


REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE BACHELOR OF NURSING STUDENTS IN INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL UNIVERSITY (IMU)

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Abstract

The research project was carried out on students of the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) Programme, International Medical University (IMU) with the following objectives:

1. To explore the students' views of reflective practice;
2. To identify factors that have motivated the students to practise reflection and writing reflective journals;
3. To identify factors that could have impeded the students in reflective practice;
4. To elicit ways that could further motivate reflective practice in students.

Data were collected using questionnaires and focus group interviews. Thirty one students from the first two intakes of the programme were recruited for the study. A response rate of 77.42% was obtained. Focus interviews were conducted on eight students from the two groups of students. Findings revealed that the students viewed reflective practice as a form of learning that provided them with an opportunity to express themselves, keep a record of their learning experiences for reflection after duty, and in the process helped them improve in the clinical area. Factors that had motivated them included feedback and guidance from their preceptors, and having group discussions. Factors that inhibited the reflective practice included not sure of what need to be entered in the reflective journals, language and time constraints as well as personal attitude. The students suggested that guidance and feedback from preceptors, and having more sample reflective journals would motivate them in reflective practice. It is recommended that a session should be planned to introduce reflection, reflective practice and journaling to the students in the first semester before they start their clinical posting. A workshop on reflective practice and its underlying skills should be organised for all new academic staff in the Nursing Department, in particular the preceptors as they will also be supervising students during their clinical postings. There is a need to structure some time each week during clinical postings for students to write their reflective journals.

Keywords: *Reflection, Reflection-in-action, Reflection-on-action, Reflective cycle, Reflective practice.*

Introduction

Much has been written on the concept of reflection. Dewey (1933) who is acknowledged as the first educationalist to write about this concept defined reflection as an active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusion to which it tends (p.9). He contended that the experiences an individual undergoes is dynamic and that each experience influences the quality of future experiences. To Boud et al (1985), reflection refers to those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation.

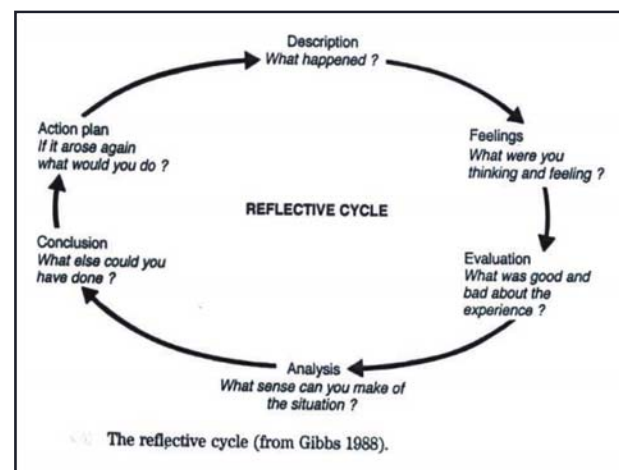
Schon (1987) identified two aspects of reflection namely, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action is viewed as the process whereby the practitioner recognises a new situation or a problem and thinks about it while still acting. Reflection-on-action is the retrospective contemplation of practice undertaken to uncover the knowledge applied to a particular situation by analysing the information recalled. The individual may ask herself/himself how the situation might have been handled differently and what other knowledge would have been helpful. In other words, reflection-on-action is reflection after the event and reflection on the reflection-in-action. To put this simply, reflection is a process that includes mulling over recent events, thinking about what you are doing while you are doing it, trying to discover why things went wrong, considering what helped to make something go really well and so on (James & Clarke, 1994). From here, it can be deduced that learning can result from reflection and the reflective process involves critical thinking.

Supporting the view that both reflection and critical thinking are interrelated, Glen (1995) and Schank (1990) are of the opinion that reflection can bring out the 'imaginative speculation' which can be omitted in the rational and linear steps of problem solving and nursing process. This so-called 'imaginative speculation' is an asset for nurses, as reflective practitioners, do not only cope with existing demands in the health care system but also face future challenges in health care.

What then are the skills needed for effective reflective practice? Atkins and Murphy (1993), through a review of literature on reflection identified the skills required for

the process of reflection. These skills include self awareness, the ability to describe the experiences, critically analyse the experiences and situations, develop new perspectives and evaluate the process. With the exception of self awareness, the other skills that underlie reflective practice are parallel to Bloom et al's (1956) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, i.e. analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These cognitive skills are at the higher end of the Taxonomy and can only be nurtured over time with guidance and support from the mentor/preceptor.

