

Editorial

## More than a paper exercise

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**Editorial Note:** Editorials are opinion pieces. This editorial has not been subject to peer review and the content expressed are those of the authors.

This editorial sets the scene for the first edition of the Journal of Nursing Theory and Practice. In an attempt to prepare, an editorial should consider the profiles of the potential readers who might be attracted in different ways to the scholarly, ethical and qualitative content (Lob et al. 2022). The target audience are those in nursing, midwifery, healthcare and educational practice. We should begin by signalling the journal's content around healthcare. However, our decision to make the focus of our inaugural editorial, the essay, is not to deviate from healthcare, but to invite and illustrate the power of language riven from the clinical practice or academic arena. Through the interpretive process, in the act of thinking, critical objectivity is achieved through writing and thus the fertile ground for critical thinking and analysis is augmented (Ricoeur, 2003).

Essays have enabled authors to express ideas about health issues since Greco-Roman antiquity, with Seneca writing about good health, peace of mind, exercise, asthma and noise (DiYanni, 2002). Generally referred to as the “father of the essay,” Michel de Montaigne called his work “essais,” which is French for “attempts” or “to try” (DiYanni, 2002, p.7). Like Seneca, de Montaigne also wrote about health (on solitude, disability, moderation, sleep, moods), relationships (fathers), and thinking (on fear, conscience, actions), and how the mind hinders itself. This infers in the healthcare professions, an experimentation of ideas on the page that can be implemented in practice. The process metaphorically involves, the *tabula rasa*, in Latin meaning “a clean slate” and our mind's a blank slate at birth shaped by experience (Duschinsky, 2012). For the purpose of writing an essay, starting with the blank canvas of the page is where it begins (Grafton, 2021). An essay can be about anything, but broadly speaking they are either formal or informal, depending on the context and purpose (DiYanni, 2002). Essays aim to demonstrate learning in education, share information, logical thinking, persuade and challenge, and in a more

formal sense, research and present evidence, and “say it well with proof,” through the art of rhetoric (Aristotle, 1991). Essays have allowed authors to question and criticise accepted and familiar ideas, often displeasing to the ear of the reader, who may feel threatened by criticism and the unwelcome disturbance of daily routine's (Robinson, 1924).

Gardner and Rolfe (2013) suggest an essay should perform three tasks: First, making new claims to knowledge, rigour, and overcoming resistance. Second, from the perspective of knowledge acquisition, essays are meant to be eclectic and stylistically cultural (Gardner & Rolfe, 2013). Third, essay writing should develop a broad range of knowledge from cultural, historical, political, and academic resources. The translation of knowledge for practice in an essay, in a broader sense, offers a safe space to write, think, and develop knowledge through a reasoned argument. The risk however, when publishing these ideas is of exposure, because the essay is an important opportunity to bridge an author's inner self, and where their understanding of professional issues are made explicit (Rule, 2015).

### Different styles

Prior to Brexit in 2020, the European Union's (EU) Bologna process (1999) aimed to remove obstacles of employability by harmonising international systems of comparable degree structures for Bachelor, Masters and Doctoral degree studies (Wihlborg, 2024). It was welcomed as a useful strategy to move the once considered vocations of nursing and midwifery into higher education with an emphasis on developing academic knowledge (Palese et al., 2014). The European modernisation agenda promoted the model of scientism in nursing and healthcare professions, which led to the pursuit of higher qualifications and specialist knowledge, but with a lack of legal regulation frameworks to support professional autonomy in healthcare systems (Cabrera & Zabalegui,

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Accepted 14 May 2024; Published 14 April 2025



2021). The Bologna process (1999) was beneficial to the United Kingdom's recruitment shortages, by receiving trained nurses from abroad to fill vacancies (Cabrera & Zabalegui, 2021). Difficulties with the Bologna process implementation started with its claim that nursing was "...a well-established scientific discipline..." (Palese et al., 2014, p. 71), when in fact a more accurate definition of nursing science is a practice-oriented human science (Parreira et al., 2021).

Scientism refers to a "...a mode of thought which considers things from a scientific viewpoint...(1A)... only knowledge gained through scientific research is valid... notions and beliefs from other sources...should be discounted...the methodology... can be used in other disciplines... (OED, 2A)." Scientism is the conviction that the methods of science, acquiring knowledge through empirical means, such as testing hypothesis through experimentation and observation (He, 2024), are the only reliable methods to secure knowledge of anything (Rosenberg, 2011). However, the Swedish study by Berg et al. (2014) reported specialist nurses being unsatisfied with acquiring knowledge about nursing through criterion-restrictive research reports, stating this style of writing was at best considered a paper exercise and "...research was being talked about like there was no real world out there..." (p.67). We also found in Ball and Regan (2019), that specialist community public health nurses (for example, health visitors) identified a lack of available evidence on practice related issues. For example, unlike secondary care nurses working closely with the medical model, community public health nurses require a more nuanced approach to working with families and children, due to a lack of evidence on the clinical and cost-effectiveness of public health interventions (Ball & Regan, 2019). This was found with NICE (2008; 2017: 32) guidelines updated in 2017, on child and maternal nutrition identifying factual, editorial corrections and gaps in the evidence informing practice, with students' concerns appearing to be well founded (Ball & Regan, 2019). The lack of best available evidence led specialist community public health nurses to "shoehorn" research into practice, because research studies emphasised methodological rigour and effective interventions, rather than practical implementation (Ball & Regan, 2019).

