



Reflective Journaling as Assessment and Teaching

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OVERVIEW

Current nursing education is focused on helping students develop into independent, critical thinkers. Reflective journaling is one method to help students review their practice, learn from practicum experience, self-evaluate, and gain depth in nursing knowledge. Reflective knowledge is constructed knowledge and reflective thinking is a way of knowing in the professional disciplines (Johns, 1995).

This case study describes formative assessment in a clinical leadership and management course for senior nursing students in a small, private college of nursing. Reflective journaling is used to help students integrate the clinical and administrative knowledge necessary for beginning practice. Students are asked to keep a journal about events in their practicum day, how they feel about those events, how the situation might have been changed, and what they have learned. Faculty members offer evaluative feedback and suggestions for future actions. A cycle of reflection, evaluation, and learning ensues.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE CLASS, MODULE OR PROGRAMME

Focus. The focus of this case study is on the nine-hour clinical practicum of a three credit hour undergraduate nursing leadership and management course. Students have two types of clinical experiences in the course: (1) assignments to care for patients in a hospital setting, with the goal of learning time management, prioritization, stress management, and delegation; and (2) observational experiences with a variety of nursing leaders, within the hospital and in the community, an opportunity to learn about administrative concerns, such as conflict management and team building. During these experiences, reflective journaling is used to help students review occurrences throughout the day and to assign meaning to those occurrences, while completing a journal for the day.

Duration. The reflective journaling assignment continues throughout one semester, for approximately 15 weeks. Students are expected to complete their journals after a practicum day and turn the journals in to their faculty members for feedback in a one-week cycle. Faculty members then make comments that affirm feelings, ask for justification and rationale, and give direction for further learning with clarification of concepts or events.

Discipline. Reflective journaling was developed in several fields, but is often attributed to Schön (1987; see “Rationale” section). Reflective journaling is one of the tools in nursing education to help students begin their journey from “novice to expert” (Benner, 1984). As both an art and a science, nurses benefit from reviewing their experiences and developing as practitioners.

Context. Students conduct their clinical experiences in medical-surgical nursing units of a 360-bed hospital in Central Illinois, USA, as well as in local health departments, nursing homes, and other community agencies.

Learners. The learners are senior baccalaureate nursing students in the final semester of their studies. There are typically around 30 students each semester. They have completed several clinical specialty courses, such as maternal-child health, mental health, and beginning medical-surgical nursing, and are taking an advanced medical-surgical nursing and professionalism course concurrent with the leadership/management course.



Description of the Case

The theory portion of the leadership/management course is conducted using the team-based learning concept (Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2004). This teaching methodology focuses on student preparation for class, measured by “readiness assessment tests,” and small-group projects. Course content includes the following: Nursing and the health care team, communication, team building, leadership vs. management, ethical and legal issues, power and politics, critical thinking, conflict resolution, stress management, time management, organizing, planning, motivating, delegating, performance appraisal, coaching, staff problems, quality management, and technology. Students take the readiness assessment tests first as individuals, then in groups, which often leads to lively discussions. Small-group scenarios are used as in-class exercises in which students must analyze and synthesize content to come to a decision about a management issue.

Students apply concepts learned in the theory portion of the class in the clinical practicum, where they learn to organize care, work within the organization, participate in quality improvement process, deal with conflict and stress, and work with the latest technology. Faculty members direct students to begin by asking themselves the “five W’s,” who, what, where, when, and why, and then specifically look for the application of each week’s topic in the clinical area. This application is at a basic level for students who are taking care of patients and at the administrative level for students observing a director, head nurse, or coordinator. The students use reflective journaling to process their experiences, with feedback and reflection from faculty members. Students turn in their journals weekly, along with their clinical assessment tools, which are used to evaluate clinical performance. They receive 10 points each week for reflective journaling, as long as it demonstrates thoughtful attention to writing and reflection.

Reflective journaling becomes an evaluative tool in two ways: (1) students learn to self-evaluate and change behavior based on what they have learned through reflection and faculty feedback and (2) faculty members can informally evaluate areas in which the students need intervention, re-assignment, referral to written resources, or further discussions. A written, and sometimes verbal, dialogue begins whereby students experience and reflect while faculty members analyze and provide in-depth feedback that can then be applied in subsequent experiences.

Reflective journals may be the topic of clinical post-conferences at the end of the practicum day. However, the reflections are treated as private documents, so discussions of any student reflection are done with student approval. Student groups get an opportunity to learn from other student reflections and provide their own feedback in this way.

Though reflective journaling is a written assessment tool, faculty members are not so much critical of writing style as they are looking for content and student growth. Reflective journals are included in the overall assessment of student learning in the clinical area, as they demonstrate students’ growth over the semester.

The advantages of reflective journaling as a means of formative assessment are many. As a science, nursing relies on objective data for learning, but, in reflective journaling, students can apply both objective (data) and subjective (feelings) information to clinical experience. Often, the most telling reflections involve emotional attachment. Students sometimes need help expressing themselves in journals, so faculty members give feedback pointing out strengths and weaknesses, possible alternative explanations for behavior, theories that may be helpful, and so on. Additionally, nursing practice is often mentally, physically, emotionally taxing; reflective journaling helps students defuse emotions while learning by doing. Each journal entry provides a record of events, observations, feelings, and the context the student used as the basis for analysis, synthesis, planning, and evaluation.

