

The Writing Center @ KUMC

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Reflective Writing

Have you ever been asked to write a “reflection” but were never told what reflection is? It’s not surprising, given that healthcare courses underutilize writing as a whole and reflective writing in particular. Perhaps the reason lies in what educators call competence. You seldom see “narrative ability” as a competence, yet patients have no end of stories that they try, often unsuccessfully, to convey to providers. Stories about their fears, desires, uncertainties, and hopes. Too often their stories fall on deaf ears.

Reflective writing is all encompassing. In medicine and nursing, it is mostly defined in terms of personal experience that centers on clinical encounters and the lessons gained after processing new information or even failures. The goal is often to enable self-expression and the sharing/evaluation of experiences (Kerr, 2010). This is a much-needed goal since a nursing or medical education is decidedly non-reflective in nature. It needn’t be so, which is the hope of healthcare programs that do include reflection.

Reflective writing asks writers to consider perspectives of patients, other students, or their own experiences in terms of illness or healthcare generally. Whether the focus is empathy, gaps in learning, or clarifying thoughts and emotions, reflection is both a record of what happened (past action) and a means to change or deepen consciousness (present knowledge). Structured or unstructured, reflective writing can respond to guided questions or reply to open-ended prompts on experience, ideas, knowledge, opinion, and so forth (Sandars, 2009).

Here are some simple steps you can take to develop reflective writing skill:

- Keep a reflective learning journal (see example next page)
- Develop a set of questions before, during, and after a learning experience (see next page)
- Strike a balance of reason/analysis, narration, examples, and links between your experience and reading when completing a reflection assignment
- Make writing a daily habit (habit in the sense of a bridge between different times in life) and both think and feel in your writing

In conclusion, reflective writing is a useful process to help you make sense of the world in which we all live and to learn from your experiences.

Example entry in a learning journal

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Event</i> | <i>Attended first ever seminar</i> |
| <i>What did I learn?</i> | <i>Discussing ideas made me realise there are many ways of reading a piece of literature. I was surprised by other people's interpretations, but the ones who convinced me were those who linked their interpretations to specific parts of the text.</i> |
| <i>What went well?</i> | <i>Made some contributions. They were mainly responses to other people's ideas but I was glad I took part and it made me think more deeply about the novel.</i> |
| <i>What could I have done better?</i> | <i>Could have been braver in forming own interpretations. Had a preconception that there was a right or wrong way to read the text. In future I want to open my mind more.</i> |
| <i>Long-term implications</i> | <i>* Now realise that there are many ways of reading a text - and if you can find evidence, you can convince people of your perspective</i> <i>* Useful for essays - putting forward a unique viewpoint is possible as long as you have persuasive reasoning.</i> |

Before, during, and after learning process

| Before an experience | During an experience | After an experience |
|--|--|--|
| What do you think might happen? | What's happening now, as you make rapid decisions? | What are your insights immediately after, and/or later when you have more emotional distance from the event? |
| What might be the challenges? | Is it working out as I expected? | In retrospect how did it go? |
| What do I need to know or do in order to be best prepared for these experiences? | Am I dealing with the challenges well? | What did I particularly value and why? |
| | Is there anything I should do, say or think to make the experience successful? | Is there anything I would do differently before or during a similar event? |
| | What am I learning from this? | What have I learnt? |

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- Kerr, L. (2010). More than words: Applying the discipline of literary creative writing to the practice of reflective writing in health care education. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 31: 295-301
- Sandars. (2009). The use of reflection in medical education: AMEE guide no. 4. *Medical Teacher* 31(8): 685-95.