



## Facilitating student learning with critical reflective journaling in psychiatric mental health nursing clinical education: A qualitative study



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Critical reflective journaling has been used to facilitate student learning in various disciplines; however, there is only limited data available on its application in clinical education in the area of psychiatric mental health nursing.

**Objectives:** The aims of the study were to: 1) explore types of events or issues that senior nursing students chose to reflect upon in their critical reflective journals during their 5-week psychiatric mental health nursing clinical practicum; and 2) assess students' evaluations of critical reflective journaling.

**Design & Methods:** For this qualitative study, we collected data from senior nursing students who were enrolled in the mental health clinical practicum from March to June 2016 and agreed to participate in the study. During the 5-week psychiatric mental health nursing clinical practicum, students completed four weeks of clinical rotations in two units and submitted one journal entry each week reflecting upon an instance they selected and completed a survey to evaluate critical reflective journaling. De-identified data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

**Results:** We analyzed 236 journal entries and survey results completed by 59 students. Students chose to reflect upon the following issues: boundaries of therapeutic relationships, responses to patient symptoms, and own attitudes and biases toward mental illness. They reported that critical reflective journaling provided them opportunities for self-reflection and self-emancipation, which led to increased motivation for full engagement in the clinical practicum and increased understanding of patients' perspectives as well as mental health nursing competency. Overall, students were satisfied with critical reflective journaling but also identified areas for improvement in regard to its application in clinical education.

**Conclusions:** Through critical reflective journaling, nursing students are able to self-reflect on issues arisen during their clinical rotation, which leads to improvement of their competency in psychiatric mental health nursing and full engagement in the clinical practicum.

## 1. Introduction

Psychiatric mental health nursing is one of the core courses in undergraduate nursing programs, but many nursing students perceive its clinical practicum as difficult and stressful (Barry and Ward, 2017; Gunay and Kilinc, 2018). The stress and difficulties are often stemming from the 'prejudice' that psychiatric patients are violent and thus they may express aggression toward students (Koskinen et al., 2011). In addition, students' low confidence in communication skills and lack of ability to handle acute situations prior to the practicum can contribute to the high level of stress and anxiety during the clinical practicum (Fiedler et al., 2012).

To address these difficulties and challenges, as well as to cultivate critical thinking skills, nursing educators have developed and implemented various effective, evidence-based teaching strategies, such as simulation, role-playing, and reflective journaling (Hermanns and Haas, 2016; Miller, 2017; Mousa, 2015; Nelson, 2017). Particularly, critical reflective journaling, which started as a pedagogical method to develop critical thinking skills, has been adopted steadily and extensively in the nursing field. It helps students to achieve the development of critical thinking skills, synthesis of knowledge, and professional growth (Naber and Markley, 2017). Critical reflective journaling also facilitates students' self-awareness (Frankel, 2009; Ganzer and Zauderer, 2013), which is an essential component in psychiatric mental health nursing.

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With the increased use of reflective journaling in the academic field in recent years, many have brought attention to issues and challenges concerning its use (Dyment and O'Connell, 2010). In particular, analyzing 75 studies focused on reflective journaling across diverse fields, O'Connell and Dyment (2011) identified several issues of reflective journaling, such as insufficient reflection, lack of training or structure for students, and legal and ethical issues related to students' privacy and evaluation of journal entries. Journaling may also invoke anxiety in some students and produce negative feelings, if proper feedback is not provided (Naber and Markley, 2017). In addition, there are gaps in the literature pertaining to the application of critical reflective journaling in nursing education. In a literature review published in 2008, only nine studies were identified as focusing on reflective journaling for undergraduate practice courses (Epp, 2008). In a recent review of studies that examined reflective practice in nursing education and practice, 24 studies were identified as focusing on the use of reflective practice in nursing education. But, the majority of the studies were targeting graduate level nursing education (Dubé and Ducharme, 2015).

Moreover, only a few studies examined the application of critical reflective journaling in practice environment, including psychiatric mental health nursing practice (Cooke and Matarasso, 2005; Curtin et al., 2015; Dubé and Ducharme, 2015; Hermanns and Haas, 2016; Kroning, 2016; Ruiz-Lopez et al., 2015). Consequently, issues that nursing students reflect upon during psychiatric mental health nursing clinical practicum and student-perceived benefits and limitations of using critical reflective journaling have not been fully understood. Understanding students' perspectives on effective teaching and learning would be an important first step toward improving the quality and effectiveness of clinical education in nursing.