Faculty members have accumulated many examples of student reflective journaling. One example is the student who was assigned to two patients and was struggling with the need to complete several psychomotor tasks or nursing skills in a short time while dealing with a

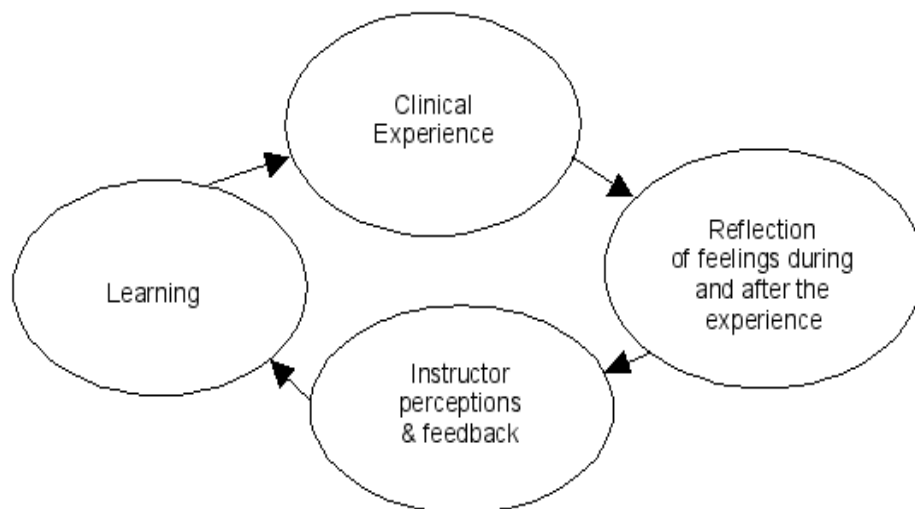


demanding family member who hovered over the patient and was particular about how care would be delivered. The student felt anxious, under-prepared, and unappreciated and expressed frustration with the situation. On her drive home, she analyzed the situation and recognized that the family member was also anxious and afraid for her loved one's medical future. "I also realized that not every patient that I am going to take care of is going to be the perfect patient. That is what makes a good nurse from a not so good nurse. It is the ability to treat all patients equally and respectfully, no matter what kind of attitude or condition the person has." The instructor stated, "Excellent reflection and assessment of the situation." She also pointed out to the student that the family member may have had a need for control in an uncontrollable situation, which served as a foundation for further discussion and learning.

The student's second patient was an elderly woman who had not been eating well. The lead nurse suggested an ethical team evaluation, the student reflected that she felt good about the lead nurse's ability to lead the health team in that decision, and the faculty member used the situation as a topic for further discussion and learning about ethical and legal aspects of health care. The student gained confidence in the nurse's role as a patient advocate, confidence that can be applied in other circumstances.

In another situation, a student expressed frustration in his journaling about his inability to get cooperation from a patient, a great source of stress. The instructor gave him feedback about the patient's need for control over his care, which led to a discussion about nursing careers in which the nurse has control, such as intensive care, to careers where the patient has more control, such as in the home environment. The student gained an awareness of the issues of autonomy and control which could be applied in future discussions.

The cycle of reflective journaling as formative assessment is diagrammed in this way:



RATIONALE IN TERMS OF EDUCATIONAL IDEAS

Reflective thinking was first described by Dewey (1933) as active consideration of a form of knowledge to determine its support and usefulness. Schön (1987) later described reflection as "reflection-*on*-action," retrospective, critical thinking, based on a practitioner's emotions and inner dialogue about events that *have been* experienced in practice, and "reflection-*in*-action," reflection occurring *concurrent with* practice. For the nurse educator, reflection involves reviewing an experience, to describe, analyze, evaluate the experience, and to construct learning about practice.

Nursing practice is, by nature, reflective, in that nurses build their own knowledge with experience. Reflective journaling is, therefore, an appropriate activity for teaching and



evaluating learning in nursing education. By reflecting, nursing students gain their own personal nursing knowledge for practice. By applying reflective journaling to clinical practice and to leadership/management situations, they learn to more critically think about clinical issues as well as conflict resolution, team building, communications, and other administrative issues.

EVALUATION

Reflective journaling meets the REAP project's 11 Principles of Good Assessment Design because it empowers students, facilitates their own self-assessment, provides feedback, provides opportunities for feedback and dialogue, leads to greater self-confidence, helps instructors assess learning, requires thoughtful consideration and writing, reflects course content and objectives, engages students in leadership and management principles, and requires students to put forth effort. Reflective journaling follows Chickering and Gamson's Seven Principles of Good Undergraduate Education because it requires interaction with the faculty, is an active learning methodology, provides feedback, requires time on task, and allows the student to use several ways of knowing. Additionally, follow up in post conferences helps students work on clinical and leadership/management issues together. As practice for clinical and administrative practice after graduation, reflective journaling helps students become self-regulated, independent practitioners.

Formal evaluation of reflective journaling from student evaluations has shown that students feel that it has helped them develop critical thinking. Interestingly, alumni evaluations also demonstrate graduates' abilities to use reflection to build upon their formal educations. The most prominent barrier to using reflective journaling has been lack of faculty time; faculty members continue to struggle with this because they also spend extended time at the bedside with students and patients as well as classroom time during the theory component of nursing courses. Reflective journaling has also helped our graduates meet both general education and program outcomes. In particular, program evaluations demonstrate that students are able to analyze legal and ethical situations, solve problems, communicate effectively, think critically, and meet the needs of diverse populations.



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Please reference as:

Fortson, A. & Sisk, R. (2007). *Reflective Journaling as Assessment and Teaching*. *From the REAP International Online Conference on Assessment Design for Learner Responsibility, 29th-31st May, 2007*. Available at <http://ewds.strath.ac.uk/REAP07>

Re-Engineering Assessment Practices in Scottish Higher Education (REAP) is funded by the Scottish Funding Council under its e-Learning Transformation initiative. Further information about REAP can be found at <http://www.reap.ac.uk>
