic terms, gaining a new perspective was the order of the day. The course's first bridge led from the intimacy of the health care setting to the public space outside. The second spanned the gap between nurses' familiarity and understanding of their practice and the often false impressions of their target audience of lay readers or listeners. The remaining five stretched from detailed specialized knowledge to essential points of nursing care; from the objective orientation of a health care professional to the subjective orientation of the target group of readers or listeners; from insider jargon to descriptive, everyday media language; from a tendency of nurses to abstain from comment or participation to active self-management when communicating with a broader audience and the public; and from the broad spectrum of issues addressed in daily nursing routines to a narrowly focused theme to present to the media.

To do all this, students needed to understand and develop skills associated with being a member of the media. The point of this course was to develop and sell a particular description of nursing work on the free market, which required work-hardened skills in public communication. Thus, the course's most important bridge was that which led from professional language to a vocabulary accessible to newspaper readers.

Buresh and Gordon (2006) also focused on this topic. Their chapter "Avoid Using Jargon" described communication killers in an exemplary manner. To demonstrate their point, they focused on one possible response to the question, "What do you do?": "I do symptom assessment, I monitor the effect of chemotherapy on ovulatory function, and I do patient education" (Buresh & Gordon, 2006, p. 90). Other nurses would certainly understand this sentence, but would it help laypeople understand either nursing work or patient problems? The authors thought it would not. "In communication with the public," they urged the reader to "distinguish between what one says to other health care professionals and what one says to laypeople" (Buresh & Gordon, 2006, p. 88). This sounded simple; however, it was not.

The mental crossing of the seven bridges is followed by a brainstorming session on Dealing with Time. What does the subject encompass? It was chosen for the semester because of the numerous and varied time management challenges facing nurses in their professional practice. Each idea was written on a yellow sticky note and stuck to the blackboard. Soon, the board was a sea of yellow, a graphic illustration of the

abundance of the students' ideas. The lecturer arranged the notes according to main areas. All 19 students considered the ideas and asked questions to clarify them. Any initial timidity disappeared. Ideas were kindled. At the end of the afternoon, the future media representatives formed groups. They presented their ideas to the class the following week, but not in the way they expected.

Course Projects

On the first Wednesday in November, every student brought a picture to class—of a grandmother, a partner, a woman at the bus stop kiosk, a taxi driver. A diverse range of people cross paths. As this was the imagined target audience, each was introduced to the class. The students discussed questions such as: What were the interests of the audience? What kind of activities did they enjoy? What kind of hospital experiences did they have? What kinds of people were they? What did they dream of? What aroused their enthusiasm? A spectrum of life sketches began to appear, which served as a touchstone for the relevance, appeal, and currency of the chosen topics and their realization for the duration of the whole semester.

Each group was allocated 10 minutes to outline its topic. The nonpresenting students acted as the audience, and were divided into two equal groups. Group A discussed their suggestions as nursing professionals; Group B took on the roles of a lay audience.

Group A began by stating:

> We want to write that nursing care needs time. And time is money. Whoever reduces funds and cuts jobs decreases nursing quality.

They were soon interrupted. "What does nursing quality mean?" asked the "kiosk woman." A fellow student interjected, "Isn't that statement rather banal?" "What does this topic have to interest me?" the "taxi driver" pressed them. The lecturer asked, "Which studies will help you to reinforce your arguments?" The students moved into gear via arguments. Their ideas were polished. After this audience reshaping, they had to rethink their original ideas and adapt them to the laws of the media market. What they just experienced was the central dynamic of a typical editorial meeting. Training in questioning and argumentation were rolled into one.

By the third meeting, the class was reorganized into five groups, each with a clear project. Group 1 developed the slogan, "Nursing Takes Time," for a poster-based image campaign on trams and buses. Group 2 wrote an article for a popular weekly magazine. They focused on women's changed perception of time after being diagnosed with breast cancer, examining the role of nursing after the shock of the diagnosis. Group 3 suggested a multimedia exhibition in the town center on the theme of Waiting, dealing with how nursing professionals could ease the stressful waiting of relatives at the hospital. Group 4 conceived an article for a monthly magazine to clarify, through words and images, that time is different for patients with Alzheimer's disease, and the implications of this little-known aspect of dementia for nursing. Finally, Group 5 planned a 1-hour prime-time radio transmission on the Swiss DRS 1 station about life after a heart attack and the role of nursing following such a "schuss vor den bug" (i.e., shot across the bow).

Learning Playfully

After the students decided on their projects, they had 2 months to finish them. Until then, the first half of each 3-hour meeting was reserved for working on projects. The groups worked on their individual projects and reflected on questions such as: Who can we involve? How will we acquire the necessary images? How will we arrange to pay the expenses? Which questions are key? How will we find concerned parties who are willing to give us information? What would be an appealing title? Does one have to explain this word? How does the tape recorder function? How are we supposed to sell our topic? Dr. Schwendimann assisted the students technically and Ms. Kazis gave them her insight as a professional journalist.

