



A practical approach to promote reflective practice within nursing

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Although reflective practice has been identified as a valuable tool to help nurses recognise their own strengths and weaknesses, many still find it a difficult concept to embrace. This article dispels some of the myths surrounding reflective practice and offers examples of how it can benefit nurses both on a personal and a professional level.

Nurses are constantly being encouraged to be reflective practitioners. While many articles have been written on the subject (Freshwater and Rolfe, 2001; Burns and Bulman, 2000; Burton, 2000; Taylor, 2000; Palmer, 1999; Boud et al, 1985) there is little practical advice for nurses on how to reflect critically. Broad frameworks for reflection have been offered by theorists such as Benner and Wrubel (1989), Gibbs (1988), and Johns (2000). The Johns model identifies particular areas of reflective practice:

- Describing an experience significant to the learner;
- Identifying personal issues arising from the experience;
- Pinpointing personal intentions;
- Empathising with others in the experience;
- Recognising one's own values and beliefs;
- Linking this experience with previous experiences;
- Creating new options for future behaviour;
- Looking at ways to improve working with patients, families, and staff in order to meet patients' needs.

What is reflection?

Reflection is the examination of personal thoughts and actions. For practitioners this means focusing on how they interact with their colleagues and with the environment to obtain a clearer picture of their own behaviour.

It is therefore a process by which practitioners can better understand themselves in order to be able to build on existing strengths and take appropriate future action. And the word 'action' is vital. Reflection is not 'navel-gazing'. Its aim is to develop professional actions that are aligned with personal beliefs and values.

There are two fundamental forms of reflection: reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Understanding the differences between these forms of reflection is important. It will assist practitioners in discovering a range of techniques they can use to develop their personal and professional competences.

Reflection-on-action

Reflection-on-action is perhaps the most common form of reflection. It involves carefully re-running in your mind events that have occurred in the past. The aim is to value your strengths and to develop different, more effective ways of acting in the future.

In some of the literature on reflection (Grant and Greene 2001; Revans 1998), there is a focus on identifying negative aspects of personal behaviour with a view to improving professional competence. This would involve making such observations as: 'I could have been more effective if I had acted differently' or 'I realise that I acted in such a way that there was a conflict between my actions and my values'.

While this is an extremely valuable way of approaching professional development, it does, however, ignore the many positive facets of our actions. We argue that people should spend more time celebrating their valuable contributions to the workplace and that they should work towards developing these strengths to become even better professionals. We are not advocating, of course, that they should neglect to work on areas of behaviour that require attention.

Reflection-in-action

Reflection-in-action is the hallmark of the experienced professional. It means examining your own behaviour and that of others while in a situation (Schon, 1995; Schon, 1987). The following skills are involved:

- Being a participant observer in situations that offer learning opportunities;
- Attending to what you see and feel in your current situation, focusing on your responses and making connections with previous experiences;
- Being 'in the experience' and, at the same time, adopting a 'witness' stance as if you were outside it.

For example, you may be attending a ward meeting and contributing fully to what is going on. At the same time, a 'fly-on-the-wall' part of your consciousness is able to observe accurately what is going on in the meeting. Reflection-in-action is something that can be developed with practice. Some techniques are described later.

Critical reflection

Critical reflection is another concept commonly mentioned in the literature on reflection (Bright, 1996; Brookfield, 1994; Collins, 1991; Millar, 1991). It refers to the capacity to uncover our assumptions about ourselves, other people, and the workplace.

We all have personal 'maps' of our world. These develop across our lifetime and our early experience

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BOX 1. EXAMPLES OF 'STIMULUS' QUESTIONS

- What is the most important thing to do right now?
- What resources are available to me?
- How can I best use these resources?
- What do I most value about my relationship with person X or person Y?
- What achievements have made me proud?
- How am I using my power?
- What do I really want?
- How do I feel about [upcoming event]?
- What am I committed to doing?
- What am I committed to not doing?
- What recurring, unpleasant situations do I find myself in?

plays a vital role in their development. Like geographical maps, our personal maps help us make sense of our environment but are representations only. Personal experience determines how much of our environment we actually 'see'.

It can be surprising to hear two people's descriptions of the same event. Each may be astonished to hear how the other experienced the situation. Critical reflection involves uncovering some of the assumptions, beliefs and values that underlie the construction of our maps. Critical incident analysis offers useful tools to facilitate critical reflection (Fivars, 1980).

Why is reflective practice so important?

Reflective practice is important for everyone – and nurses in particular – for a number of reasons. First, nurses are responsible for providing care to the best of their ability to patients and their families (NMC, 2002; UKCC, 1992). They need to focus on their knowledge, skills and behaviour to ensure that they are able to meet the demands made on them by this commitment.

Second, reflective practice is part of the requirement for nurses constantly to update professional skills. Keeping a portfolio offers considerable opportunity for reflection on ongoing development. Annual reviews enable nurses to identify strengths and areas of opportunity for future development.

Third, nurses should consider the ways in which they interact and communicate with their colleagues. The profession depends on a culture of mutual support. Nurses should aim to become self-aware, self-directing and in touch with their environment.

