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Full Length Article

Perceptions of student nurses on the writing of reflective journals as a means for personal, professional and clinical learning development



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ABSTRACT

Background: Reflective journals are used by the students to voice their views on the daily activities during clinical placement. Reflective journals are aimed at helping the student to observe and record as many facts about daily practice as the student finds relevant. Reflective journal writing can therefore be used as a tool to evaluate that clinical learning is actually taking place and what challenges students are experiencing which may influence their learning. Findings by Harris (2006:460–461) are encouraging that through journaling students will develop ability to identify and analyse their difficulties, make suggestions for solving problems and ask and pursue questions on their own. Some of the participants confirmed improved values clarification, self-valuing and personal growth. Bulman & Schutz (2008: 172) recommends journal writing for recording processes the student observe, copy and internalize in her journey towards professional development.

Objectives: This study aimed to determine student nurses' perceptions of reflective journal writing as a means for personal, professional development and clinical learning development.

Method: A quantitative and descriptive survey was conducted in September 2013. Forty participants were recruited from second year student nurses of a University of Technology in uMgungundlovu District of KwaZulu-Natal. Purposive convenience sampling strategy was used. A structured questionnaire was designed by the researcher from literature reviewed. The questionnaire was piloted and modified, then used after permission had been granted by the Ethics Committee of the university concerned. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 17) programme was used for data analysis.

Results: Results indicated that the participants generally experienced writing of reflective journals to be a valuable tool enhancing personal development, professional growth and clinical learning. A significant number ($n = 24/60\%$) confirmed that they improved in making proactive decisions and taking on the spot corrective actions; 52% ($n = 21$) of the participants were empowered to examine their attitudes and perspectives to a given situation and 55% ($n = 22$) participants increased in active involvement and ownership of their learning.

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Recommendations: It is recommended that clinical staff be reminded of their responsibility as role models for student nurses so as to enhance their personal, professional development and clinical development. The writing of reflective journals must be encouraged in nurse education and students given guidance and constructive feedback.

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1. Introduction and background

Nursing students are placed in clinical facilities to correlate classroom learning with real life situations to learn nursing skills and to socialise students into professional behaviours and practice (SANC, 2005). Nursing students are being prepared to become future competent registered nurses who are not only clinically competent but personally and professionally developed to meet their leadership role in nursing. Theory can easily be assessed through tests and examinations, clinical skills through well-developed clinical checklists. The challenge lies in monitoring personal and professional development of a student. Reported cases of poor attitudes of nurses and professional misconduct are indicators of a decline in personal and professional development of nurses (SANC, 2008; Bloom (2013)). Nurse educators need to explore innovative teaching strategies such as reflective journals, to address these challenges facing the profession.

Some of the benefits of writing reflective journals include professional, cognitive and affective development; making connections through text and journals; increased awareness of contextual 'space'; active engagement with issues; connecting with self and others (Bolton, 2005; Bulman & Schutz 2008; Chabeli & Muller, 2004; Harris, 2005; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Lasater and Nielsen (2009) state that reflection provides an excellent opportunity for students to analyse their actions and increase their capacity to make sound clinical judgments.

The writing of a reflective journal is commonly done by the student individually and during their own private time away from the intimidating presence of seniors and nurse educators. In addition, students will develop the ability to identify and analyse their difficulties, make suggestions for solving problems and ask and pursue questions on their own (Harris (2006:460-461)). It becomes a platform for voicing out opinions, feelings and disturbing issues that concerns the student (Bulman & Schultz, 2008: 86). Thorsen and DeVore (2013) and Chabeli (2006: 82) add that journals can be utilised to teach and guide students to develop higher order thinking skills e.g. reflection, critical thinking and problem solving skills.

1.1. Problem statement

Reported cases of negligence and poor nursing staff attitude have been steadily rising and reported in a number of cases. South African Nursing Council investigated 629 professional misconduct cases by Registered Nurses (SANC, 2008). Health

departments are facing billions of rands in litigations resulting from cases of negligence (Bloom, 2013; Bauer, 2011). The Minister of Health has admitted the attitude of professionals within public healthcare to their work was a major stumbling block to transforming the sector (Bauer, 2011). Poor attitudes of nurses and professional misconduct are indicators of a decline in personal and professional development of nurses. This highlights the need for reflective practitioners who will be able think and consider their actions carefully or reflectively to make sound clinical reasoning and judgements, preventing such occurrences (Lasater & Nielsen, 2009).

The above challenges facing the nursing profession warrant a revisit of current nursing education strategies because the commonly used clinical evaluation tools are designed to measure observable clinical learning outcomes but fall short in measuring critical attributes of nurses pertaining to behaviours such as personal development and professionalism (DeBrew & Lewallen, 2014:1). Innovative strategies, such as reflective journals, can be utilized to monitoring the personal and professional development of nursing students in order to produce professionals who are clinically-focussed and reflective in their practice. It is with this in mind that the researcher purposed to conduct this study to contribute knowledge voiced out by the nursing students as active participants in the clinical environment.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The aim of the study was to determine student nurses' perceptions of reflective journal writing as a means for personal, professional development and clinical learning development.

1.3. Definition of key concepts

Student nurse refers to persons following the programme leading to registration as a nurse (general, psychiatric and community) and midwife in terms of Regulation R425 of February 1985, as amended (SANC, 2005).

Clinical learning is part of the educational process achieved through clinical placement of students in nursing and midwifery practice settings to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and behaviours and demonstrating competency in the practice of nursing and midwifery (SANC, 2005).

Reflective thinking skills refers to the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which result in a changed conceptual perspective (Chabeli & Muller, 2004).

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