The reflective cycle as a framework to aid reflection was proposed by Gibbs (1988) as shown below:



In Nursing, reflective practice is getting the practitioners or nursing students to recall or recollect, describe, review and evaluate their experiences. In short, reflective practice is an approach to learning from professional practice. Various methods of getting the individuals to articulate their thoughts and feelings have been used. Some of these methods include reflective diaries/journals, reflective essays which are well-recognised assessment tools, individual reflective discussions between student and mentor/preceptor and group reflective sessions with course mates and the mentor/preceptor in which students are encouraged to reflect on their nursing practice. James and Clarke (1994) questioned the effectiveness of these methods as there is no evidence to suggest that these methods develop reflective skills amongst students.

According to Heath (1998), reflection is a complex activity and is especially difficult for new students. This is understandable as the skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation are not developed overnight. Meerabeau (1992) stated that reflection draws on tacit knowledge which may be difficult to articulate. In the writers' opinion, this is especially so for students who had their general education in Bahasa Malaysia (the national language in Malaysia) and have proceeded to study at higher institutes of learning in Malaysia where English language is the medium of instruction.

Pierson (1998) contends that writing reflective diaries can be time consuming. It requires one to set aside time to write and this may be compounded by time constraints, deadlines of other activities and language constraint. As reflective practice has been widely practised in nursing education, students may be assessed in their reflective practice. Richardson (1995) argues that students may not reflect honestly if they are assessed for fear of being judged. Students may be constrained in expressing their thoughts and feelings especially if these are negative. Do Malaysian nursing students view reflective practice this way?

Burns and Bulman (2000) conducted a study to explore the students' perspectives on reflective practice. This study resulted in a number of practical tips to support and motivate the students in reflective practice. The tips range from using a reflective framework when reflecting, jotting the experience as soon as possible, having reflective conversations with the mentor and seeking support from colleagues. Reflective practice was first introduced to the Advanced Nursing Education Programme, University of Malaya as early as 1968 and is an integral learning tool throughout the curriculum in the Bachelor of Nursing (Honours) Programme, International Medical University (IMU). Two cohorts of students have been introduced to the reflective practice – N1/05 comprising nine students and N1/06 comprising 22 students. Yet there was no reported study on the use of reflective practice among nursing students in Malaysia.

Objectives

1. To explore the students' views of reflective practice;
2. To identify factors that have motivated the students to practise reflection and writing reflective journals;
3. To identify factors that could have impeded the students in reflective practice;
4. To elicit ways that could further motivate reflective practice in students.

Assumptions

1. Group discussion, reflective journaling, support and guidance from preceptors facilitate reflective practice;
2. Language constraint, fear of being judged, lack of support and guidance from preceptors inhibit reflective practice;
3. Reflective practice is a useful learning tool.

Instruments

Questionnaire and focus group interview were used in this research project.

The questionnaire was pilot tested on five students pursuing the Bachelor of Nursing Sciences (Honours) at the Nursing Sciences Unit, Department of Allied Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Malaya on 21 March '07. Space saver method in SPSS was used to compute the reliability coefficient of the questions. The results showed a reliability of >0.8 indicating the reliability of the questions.

A brief review of reflective practice was given at the top of the questionnaire. The questionnaire began with open-ended questions exploring what the respondents like or do not like about reflection and reflective journals. What has/have helped the respondents was addressed by question 3. Question 4 sought to explore whether the respondents encountered any difficulty in reflective practice. The respondents' answer to question 4 determined the sequence of the subsequent questions they should answer. Question 6 sought to explore whether reflective practice has been a useful learning tool. The questionnaire ended by inviting the respondents to suggest ways to enhance their reflective practice.

A focus group interview guide was derived from analysis of the open-ended questions of the questionnaire. The purpose of the focus interview was to gain in-depth information about the relevant aspects

of reflective practice and learning through reflection, especially in clinical nursing practice.

Sample

All 31 students from two intakes of students (9 students in N1/06 and 22 students in N1/05) were recruited for the study.

Ethical Consideration

The study was approved by the Research Committee and the Ethics Committee of IMU. The participants were given the Study Information Sheet which states the purposes, what is involved in the research, why they were involved and benefits of the research. Participation in the research is voluntary and the participants were required to sign the consent form.

Data Collection

The questionnaires were given to the students personally after they were briefed about the project. Voluntary participation in the study was emphasised. Students who agreed to participate were required to sign the consent form. Thirty one sets of questionnaires were distributed to 22 students from the N1/06 Semester 3 on 9 July 2007, and nine students from N1/05 Semester 4 students on 16 July 2007.