They can only achieve this goal if they make full use of opportunities to gain feedback on their impact on patients, patients' families, their colleagues and the organisation as a whole.

Gaining this feedback involves using complex skills in detecting patterns, making connections, and making appropriate choices.

How to be reflective

You may at times think that you do not have enough time to live your life, let alone reflect on it. Among the many tools that can assist you in the vital skill of reflection, here are a few ideas, tips and activities that will enrich your experience of reflection and will take only a few minutes of your time.

Feedback

Feedback comes from other people in many different forms, both verbal and non-verbal. We receive feedback from others about our behaviour, our skills, our values, the way we relate to others, and about our very identity. It can be argued that we are who we are because of the feedback we receive from others. For this reason, feedback is central to the process of reflection.

One of the key questions in reflection is: 'How do I know that I have accurately perceived what I have seen and what I have heard?' This is a very important issue.

As we all carry our own unique 'map' of the world, we can develop richer maps by directly asking other people how they perceive a particular incident. In other words, we should develop the habit of asking relevant people how they see us. Asking the simple question: 'Can you give me some feedback on what I did?' will provide extremely valuable information. Of course, the person you ask must be someone who can be trusted to give an honest answer and whose opinion you value.

At work, that person may be someone who is more experienced than you, such as a clinical facilitator, and who is able to assist you in reflecting on a particular experience. The clinical supervisor may challenge your thoughts in a supportive and non-threatening manner in order to maximise the learning that can occur. Remember, though, that you do not have to accept the feedback as the 'truth'. But do give it your consideration.

We encourage people to take responsibility for gathering feedback about themselves. Keep asking people – when and where appropriate – how they saw your behaviour. Be as specific as possible. For example, you could say: 'Can you give me some feedback as to how I spoke to that patient?'

When you begin to ask others for feedback do not be surprised if they are slightly hesitant at first. They may give rather bland comments along the lines of: 'I thought you did well, given the circumstances.' When they realise that you are likely to ask them for feedback at appropriate times they will be more able and prepared to give richer information. Requests for feedback can have interesting ramifications. For example, other people may begin to ask you for feedback.

You may wish to ask for feedback from more than one person who has participated in the same experience. In this way, you obtain a variety of perspectives on your behaviour. These perspectives may differ and may occasionally contradict each other. This is not really problematic because, as we said above, each of us carries our own map of the world and we may be aware of different issues arising from the same situation.

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What have I learnt?

Another invaluable approach to reflection is to ask yourself regularly: 'What have I learnt today?' This is a positive approach to processing information, and can be a constructive way of dealing with an event that may have been upsetting. Incidentally, you can also say to other people whom you know well: 'What have you learnt today?' This should be done sensitively and at the right time and in the right circumstances. It is particularly useful if the other person is in the process of developing new skills and knowledge. As with asking a person for the first time to give you some feedback, the other person may be taken aback by being asked this question. We rely on each other to tell us what we have learnt and how well – it is part of our culture and education system. It is another way in which we can work together with others to develop our reflective skills.

Valuing personal strengths

The literature on reflection often focuses on an individual or group identifying weaknesses and using reflection to address 'areas of opportunity', as managers sometimes call them (Grant and Greene, 2001; Revans, 1998). While we do not deny that it is important to look at ways of improving our effectiveness, we should never overlook our many positive accomplishments (Buckingham and Clifton, 2001). Take time regularly therefore to review the many satisfying things that you have achieved in the recent past. This is not a question of wallowing in self-congratulation but a way of celebrating the positive contributions you make to the workplace. When you identify something that you wish to change for the better, at the same time think of five positive things you have achieved in the past 24 hours.

Viewing experiences objectively

To obtain as objective a picture as possible of yourself, your actions and your colleagues, try the following exercise. Recall an incident from the recent past, one which involved you and another person or other people. Now imagine yourself at the theatre. On the stage are the players in the scene in which you were involved. Look as carefully as you can at what you are doing and saying and at what the other person is doing and saying. Watch the interaction between you and the other person, and watch the role you are playing. Do you notice anything different from this perspective and, if so, what? How does this affect you now?

Practising this way of looking back on an experience can help you develop reflection-in-action skills. Being a participant observer of your own experience is a sophisticated skill and can enable you to process the underlying elements of a personal experience.

Empathy

A useful way of reflecting on an interaction, possibly one that has involved you in conflict of some kind, is to adopt an empathic position to try to see, hear and feel what the other person may have experienced. Try another

exercise. You are Anna and you have had a disagreement with a colleague, Rachael. Mentally step into the shoes of the other person and say out loud or in your head something along the lines of: 'I am Rachael. I don't like the way Anna treats me. My feelings are... My thoughts are... I think Anna's feelings are... I think Anna's thoughts are...'. This can be a rather strange but potentially enlightening exercise. It can add new perspectives to the analysis of your experience.

Keeping a journal

Keep a private journal to log your reflections. You may wish to choose a book with unlined pages so that you can record your thoughts in a variety of forms – drawings, notes, pictures that connect with your thoughts and feelings. Use a variety of writing instruments – coloured pens, pencils, crayons, and highlighter pens.

