



The use of reflective journaling as a learning strategy during the clinical rotations of students from the faculty of health sciences: An action-research study



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SUMMARY

Background: Reflective practice contributes significantly to the assimilation of knowledge in undergraduate health students. Reflective journals constitute a learning strategy that promotes student reflection during clinical practice.

Aims: The overall aim of the study was to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding the use of reflective clinical journals as a learning tool for students in order to improve the implementation of clinical journal writing in all the Health Science degrees offered by our University.

Method: A qualitative research study was performed using the Action-Research method. Students studying various degrees at our Health Faculty were considered for this study (Nursing Physiotherapy, and Physiotherapy and Physical Activity and Sport Science). Data were collected using triangulation of document analysis (102 student journals and 12 teacher journals, together with the teachers' responses to the student's journals) and transcripts from 2 discussion groups (1 student discussion group and 1 teacher discussion group). Data analysis was performed based on the constant comparative method using ATLAS.ti version 6.2 software.

Results: Four qualitative themes emerged from the data: the journal as a teaching strategy; building a relationship of trust between the tutor and the student; the role of the teacher and the world of emotions.

Conclusions: Several recommendations for supporting clinical journal writing were identified: an informative meeting should be arranged with students; written guidelines should be provided; a personal interview with the student is recommended at the start of the activity; feedback should be offered over short time periods; teachers should provide constructive feedback; and students should adopt a free writing approach, or be guided by very open questions. Finally, it is important that students be familiarized with the assessment criteria.

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Introduction

The use of reflective journals represents a pedagogical method aimed at promoting the student's ability to reflect. At present, a new teaching model is suggested for stimulating significant student learning: this model relies on higher-order thinking processes, and

represents a continuum of learning via the implementation of methodological strategies that are able to evoke reflective thought processes. Consequently, reflective learning is currently very popular in professional education programs (Williams and Grudnoff, 2011).

To think of education as a reflective experience equals a deep rethinking of the dominant pedagogical rationale by assuming that education does not culminate with mere technical performance. Instead it is an experience that requires teachers to use conversation and judgment, as well as logical thought coherence, analysis and reflective criticism, deliberation and educational decisions in contexts of doubt. All of these factors lead one to understand education as a reflective and ethical development, similar to philosophical education (Sadio Ramos and Ortiz Molina, 2010).

Reflective thinking represents a higher level of thinking. It is an ordered chain of ideas, analyses and personal research that arises when we begin to enquire about something and try to test its

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authenticity via justification. It involves the analysis of complex situations, doubt and self-correction processes, which requires effort (Dewey, 2007). By acquiring a reflective habit, one can change the way one thinks about practice including the perceptions and relations with patients (Gustafsson, Asp et al., 2007). In our professional day-to-day life, reflective thoughts are continuously generated, prompting the need for further enquiry to resolve the doubts that arise from our own activities (Schön, 2001). According to Donald Schön (1983), the capacity to reflect on action and therefore to engage in a process of continuous learning represents a key characteristic of professional practice, as part of a process of professional growth necessary in order to become skilled practitioners. Thus, professionals are encouraged to 'transform' into reflective practitioners, so that reflection is present as the central concept of practice (Medina and Parra, 2006). For this reason, reflective practice is the guiding theme behind professional training (Mertz dos Santos and Aranda Campoy, 2010). Clinical practice must be a place for dynamic exchanges, active participation and professional autonomy. This involves helping the student to reject knowledge that has nothing to do with their own knowledge and life experiences but rather helps them to understand practice according to their own comprehension of how the processes of care take place (Medina, 2005).

Critical-reflective training requires supporting curiosity and achievement; supporting the fact that both students and teachers are able to question the situations that surround them with creativity and innovation, as well as valuing uncertainty as a potential aspect of reality (Medina et al., 2010). The critical, reflective and creative pedagogical approach places great emphasis on the holistic development of the person, of a type of individual who is able to consider the point of view of others; promoting social interaction based on mutual respect, reasoning, cooperation, constructive approaches and ethical coherence (Sadio Ramos and Ortiz Molina, 2010).