During the second half of the afternoon, students practiced journalistic technique, although it would be equally accurate to say they learn by playing. For example, the term *WWW* for a journalist refers not only to the World Wide Web, but also to the typical beginning of journalistic questions: What? When? Why? Where? Who? To play a game demonstrating the value of these words, participants arranged themselves in a circle. One person at a time placed an object commonly used every day in the center. For example, a student might have used a ballpoint pen. The barrage of questions would begin: Where does it come from? What was signed with it? How much raw material is needed to produce it? Why are ballpoint pens not appropriate for practicing one's best writing? How expensive was it? Who profits from it? This game is designed to lead players beyond the obvious questions, while preparing them for interviews and press conferences.

For one meeting, the authors invited an expert to give a 20-minute talk on a highly charged issue. The class staged a press conference with press portfolios, beverages, and the usual formalities. Thus, the students learn about the organization of a media event and can test their reporting technique by role-playing a typical question-and-answer session. A student stated after this exercise, "It's so difficult when they talk in such abstract professional jargon, how on earth am I supposed to make this interesting for my readers?" The change of perspective worked. Those who wanted to explore the afternoon's exercise delved into 20 Golden Rules for a Successful Press Conference (a chapter of Ziegler's book) for the following week (Ziegler, 2007).

BVB stands not only for the "Basler Verkehrs-Betriebe" (Basel Transit Authority), but also for *Bild, Vergleich, und Beispiel* (i.e., image, comparison, and example)—three important aides that must be present and sustainable in communication. A demonstrative example would be to liken the everyday experience of a patient with a borderline syndrome to a never-ending roller coaster ride. Similarly,

numbers often elude comprehension. To help the reader or listener grasp the phenomenon of 400,000 people afflicted by an illness, an individual might observe that the number is equivalent to 1,000 fully-loaded Boeing 747s. Examples are even more useful, and case histories are invaluable. Remembering the principles of bild, vergleich, und beispiel is crucial to building the bridge, first mentioned in the first meeting, between professional jargon and everyday descriptive language, and one of the course's most salient themes.

Decreasing Fear of Contact and Narrating Stories

Students' evaluation notes, written at the end of the semester, showed their thoughts and progress while coping with the course's requirements. One student wrote in her course feedback:

> I was delighted that one of the two lecturers is a real journalist; that helped to shape the course. At the same time, I was also uncertain, especially because of the heavy demands.

Another participant wrote of the first afternoon:

> I was very excited about the course, as I was hoping to gain more control over my own performance. I unfortunately always get nervous during presentations and feel like bolting after a few minutes.

Another student noted:

> We often had to hand in an established statement after being timed with an hourglass for 30 seconds! It was impressive to see how the lecturer taught us the most essential points about media and communication with very little material.

Actually, it is the person who was central, not the material. This truth, gleaned from the everyday routine of the hospital, was also valid for publicity, which is why both lecturers very consciously placed emphasis on personal development and experience, language training, and experience-based knowledge, rather than on theory. Thus, the authors used the ritual of the pocket story throughout the semester.

The pocket story task was deceptively simple. Each student briefly narrated a minor incident from his or her daily nursing routine. The goal of these quick anecdotes was to show, in an entertaining way, the demands of the job. However, this level of simplicity was a challenge for many. One involved and motivated student, who hardly revealed her battle with stage fright, wrote:

> I did not manage to hide with reference to the aforementioned pocket story. It was a positive experience for me in the end. I…learn[ed] to take a closer look instead of running away; I…learn[ed] to confront the situation. I was very much strengthened when it came to performing.

Buresh and Gordon (2006) also wrote how important it was to talk about what one does. For example, someone at a party asks you what you do. You respond, "I'm a nurse." The other person doesn't know what to say. "Oh, how nice," the person mutters politely and begins to discuss a different topic. Or on hearing that you are a pediatric nurse, an oncology nurse, or a hospice nurse, an acquaintance responds, "That must be so depressing. How can you stand working with sick children/cancer patients/dying people?" Buresh and Gordon (2006) stated:

> To someone outside healthcare, anything that has to do with sickness, vulnerability, and death may appear to be draining and unbearably depressing rather than enriching and rewarding. (p. 72)

It is not unusual that an individual's work is turned into a cliché or stereotype. To preempt or respond to this, the students, supported by the authors, practiced producing brief and compelling narratives of nursing work. During this time, the trial audience in the seminar room paid sympathetic attention to the technical points of the presentation. Where was the storyteller's gaze? What did his or her body language express? What did his or her voice sound like? How well did the story demonstrate the intended points? Could I get the picture? Would I be able to tell the story to someone else on the spot? Did the anecdote capture my interest? Would I like to continue talking to the narrator?