The completed questionnaires were returned through the student representatives from N1/06 Group on 27 July 2007 and N1/05 Group on 2 August 2007. Twenty four out of the total of 31 students returned the questionnaires, giving a response rate of 77.42%. Table 1 shows the breakdown of response rate (frequency and percentage) of each cohort of nursing students.

Cohort of Students	Number Per Cohort	Response Rate (%)
N1/05	9	8 (33.3)
N1/06	22	16 (66.67)

Out of those who had responded, one-third of the students were selected randomly from each cohort of students to participate in a focus interview. From the N1/05 cohort of eight respondents, three students were selected; while five students from the N1/06 cohort of 16 respondents were selected for the focus interview.

Data from all questionnaires were analysed prior to the focus interviews. The focus interviews were conducted separately for each cohort of students and each session lasted about 45 minutes to one hour. Content analysis was carried out on all the qualitative data derived from the transcripts and recordings of the focus interviews. Results of the focus group interviews will be presented in part II of this study.

Findings and discussion based on research questionnaire

Question 1: What do you like about reflection and reflective journals?

All 31 students (100%) answered this question. Analysis of the responses were grouped into three themes:

1. It makes them reflect, think, analyse and improve.
2. There is something they can keep: record, reference and memory.
3. It provides them with a platform for expression.

Theme 1: It (Reflective practice) makes them reflect, think, analyse and improve

Responses from seven participants (29.2%) were suggestive of reflective practice as a learning platform for them to improve. There was expression of an element of thinking in reflective practice. Some of the responses under this theme were:

"It is a good form of diary to reflect on what we did on that particular day, when there's something new to learn."

"... enables me to discover the weak and the strong side of me. Sometimes we can't really know how we perform, sometimes we do not realise our mistakes. Reflection enables me to know myself, and enable me to remember what I've done."

"It helps me to ponder back the mistakes that I've done for the day. ... and start changing myself so that I will never

repeat it in the future.”

“... see clearly my mistakes and what I did right. In future, I can improve my skills as the reflective journals can be the guide”.

“It makes you think about what you've done, how to improve yourself”.

“A reminder for me on what I've done wrong and how I can improve.”

“I am able to learn from mistakes. Recalling back previous experience and compare those experience with current experience. It serves as a review at the end of clinical posting.”

“Makes you analyse situations and detect your weakness.”

“It can let me know what I did is correct or wrong. If there is a mistake, it can remind me to avoid it.”

“Reflect and see what we do is appropriate or not.”

“It helps me face my true feelings. ... think of what I have done right and wrong. In this way, I get to improve myself.”

The responses from the students supported the opinion of James and Clarke (1994) that learning can result from reflection and the reflective process involves critical thinking.

Theme 2: Something they can keep as a record for memory and use for future reference

Five respondents (20.8%) stated that it was a form of record for memory and future reference. This interpretation was derived from the following responses where the students referred reflective practice as:

“... a diary and a memorable thing that I can keep it forever”

“I can keep a record of what is worth learning as a lesson”

“... a method for me to record what I've done and learnt.”

Theme 3: It provides them with a platform for expressions

Responses from five participants (20.8%) indicated that reflection provide them with a platform for expression of their thought and feelings. Evidence for the theme was interpreted from statements below:

“I am able to express my emotions and my actions in words and to justify them.”

“We can express our feelings and working experiences.”

“Can express my feeling and very personal thought”

“Can express our feeling freely. Can give our opinions”.

“You get to write down what you're not happy about or what you're happy about. It is like a way of expressing what you feel, what you see, how you thought things were supposed to be and how you could actually make things better.”

“It is all about my nursing life during my study in nursing. If there is something good, it makes me feel happy and satisfied”

“It gives me an opportunity to recall what I have done or going through”.

“It helps me to express myself better.”

Responses from these five participants (20.8%) clearly suggested the opposite of the view put forth by Richardson (1995) who argued that students may be inhibited in expressing their thoughts especially if these were negative. While Richardson's view could be true, it was possible that a certain proportion of students would not be inhibited to express their thoughts and feelings even though they were negative.

Question 2: “What do you not like about reflection and reflective journals?”

In response to *question 2*, the most common theme elicited was the students' expression that they were unsure and not able to express themselves. Sometimes, they were lazy to write and did not feel like revealing private things. They also feared being reprimanded over the contents in their recordings. The finding were derived from the following responses:

“Sometimes very lazy to write it down and to think back what I did. Sometimes do not know how to express it through writing”

“Reflective journals are like exposing own secrets to the reader. (But of course it is up to us whether we want to write it down). The worst thing was sometimes actions were taken.”

“Sometimes unable to reflect or write reflective journals due to limited time / tired to write after back home from work. Not sure what should or should not write. Do not have a clear guideline of what is an effective journal.”