A number of studies have highlighted the power of journals as a reflective strategy (Epp, 2008). In these, the levels of reflection described by Merizow are used to explore the type of student reflection:

- Level 1. Reflectivity. The ability to speak of and describe experiences and observations.
- Level 2. Affective reflectivity. The ability to recognize and express feelings.
- Level 3. Discriminant reflectivity. The ability to evaluate activities undertaken.
- Level 4. Judgmental reflectivity. Awareness of expressing evaluation judgments that are subjective in nature.
- Level 5. Conceptual reflectivity. The ability to develop awareness of what is required for learning.
- Level 6. Theoretical reflectivity. The ability to demonstrate learning derived from the experience or changes in perspective (any of the two).

A common finding in the abovementioned studies was that the students evolved in the depth or level of reflection achieved. They began describing the facts but, as time passed, they experienced higher levels of critical reflection.

A number of studies have performed a content analysis of clinical journals written by students in the Health Sciences (Moreno and Ruiz, 2007; Busto et al., 2012; Ramli et al., 2013; Rodriguez Garcia et al., 2014). These have highlighted a series of associated advantages and disadvantages: journals help students to work on the competencies of team work, responsibility and holism; they bring teachers closer to the way students learn; improve the communication abilities of patients and colleagues; help identify learning difficulties and guide the students in observing aspects that are not reflected in their journals (Moreno and Ruiz, 2007). However, journal writing requires a considerable amount of dedication and it is therefore necessary to have some prior experience (Sanfeliu et al., 2006).

At the time of this study, journals were being used differently in the various degrees within our Faculty of Health Sciences. In the nursing degree program, journals were always used at times when the student was not at the university and these were valued for contributing to the student learning. In the physiotherapy program, closed questions were used and no feedback was offered to students. This was the motivation for conducting this study, as a group of teachers wished to reflect on the most appropriate use of the reflective journal as a learning aid.

Study Aim

The overall aim of the study was to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding the use of reflective clinical diaries as a learning tool for students.

The secondary aims were to:

- Identify aspects that can contribute to improve teaching practices involving reflective student journals.
- Assess the difficulties teachers have working with students' reflective journals.
- Develop journal-writing guidelines for students.
- Develop an assessment guideline for students' reflective journals.

Methods

In order to achieve the aims of the present study, a qualitative approach was considered. We performed an action research study following the action plan proposed by McNiff and Whitehead (2011): review one's own practice; identify an aspect that one wants to improve; imagine the solution; implement it; register everything that happens, modify the plan according to the results and continue with the action. Action-research was chosen as the most appropriate approach in order to reflect on and improve the use of the journal as a learning strategy within the whole of the Health Faculty. Meetings of expert teachers were held, in which the teachers agreed on the importance of the reflective journal during the clinical rotations in order to ensure a better follow-up of the student's progress and learning. Guidelines on elaborating a reflective diary were developed (Annex 1) together with an assessment protocol (Annex 2), furthermore it was decided that an interview with students who decided to participate in the project was essential.

This study relied on several sources of data in order to understand the value of journaling for students, together with the difficulties encountered, the aspects that could be improved regarding teachers, and how feedback should be offered as well as the best way to interest students in the activity. Data were collected from students' journals, teachers' journals, the responses offered by the teachers to the students' journals, a teachers' discussion group and a students' discussion group.

The diversity of the techniques used enabled data triangulation. Triangulation enables the holistic portrayal of phenomena, enabling researchers to review the information, detect coincidences and contradictions, and establish veracity. In this study triangulation of subjects was performed in order to reveal the participants' different perspectives and interpretations, via the diverse data collection methods. Triangulation of experts was performed by considering the suggestions made by colleagues who acted as experts and according to the published literature by experts on the subject. Methodological triangulation was performed at the level of the research design, by planning different data collection strategies according to the data that was being gathered with each of the strategies. This was necessary as each data collection method is able to uncover certain aspects and characteristics of the study subjects and their context, but neither can reveal the entire picture.

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