LEARNING CURVE

Reflective learning, reflective practice

By Steven Jacobs, MN, MA Ed, RN

IT’S IMPORTANT that nurses practice self-reflection. But what exactly does self-reflection mean and why is it important? Further, how is it enacted and conveyed to others? As an educator, I had a classroom experience that led me to examine these questions in depth. In this article, I discuss what I learned.

Mandate for reflective practice

I was teaching an introductory nursing course and, like all good nurse educators, I spoke of the need for students to begin the process of self-reflection within their practice. I said we all need to engage in this process because as nurses, we must constantly evaluate our actions, behaviors, responses, and the decisions we make while practicing nursing. I discussed how reflective practice is a professional obligation; the College of Nurses of Ontario mandates that practicing nurses engage in reflective practice.1 During my discussion, I also showed some lecture slides that described reflective practice. One slide showed a robot with the notation that, as nurses, we can’t act blindly, without reflection or critical thinking.

A few weeks later, when I asked why nurses need to engage in self-reflection, one student wrote only, “Because nurses aren’t robots.” At first, I was dismayed and disappointed by this simple answer—but really, what kind of answer was I expecting? As I reflected, I realized that we do a disservice to this concept in nursing curricula. We say nurse need to engage in self-reflection, but we don’t explain or model what reflection really is. For much of our curriculum, we teach content, but do we as educators consistently reflect if learning has actually occurred?

Reflection is much more than revisiting how we administered a particular medication. Authentic reflection requires not only providing rationales for our actions, but also constantly exploring and examining ourselves and our own growth. This includes every aspect of our nursing practice, from skills to communication to interactions with others. Reflection not only ensures that we followed all the rights of medication administration, but also that we relate to our patient and colleagues in a humane, holistic manner.

Freire stated that those who wish to commit themselves to others need to constantly reexamine themselves. True reflective practice provides a way for nurses to escape impulsive, routine, and judgmental assumptions about situations, practice, colleagues, and patients.2

Reflective learning or practice?

Henderson, Napan, and Monterio use the term reflective learning to describe consciously thinking about and analyzing actions.3 Reflective practice is the process of obtaining new insights through self-awareness and critically reflecting upon present and prior experiences.4

More recently, reflective learning has been defined as a process of holding experiences up to a mirror in order to examine them from different perspectives, whereas reflective practice assists one to explore what exists “just beyond the line of vision.”5 Similarly, the College of Nurses of Ontario states reflective practice is a process of nurses reviewing aspects of their practice to decide what’s working and what could be done differently.1

But reflective practice in nursing and/or nursing education is more complex than a single definition. As Bagay reminds us, reflection is a multifaceted process of action that each professional nurse considers throughout his or her entire career.6

Bulman, Lathlean, and Gobbi wished to uncover a greater understanding of how reflection is perceived and used by nursing students and instructors in an educational context. They found that reflection is associated with one’s professional motivation to “move on” and “do better” in practice in order to learn from the experience, and critically examine one’s “self.”7 This isn’t new. Over 80 years ago, Dewey articulated this type of reflection as important to an active search for solutions to difficulties from past experiences in order to learn.8 Bulman et al. also found that reflection was associated with humanistic nursing, emphasizing the importance of active expression of oneself to holistically care for others.7
Within education, much discussion has centered on the importance of teaching students to develop critical thinking skills through the use of reflection, both within and outside the profession of nursing.\textsuperscript{9-12} Fulton expands on this and argues that nursing educators also need to encourage students to be curious thinkers.\textsuperscript{13} Curious thinking uncovers problems. Because curious thinkers are more interested in the questions than the answers, they question everything in their practice, beginning the process of authentic and complete reflection.\textsuperscript{13} Authentic reflection is action-oriented. It's an active process of discovering oneself.

**Necessary practice**
Johnson states that reflection is necessary to determine how one learns and one thinks, make sense of information, think critically, view problems from varying perspectives, develop new insights, bridge theory and practice, and understand one's strengths and weaknesses.\textsuperscript{11} Reflective practice in nursing correlates to the development of critical, autonomous, and advanced practitioners.\textsuperscript{14} In short, reflective practice is necessary to:

- develop coping strategies
- enhance interprofessional communication
- increase students' understanding of nursing practice
- promote the expression of feelings
- make sense of personal emotional practice challenges
- help nursing students to know themselves \textsuperscript{15-17}

It's obvious that reflective practice is much more than simply wondering how one's shift went, and it's more than simply discouraging nurses and nursing students from applying their knowledge and skills robotically. Reflection for nursing students also helps them bridge the gap between new information they're learning and their prior knowledge.\textsuperscript{18} These connections help to deepen their understanding of the content and material. They not only learn to solve problems, but also to help others and use their learning in "new and imaginative ways."\textsuperscript{18}

**Tools for reflection**
But how does one actually engage in reflective practice within nursing? Henderson, Napan, and Monterio offer a five-point reflection scale (reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, reconstructing) that can be viewed as a continuous circle.\textsuperscript{3,11} Gibbs offers another reflection model with six components (description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, action plan).\textsuperscript{19}

Of course, these are only two models of reflective practice; there certainly are others. What's most important to consider is the fact that with these and other models, reflection is an active, deliberate, and cognitive process in which one examines a situation from varying perspectives, is open to new knowledge and information, and looks for numerous explanations and outcomes.\textsuperscript{11}

But how often do we describe these models of reflection to nursing students? We ask them to write reflections on how their day went, but we don't often ask them to authentically reflect on how they interact with others. Sure, we talk to them about being professional with all colleagues and peers. We say it's necessary to exude professionalism, but we rarely explain to students that this requires them to constantly reflect upon how they act with others, what they actually say, and how they say it.\textsuperscript{20} Only then will reflective practice serve the larger purpose of holistically enlightening nurses.

**How educators can model reflective practice**
Nurse educators must model reflective practice. One of the ways I do this is by asking my students to complete an anonymous evaluation of our class. I explain to students that I want their input about how I can best teach (and reach) them, and how we can all work together to enhance the learning environment. I do this early in the semester; the following week, I discuss their comments, ideas, and opinions. I incorporate as many of their thoughts as I can during the balance of the semester. Brookfield promotes this type of reflective practice in education because it allows instructors to see themselves through their students' eyes.\textsuperscript{21}

Although educators often engage in reflection about our own actions and communication, we need to remember that sound education is always more about the process than the product.\textsuperscript{22} Our job is to constantly view the world from different perspectives. And this can be achieved only by modelling and engaging in true reflection of all our actions and communications as educators.

**REFERENCES**


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