“The fact that my privacy is limited as at times someone has to review my journals to see how far I am progressing”.

“Well, sometimes I do hesitate to write down some negative things. In reflective journals we must only write our feelings towards what had happened when we do some procedures. Not everyone likes to write down what they've been through. some people don't express themselves in writing but reflective journals require putting everything in words. ... hard for this type of people. I have to write it down and keep the book! My hypocrisy. I hate the way I had to fake myself. I also hate the way on being told what I should write in my own reflective journal about my own feelings.”

“My reflection/reflective journals need to be given to my preceptor and lecturer to view.”

Students also mentioned that it was time consuming and did not know what to write, especially without proper guidance and feedback:

“It takes time for me to do it.”

“It is just a feeling in the heart.

Sometimes nothing to write”

“Troublesome. Takes lots of time especially when there's lots of things to write.”

“That I have to write it everyday, even when I don't have anything to write.

“Sometimes nothing to write and due to language problems.”

“It is hard without proper guidance.”

“Sometimes we didn't get feedback on the reflective journal. Maybe because there are too many pages that I wrote and the preceptor doesn't have the time to go through all pages.”

The students' responses to question 2 echoed the view of Heath (1998) who exerted that reflection is a complex activity and especially difficult for new students. The higher cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation underlying reflective practice are gradually developed over time. Meerabeau (1992) stated that reflection draws on tacit knowledge which may be difficult to articulate. In the writers' opinion, this is especially so for students who had their general education in Bahasa Malaysia (the national language in Malaysia) and have proceeded to studying at higher institutes of learning in Malaysia where English is the medium of instruction. This is also the case for students who have completed their general education in the Chinese medium school. The students who participated in this project have followed this trend in their education.

Responses from the students support the view of Richardson (1995) who argued that students may not reflect honestly if they are assessed for fear being judged. Students may be constrained in expressing their thoughts and feelings especially if these are negative. Comments from the students are also consistent with the contention of Pierson (1998) that writing reflective diaries can be time consuming. Writing effective reflective diaries requires one to set aside time and this may be compounded by time constraints, deadlines of other activities and language constraint.

Question 3: “What has/have helped you in your reflective practice?”

The students' responses are shown in Table 2.

What has helped in reflective practice	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Coaching from your preceptor	20	83.3
Writing reflective journals/diaries	15	62.50
Group discussion	12	50.00
Support from your course mates	3	12.50
Others	5	20.83

Others in Table 2 include observing others doing it, intrinsic motivation and pressure from peers as expressed:

“Observe someone doing it. Knowing what I am doing is not a bed of roses and that I have to take chances and live my life with meaning.”

“Observe the way my course mates conduct their duties, reflect on them, and then try to put into practice but eradicate the mistakes that they’ve done”.

“My own motivation to gain more. Pressure from peers, self and others”

“Improve my knowledge and skills including other aspects such as communication.”

The various methods that aid reflection as stated by the students bear similarities as revealed by James and Clark (1994), and resources highlighted in literature reviews. Literature resources have revealed that various methods have been used in getting the individuals to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Some of these methods include reflective diaries/journals, reflective essays, individual reflective discussions between the student and the mentor/preceptor and group reflective sessions with course mates and the mentor/preceptor in which students are encouraged to reflect on their nursing practice. James and Clarke (1994) questioned the effectiveness of these methods as there is no evidence to suggest that these methods develop reflective skills amongst students. Contrary to their views, the students in the study had identified that coaching from the preceptor, writing reflective diaries and group discussions have helped them in their reflective practices.

The findings in the study correspond with the findings of a study conducted by Burns and Bulman (2000), in exploring the students’ perspectives on reflective practice. The study resulted in a number of practical tips to support and motivate the students in reflective practice. The tips range from using a reflective framework when reflecting, jotting the experience as soon as possible, having reflective conversations with the mentor and seeking support from colleagues.

Question 4: “Do you have any difficulty in reflective practice?”

Sixteen respondents (66.7%) said “Yes”, and eight respondents (33.3%) said “No”. For those respondents who answered “Yes”, they were required to answer Question 5: “My difficulties in reflective practice is/are _____”. Their comments are shown in Table 3.

My Difficulties in Reflective Practice	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Do not feel free to express my thoughts and feelings as they may be negative at times	11	68.75
Unable to express myself because of language constraint	9	56.25
Fear of being judged for what I write in my journals	8	50.00
Lack of guidance and support from preceptors	1	6.25
Lack of support from my course mates	1	6.25
Others	Nil	

Difficulties in reflective practice were mainly personal and related to expression of feelings and thoughts, either due to language or the lack of interest to write what will be viewed as negative and be judged by the preceptor or lecturers. Students did not identify “Lack of guidance and support from the preceptor”, and “Lack of support from my course mates” as areas of concern for reflective practice.