Viewed from this perspective, quick anecdotes are public relations training for everyday life. People may begin to understand the nature of nursing and the agency of the nurse through anecdotes or arguments supporting their role in the health care system. Buresh and Gordon (2006) wrote:

> Silence any internal voice that expresses doubt about the value of nursing, such as, "Oh, no one would be interested in hearing about this," or "They would think it's ordinary." (p. 82)

Our class prepared anecdotes or arguments by trying to imagine the role of a journalist who wants to describe nursing care. They also developed a scenario about work.

Student feedback confirmed that the messages of the course were well received. One student wrote:

> For me, language fulfilled a more important function and I slowly learn[ed] to use it more consciously.

Another student stated:

> I will never ever forget the bild, vergleich, und beispiel.

A third student added:

> The project was a wonderful experience: even though we had to work very hard. I could feel that both course lecturers believed in our project.

Going Public and Maintaining a Position

At the end of the course, the radio program on life after a heart attack had been produced, broadcast, and copied onto CDs for everyone. The exhibition on waiting was ready visually, spatially, and acoustically. Relatives of patients spoke of how it feels to wait for the unknown; students recorded anything that might be helpful on MP3 players and created an accompanying slideshow. Another group wrote, edited, and illustrated an article on how people suffering from dementia experience time. It was published in the magazine, *Sprechstunde* ("Consultation"),

which can be found in every general practice clinic in Switzerland (Bigler, Bischoff, & Tschumi, 2007).

An article on patients' experiences after a diagnosis of breast cancer was be printed in the popular magazine *Schweizer Familie* ("Swiss Family") (Boilat, Micheli, Rieder, Schneehagen, 2007). In addition, the planned posters are on display in trams and buses. These consisted of large photographs of various nurse-patient interactions, below which "Nursing Takes Time" is printed.

Two groups had to raise money for their projects. Both managed to obtain the necessary funding, thereby achieving their first educational objective—disseminating their product by selling it to a newspaper editor. The bridge between personal restraint and active self-management was built. In the weeks after the projects' completion, a broad public read, heard, or viewed them all. A class of graduate students managed the job of bringing nursing to the public. Every participant was awarded the maximum possible grade of 6 for this segment.

During their final presentation, the students were invited to journalist's work place, the radio studio of the Swiss Radio and Television Association in Basel, Switzerland, the seat of the cultural broadcast station DRS 2. This was an encounter with a working environment no longer completely unfamiliar.

Each group received 1 hour for their final presentation and the grading of their work. A series of short performances turned the day into a special event. The fire kindled earlier was burning brightly now. Although the presentation did not count toward their final grade, not a single group gave up the opportunity to captivate the audience of their classmates and the two lecturers.

The works were later graded according to their content and form, thus taking into account what journalist Carmen Thomas so neatly summarized as the "Mache und Sache" principle (deed and subject matter) (Ziegler, 2007).

Discussion

The course involved making some difficult distinctions for the sake of a lay audience. Unquestionably, it became a beneficial exercise and will continue to inform and enrich the participants' working lives in future years. Equally important are the questions they will ask themselves of this and every subsequent course: What was important for me? What was lacking? What displeased me? What pleased me? Such are the simple questions of activity and subject matter. Each group received everyone's briefly formulated feedback on notes that were stuck to a large flipchart sheet along with their various marks, including the 6 awarded for the project's completion. The class average was calculated. All were at least good; some were excellent.

One student mused in her final feedback:

> I find it important to wage a specific "advertising campaign" for Nursing Science. It is surprising that fellow students from other faculties still don't know that Nursing Science can be studied at the University of Basel.

Another student wrote:

> The feedback of our visitors at the exhibition showed me that our nursing work is extremely important and meaningful for those concerned.

A third student stated:

> I passed the article along to my whole circle of acquaintances and got heaps of praise for my efforts, which I naturally enjoyed a lot.

At the end of the day, a radio station staff guided everyone through the long corridors of the production studio, pointing out the soundtracks of a radio play director and describing the stressful work of the news editors. He talked briefly about modern technology and the importance of the individual. The day was long, but the students were still paying close attention. Now they understood what the editor was talking about.

Conclusion

Currently, more than 70 students have successfully completed the University of Basel's Bringing Nursing to the Public course. Many individual comments from newspaper readers, radio listeners, and exhibition visitors have shown that the students' messages about the indispensable contribution nurses make to health care are reaching their target audience. In addition, former students now working as health care professionals have expressed what this course means to them today, as it left them with valuable communication skills for patient education, interdisciplinary communication, leadership, and management. In terms of the course's immediate goals of helping students understand and exploit the value of their voices, it succeeded. In terms of the long-term target of bringing nursing to the public, it may be too early to say, but the initial results are encouraging.

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