Interpreting the relevance of research findings to the clinical context, and use of scientism (such as in psychiatry) tends to distort treatment (diagnosis, patho-genesis and interventions) because two patients with the same symptoms may have different treatment requirements (Berg, 2025). There is a need for treatment and health care to incorporate individual differences rather than syndromal characteristics (Berg, 2025). Stein and Illes (2015) suggest for psychiatry, rather than viewing mental disorders as essential categories (for example, a single bullet approach, using focused interventions), it should instead encourage a broad spectrum, multipronged approach, involving scepticism (for example, interventions

that reflect local socio-cultural values) and be integrative (for example, complex realities and a variety of insights). Therefore, the risk of scientism in understanding the complexities of the human condition is misleading (Berg et al., 2025). We will now discuss why eclectic writing styles are important for nursing, midwifery and health-care professions.

## Self-disclosure and self-discovery

Contrary to essays being considered an academic (paper) exercise, an essay is an opportunity to express higher values of learning because writing allows the author to write critically, then think differently, and in turn act differently (Gardner & Rolfe, 2013; Johnson & Rulo, 2019). Let us consider this last point in more detail. Gardner and Rolfe (2013) suggest the apparent suspicion of self-disclosure (the art) compared to scientism in nursing (the science), relates to the former starting from a position of uncertainty rather than certainty (for example, pre-designed selection criteria of the literature search). Gardner and Rolfe (2013) refer to the "hegemony of the laboratory" and science's restriction on uncertainty and self-disclosure, by adopting the language of certainty, may reduce the essay to a lifeless form of expression, which threatens creativity (Milgrom, 2021). The process is not scientific using a scientism definition, but is an experimentation of ideas, to refer to John Locke's (1698) original use of the word experimentation in the 17th Century, which meant learning from sensory experience.

From a perspective of the target audience working in a practice-oriented human science (Parreira et al., 2021), an essay is the start of an experiential journey of curiosity, from an individual's spontaneous state of reverie when alone (Robinson, 1924) yet eventually influenced by the work of others (Derrida, 1985). The journey involves a thorough investigation (research) into intellectual or academic questions, and hypothesis testing, not through observation but through discourse (Ricoeur, 2003). Discourse is an intention to say something, but it can also reveal through slippage, something unintended by the author, such as conscious and unconscious bias, which plays out to the wider audience (Ricoeur, 2003).

The development of critical thinking in an essay relies on the persuasive power of argument, of logos (logical form of argumentation), pathos (touching the readers emotional world) and ethos (asserting moral position, promoting trust and respect of the reader) when focused on the reading and writing process (Lob et al., 2022). The latter issue follows the process of writing, reading, interpreting meaning and relevance, and then writing in a way that reflects the author's discursive intentions. What is often missed out to the reader in the writing process is the starting point, where authors started from a position of (generally) not knowing and attempting to learn from the revelatory process of reading, towards a clarity of discourse (Ricoeur, 1998). The clarity of discourse develops

later on in the writing process, when misinterpretation and misunderstanding are re-interpreted to hone meaning (Ricoeur, 1998). In this interpretive process, what the text means to the reader relates to self-interpretation, and interpreting the text through the reader's inner world, is what Ricoeur called the hermeneutic self, interpreting versus explanation.

A practical phenomenon in clinical practice when reacting hesitantly with a patient due to a lack of knowledge or experience (for example, when talking about a sensitive subject), is that after writing an essay and careful reading, naivety is replaced by newly acquired knowledge (Johnson & Rulo, 2019). The hermeneutic self-engages in the writing process, but it may remain hidden to the reader (Ricoeur, 1998). For example, in an attempt to understand experiences of change in the NHS, a previous editorial (Ball & Regan, 2010), reflected the challenges of change at that time, and a sense of feeling disempowered. One paper (Regan & Ball, 2017) started with the first author's emotional reaction to change (pathos), and writing driven by the alienating impact of epistemic injustice (ethos). The first drafts were raw and emotional, yet the end result became objective, unemotive and logically developed content (logos), with the authors' voices replaced by inquiry-based text.

## In conclusion

An essay is more than a planned event; the essay materialises from something kept in the author's mind's eye, at first inarticulate, unshared and only partially interpreted. By researching, crafting and articulating events in healthcare practice, critical evidence can emerge. Thus, the invitation to the reader to embark on the twists and turns of the writing process acknowledges and underscores the (often) painful act of writing. Healthcare practitioners and academics are not in the business of fleeting musings that should but rarely get written-up, because they are hard-nosed research based critical theorists, who address and continue to improve the profession through the act of writing.

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