Here again, the findings focus on issues such as reflection being a complex activity and is especially difficult for new student (Heath, 1998). As stated by Meerabeau (1992) reflection draws on tacit knowledge which may be difficult to articulate. This is especially so for students who had their general education in Bahasa Malaysia (the national language in Malaysia) and in Chinese medium schools and have proceeded to studying at higher institutes of learning in Malaysia where English is the medium of instruction.

One would also want to highlight the argument put forth by Richardson (1995) that students may not reflect honestly if they are assessed for fear being judged. Students may be constrained in expressing their thoughts

and feelings especially if these are negative. This is in contrast to the smaller percentage of respondents (20.8%) in relationship to the theme derived from question 1 - *It provides them with a platform for expressions.*

Question 6: “Overall, do you feel that reflective practice has helped in your learning?”

All 24 respondents were required to answer *Question 6*. Twenty one respondents (87.5%) answered “Yes’ and two respondents (8.3%) answered “No”. One respondent (4.17%) did not answer this question.

Question 7: “What suggestions would you give to help you further in practising reflection and reflective journaling?”

Eight of the 24 respondents (33.3%) highlighted that preceptors play an important role in helping them with their reflective practice. This could be identified from the following responses:

“The preceptor can give encouragement or counseling related to what we say”,

“Support and discussion from preceptor and course mates”,

“Proper guidance and feedback has to be given”,

“Group discussion & coaching from our preceptor”.

“Although we learn new things and write about it referring or based from books and internet. It's really important that the preceptor narrow it down to our use in clinical and explain to us as well, based on their experience”,

“We should have a clear guideline on how to practice reflection and how to write reflective journal”,

“We need more support and guidance from our preceptor”,

“More feedback from preceptor”.

Five of the 24 respondents (20.8%) suggested having more references and journals as being helpful:

“Read more of other's reflective journal to improve ourselves”,

“Regular entries, preferably any entries during the posting ... we can track and know that journaling will become something we are accustomed to”.

“Get more nursing journals for us. The hard copy nursing journals”,

“More nursing reflective journals should be made available in Nursing Department”, “I would prefer to read more reflective journals from other nurses so that I can learn from their mistakes too, before any of us repeat the mistakes.”

Other suggestions given by four of the 24 respondents (16.7%) include:

“Improve in English and just express my thoughts without fear of being judged by others”,

“To be able to talk it out like in a discussion”,

“Reflective journals should be our freedom to write anything we want regardless of what we have gain or lost, not a material that needs to be published which fulfills certain criteria”,

“Journal should be kept confidential even though it is viewed by preceptor and lecturer”.

These responses revealed that the students also value confidentiality, freedom to express self in journals, a better command of English language to write and the ability to “talk it out”, as elements that would help in the reflective practice.

The suggestions given by the students correspond with the findings in Question 3 where “Coaching from preceptors” was rated the highest among other methods found to be helpful for reflective learning. This consistency in the findings further reinforces the significant role of preceptors in the practice of reflection in the clinical area.

Conclusion

In general, the students viewed learning through reflection as a form of practice where they were required to record their learning experiences from the clinical area in reflective diary or journal for the preceptor to view and guide them in their practice. To the students, reflective practice served several purposes: it offered an opportunity for them to express themselves as well as a record for future reference and for them to reflect after work, all of which helped them improve as they progress through the semesters in the clinical area.

Factors that have motivated them included feedback and guidance from the preceptors, keeping a reflective diary and having group discussions. Factors that inhibited the practice of reflective learning were not sure of what need to be entered in the reflective journals; some students were apprehensive in writing negative feelings and thoughts as they might elicit unfavourable feedback from the preceptors and may also be reprimanded. The students also found that language, time constraint and personal attitude were factors that deter them from regular entries in the reflective journals.

Suggestions given by students that motivate them to learn through reflective practice include continuing with writing reflective journals, guidance and feedback from preceptors. Overall, most of the students expressed that feedback and guidance from preceptors with reference to the reflective journals facilitated their learning. Feedback given on a one-to-one basis was preferred to group feedback.

Evidence revealed that there was a lack of clarity and understanding of the concept of reflection and reflective journaling. The students had learnt and benefited from the reflective practice, though it was hazy in the initial period. Thus, they were unanimously in favour that reflective practice in the clinical area be continued. Reflective journaling, one-to-one discussion between the student and the preceptor as a mode of learning are recommended.

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