The specific aims of the present study were to: 1) explore types of events or issues that senior nursing students chose to reflect upon in their critical reflective journals during their 5-week psychiatric mental health nursing clinical practicum; and 2) assess students' evaluations of critical reflective journaling. Ultimately, we aim to improve the quality of psychiatric and mental health nursing clinical practicum.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design & Procedure

In this qualitative study, we collected data from senior nursing students who were enrolled in the mental health clinical practicum. During the 5-week psychiatric mental health nursing clinical practicum, students completed four weeks of clinical rotations in two units out of 7 diverse psychiatric hospital units (i.e., open psychiatric units for adults, closed psychiatric units for adults, a closed psychiatric unit for children and adolescents, and a day hospital) and one week of clinical rotation in community mental health centers. Detailed information on the clinical practicum was reported previously (Choi et al., 2016).

To prepare nursing students for health care fields that require higher level of critical thinking and reasoning abilities to deal with ambiguous and complex clinical situations (Crowe and O'Malley, 2006), we have incorporated critical reflective journaling into our 5-week psychiatric mental health nursing clinical practicum. For journaling, we used the structure of critical reflective inquiry, which consists of three phases: descriptive, reflective and critical/emancipatory phases (Kim, 1999). In the first phase, students are encouraged to select a practice instance to reflect upon and to describe the situation as well as their actions, thoughts, and feelings (descriptive phase). In the next phase, students analyze the situation and their intentions and reflect upon against their personal beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge (reflective phase). Then, they focus on correcting and changing ineffective practice, which eventually would help them to move forward (critical/emancipatory phase). Students were oriented to all aspects of critical reflective journaling on the first day, including its theoretical background, premises and the critical reflective inquiry process (Kim, 1999). One journal

entry was required each week reflecting on an incident that students strongly reacted to during their clinical rotations.

Written instructions and forms for journal entries were provided. During the first four weeks of their clinical practicum, each student submitted one journal entry per week to their clinical instructors by e-mail. Clinical instructors provided feedback on each entry via e-mail within a couple of days of submission, which helped students incorporate new insights into their clinical performance.

Upon completion of the clinical practicum, students were asked to evaluate each component of the clinical practicum, including the critical reflective journaling. This was part of the course evaluation. Students' satisfaction with the critical reflective journaling and clinical practicum were rated on a scale of 1 (not satisfied at all) through 10 (very satisfied). In open-ended questions, students were asked to provide rationale for their ratings. We also asked students to provide their opinions about the critical reflective journaling and identify any areas for improvement in relation to this. All responses were collected anonymously.

The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the university. Data were collected from March 2016 to June 2016. Since critical reflective journaling was one of the required course assignments, all students enrolled in the course ( $n = 64$ ) submitted critical reflective journal entries during clinical practicum. To ensure voluntary participation in the study, informed consent was obtained at the end of the semester after evaluation of assignments was completed and course grades were assigned. During the informed consent procedure, it was also emphasized that participation in the research study would not affect their course grades. Out of the 64 enrolled students, 59 students agreed to participate in the study.

### 2.2. Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed with IBM SPSS 22 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). The demographic characteristics of the study sample and satisfaction with the clinical practicum and critical reflective journaling were summarized using descriptive statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations [SD], frequencies, and ranges).

Journal entries were de-identified and then analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Two authors (H.K. and S.K.) independently read and reread the data in order to obtain a broad perspective on the content of journal entries. Then, the same two authors independently analyzed the data to determine key concepts, categories, and themes based on core interview questions. The results were shared with all authors, and the identified concepts, categories, and themes were discussed and confirmed by all authors.

Students' responses to the open-ended questions about critical reflective journaling were also analyzed qualitatively. After an intensive review, the responses were categorized using the same method described above, and the frequency of each category was calculated.

## 3. Results

The age of the 59 students who agreed to participate in the study ranged from 21 years to 27 years (mean 21.98, SD 1.39). Ninety-five percent of the students were female. All students were in their fourth year (final year) of a baccalaureate nursing program.

### 3.1. Types of Events or Issues Reflected Upon in Journal Entries

Analyzing a total of 236 journal entries completed weekly for four weeks by 59 students, we identified a primary theme for each entry. Based on the type of events or issues that students chose to reflect upon, the themes were categorized into three major areas: boundaries of therapeutic relationships, responses to patient symptoms, and own attitudes and biases toward mental illness.

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