



# Reflective writing: The student nurse's perspective on reflective writing and poetry writing



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## SUMMARY

**Background:** Reflective writing is a mandatory part of nurse education but how students develop their skills and use reflection as part of their experiential learning remains relatively unknown. Understanding reflective writing in all forms from the perspective of a student nurse is therefore important.

**Objectives:** To explore the use of reflective writing and the use of poetry in pre-registered nursing students.

**Design:** A qualitative design was employed to explore reflective writing in pre-registered nursing students.

**Setting:** A small university in Scotland.

**Participants:** BSc (Hons) Adult and Mental Health Pre-registration Student Nurses.

**Methods:** Two focus groups were conducted with 10 student nurses during March 2012. Data was analysed thematically using the framework of McCarthy (1999).

**Results:** Students found the process of reflective writing daunting but valued it over time. Current educational methods, such as assessing reflective accounts, often lead to the 'narrative' being watered down and the student feeling judged. Despite this, reflection made students feel responsible for their own learning and research on the topic. Some students felt the use of models of reflection constricting, whilst poetry freed up their expression allowing them to demonstrate the compassion for their patient under their care.

**Conclusions:** Poetry writing gives students the opportunity for freedom of expression, personal satisfaction and a closer connection with their patients, which the more formal approach to reflective writing did not offer. There is a need for students to have a safe and supportive forum in which to express and have their experiences acknowledged without the fear of being judged.

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## Introduction

Since the 1980s, nurse education has embraced the concept of 'reflection' as the cornerstone of nursing practice. This is complemented by a plethora of literature which suggests that by combining experiential learning with critical thinking and new found knowledge, reflection can support practitioners to contest previous assumptions related to practice (Howatson-Jones, 2010; Taylor, 2003). However it has also been suggested that in their formative years at the university, student nurses find reflection a challenging process (Kennison, 2012) not least because of the conflicting emotions evoked when reflecting on practice. Burrows (1995) argues that student nurses do not possess the necessary skills or maturity to engage purposely with reflection. This resonated with our experience, in that students within our institution encountered significant difficulties with the process of reflection notwithstanding the demands of reflective writing. This seems at odds with the importance

that programmes of pre-registration nursing in the United Kingdom place on reflection and in particular reflective writing assignments as an approach to the formative and summative assessment of student learning (NMC, 2010).

Whilst there has been little research conducted to investigate the student nurse's perspective of reflective writing, there is some evidence in the literature to suggest that poetry writing might be a more creative and effective alternative to reflective writing. Poetry writing, by its very nature of being expressive, is espoused as a process that enables the student to perhaps more easily explore and articulate their feelings and practice experiences (Chan, 2014). Poetry writing in nurse education is not a new concept, it has many similarities to reflective writing and has been used both as a way to assess and monitor student learning (Hunter, 2002; Kidd, 2004). In addition it has also been used as a tool for personal and professional development (Davies, 2008; Wright, 2006). Furthermore poetry writing is posited as a means to increase student nurse's capacity for compassion, empathy and critical thinking (Hunter, 2002).

However research studies that have investigated the use of poetry in nurse education have tended to rely extensively on a hermeneutic

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methodological approach, whereby data interpretation is based on the actual content of the student's poems in order to inform findings (Wright, 2006; Kidd, 2004). Therefore there would appear to be a paucity of research that explores the student nurse's perspective on poetry writing and its uses in nurse education (Epp, 2008). Central to the goal of this research was to more fully appreciate the student nurse's perceptions of reflective writing and the use of poetry writing within the undergraduate curriculum.

## Background

It is perhaps helpful to clarify more fully the purpose and expectations of reflective writing and poetry writing within the pre-registration nursing curriculum. Students in our institution are introduced very early in the curriculum to the theoretical background and process of reflection and reflective writing (in lectures and tutorials). Reflection is espoused as a means of developing self-awareness, insight and an alternative perspective. Rolfe et al. (2001, p.42) describe reflective writing as a means 'to help us learn from our experiences'. Reflective writing is posited as a purposeful activity that serves as a tool for professional development in its own right (Jasper et al., 2013). Students are encouraged to begin to get to grips with reflective writing at our institution in their first year through diary accounts of practice experiences. Students are then asked to share, if willing, some of their diary entries with the module tutor. The diary entries form the basis for informal discussion around and about achievement of learning outcomes, new found knowledge and skills acquisition. In terms of introducing poetry into the curriculum students are shown published works, this is an informal session which serves to nurture student's own creativity. At the end of year one, students are required to submit either three 500 word formative reflective accounts or poems. Verbal feedback is provided at this stage and aims to identify students' strengths and provides suggestions for improving and developing practice.

In years 2 & 3 students are required to submit a summatively assessed reflective case study, and 3 formatively assessed reflective accounts or poems. At this stage written feedback is provided on the summative pieces and verbal feedback on the formative accounts. In year 4 students undertake an extensive summative reflective portfolio relating to clinical practice.

Reflective writing within nurse education in the UK is used as a way to assess achievement of learning outcomes and as a means of developing a more focused approach to reflection (Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper, 2001). James Pennebaker's (1997) seminal work on the therapeutic value of expressive writing suggests that because the act of writing takes longer than the spoken word, it forces the thoughts to be recounted in greater detail and provides a framework by which to understand new and unique perspectives. The act of penning thoughts to paper seemingly creates distance and objectivity from the actual experience and in doing so alternative ways to do things are seen. Through the act of reflective writing it is suggested that more complicated problems can be better understood (Schmidt, 2004) leading to the 'writing to learn' paradigm espoused by Allen et al. (1989).

McMullan's (2006) research into student nurses' perspectives on the use of reflective writing in portfolios suggests that written reflection is a skill that requires mastery and maturity to acquire. These findings concur with Jasper's (1999) work albeit with post-registration nursing students, which also suggested that written reflection requires maturity, self-awareness and language skills. Whilst the meaning of maturity in this context is debatable, Levett-Jones (2006) in her work identifies year three of the undergraduate curriculum as the stage whereby student nurses start to develop the capacity and confidence for reflective writing.

Models of reflection are advocated by nurse educationalists to scaffold the process of reflective writing. By providing a series of questions, models of reflection help the student/practitioner to analyse and make sense of the situation before moving to an alternative solution.

Various models of reflection abound, the difference being in structure and content, with more structured models of reflection being criticised in some quarters for being overly interrogatory (Coward, 2011).

Further critique of the literature in the area of reflective writing in the undergraduate nursing curriculum echoed our own sentiments in that students have a tendency to just write about experiences that demonstrate achievement of the modules learning outcomes rather than situations that could potentially draw out something more meaningful in terms of self-development (Richardson, 1995). Moreover, the literature also suggests that summative assessment can have a negative impact on the honesty of reflective accounts, due to the notion that students feel apprehensive about telling the truth in their work for fear of being adversely judged by the tutor (Epp, 2008). This begs the question, are students merely telling the teacher what they want to hear?

By contrast poetry writing is a means of expressive writing without constraint or ulterior motive. Indeed the poem, by virtue of the fact that it is a creative piece of work, negates assessment and unlike other reflective writing assignments cannot be judged. As Bolton (2006, p. 17) states 'every writer is the authority of their own writing....the writer will always write the right thing'. Consequently poetry may be more appealing (Richardson, 1995). Indeed Whitehead (2002) advocates poetry writing as an alternative to traditional reflective writing, because it mitigates the adherence to prescriptive academic related practices that students can sometimes find overwhelming.

With similarities to reflective writing, poetry writing is also valued as a tool for personal and professional development. Moreover it would appear that poetry writing is a medium that encourages self-awareness, self-evaluation and self-healing (Foureur, 2007). Furthermore it has been argued that writing poetry enhances the theory of nursing because it nurtures an empathic connection to the subject (Hunter, 2002; Wright, 2006). This can be seen to support Carper's (1978) seminal work which legitimizes aesthetics, as one of the four fundamental ways of knowing in nursing. Carper's interpretation of aesthetics requires an appreciation of the patient and the uniqueness of individual situations. More broadly speaking, aesthetics is rooted in a philosophical approach that maintains a more subjective orientation to patient care which entails an appreciation of the unique qualities of individuals using creativity and empathy. It could be argued that poetry is more akin to 'the art of nursing' and as such is a valuable way as Holmes & Gregory suggest (1998, p.1193) to 'help nurses remain intimate with their experiences, feelings and images'.

Thus poetry is posited as a way of increasing understanding of the patient's perspective and fostering compassion and empathy (Price, 2007). Roberts (2010; 2013) goes further recommending poetry writing as a means of developing emotional intelligence in particular with mental health nurses. Fostering emotional intelligence has been advocated as a means of building resilience and coping with stress in an ever demanding clinical environment whilst maintaining an empathetic understanding of the patient perspective (Roberts, 2013).

Since students may have a different understanding and perspective towards reflective writing and poetry writing in the nursing curriculum, this study aims to reveal student perspectives, to inform our future teaching and learning approaches in this area.

## Methods

### Aim

The aim of the study was to explore the student nurse perspective on reflective writing and the use of poetry in reflective practice assessments.

### Design

A qualitative study using two focus groups was employed to explore reflective writing by undergraduate nurses. An inductive approach was

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