There are many ways to record your thoughts, feelings and future plans. For example, after work you could write in your journal one adjective describing your day (remember to record the date). Then, underneath it, write one adjective describing how you want the next day to be. The following day, compare what happened in the light of what you wanted to happen. If things happened in the way in which you wanted, how did you achieve your wish? If not, why not?

Another way of recording your thoughts is to give a brief description of the best things and the worst things that happened during the day. Write a 'win' list of everything that went right. This will give you a fascinating record of your high and low points across time. You could also try writing a few words in response to stimulus questions, some examples of which are shown in Box 1.

Look at what you write immediately after putting pen to paper, and a few days later review what you wrote. Ask yourself the following questions: What comes over me when I do this review? What can I learn from this? Do

BOX 2. DREAMER, REALIST, CRITIC: THE THREE-STEP APPROACH TO REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

- Stage 1** Identify the situation for which you require answers.
- Stage 2** Put yourself into Dreamer mode. Come up with as full a picture as possible of a vision, without any editing. Stay with whatever presents itself to you.
- Stage 3** Now take on the role of the Realist. Draw up a plan to achieve the dream, without any criticism or amendment to it.
- Stage 4** Give the action plan to the Critic and ask this person to identify those areas that need further development and to package these concerns into a series of questions to give back to the Dreamer for answers.
- Stage 5** Repeat stages 2-4 until all parties are happy and are at rest.

I see any patterns in my day-to-day experience? Do I see patterns across time? Write spontaneously, and write quickly so that you are not planning what comes next. Write honestly. This will allow you to be open about what you really think and what you really believe. Do not worry about being logical and orderly in your reflections. It can be very enlightening to write down your thoughts in an uncensored manner – after all, no one else is going to read your journal unless you want them to.

The very act of writing things down is important. Writing can be cathartic and can help you to put your thoughts in some order of priority. It can, however, be frightening at times. Do not censor yourself. You are reflecting for yourself, not for a teacher who might criticise your writing (our past experiences of the education system can have a negative effect on writing in this way. We may feel that we have to write in sentences, that we must spell correctly, and that our thoughts must be organised in a logical way).

You can also use drawings and cut out pictures that represent your experience. You might find it easier to speak your thoughts aloud and record them. It can be very enlightening to listen to these spoken thoughts some time in the future.

Exploring the images

If you write freely you are very likely to contradict yourself. This is natural. Value contradictions. What you may uncover is that you sometimes act in a way that differs from the way you think you 'ought' to behave. Diary entries reflect the complexity of our personalities.

But where exactly do you begin? There is a range of possibilities to choose from. You may want to begin with an expression of the present moment. This may be in the form of an image, a description of events, or a feeling. Your image may take the form of a simile, for example: 'I feel as though I'm in the middle of a battle'. Exploring this image can help you to understand how you came to be where you are at the present moment.

Diary entries can be very enlightening when re-read at a later date. You can see how you have developed since you wrote the words. By looking back at how you viewed your world you may see that your interpretation of events limited the options you had at the time. You may be able to identify how limiting beliefs served you poorly. This element of critical reflection is regarded as a vital component of being a reflective practitioner.

What do you do with all this material?

Your next task is to make connections. Having written, drawn or tape-recorded your thoughts and feelings over a period of time, which could be a few days, a few weeks or even months, try and see if there are any emerging patterns. Give a name to the patterns and see if there is a connection between any of them. What do the patterns and connections mean to you? Which ones are you proud of? Do any of them worry you? If they do, how can you manage these concerns? What can you do to build on the positive patterns and connections?

Planning for the future

Planning future actions is part of the learning and reflective process. Having made connections, identified patterns and made sense of reflections, you are likely to be able to plan and implement changes for the future. However, do not be over-ambitious.

Planning and carrying out a small change in your behaviour can be extremely effective in several ways. First, making small changes may take less effort and courage than making big changes.

Second, if your change in behaviour does not have the desired effect, you have a further choice – you can abandon the plan or increase the amount of time and effort you are prepared to invest.

If you finally decide to abandon your plan, you will not have wasted time or energy. On the other hand, it is often the case that a small change can have a huge impact. Persevere with your plans until you see whether or not they are having an effect.

Creating your own future

A vital part of the reflective process is to plan for changes in your behaviour. One way to tackle this is to adopt the creative thinking strategy devised by Walt Disney. He had three stages to his strategy, based on different characters, each of which surfaced at appropriate points in the process of creating new projects. These three characters were:

- The Dreamer. This character looks towards ideas for the future. The main focus is on how the imagined future feels and looks. In this phase, people say: 'I wish... What if ...? Just imagine if ...'
- The Realist. This character is action-oriented, looking at how the dream can be turned into a practical, workable plan or project given the existing constraints and realities. The realist weighs up all the possibilities, asking: 'How can I ...? Have I enough time to ...?'
- The Critic. This character is very logical and looks for the whys and why nots to a given situation. The critic evaluates the plan, looking for potential problems and missing links, and says: 'That's not going to work because ... What happens when ...?'

Effective planning of personal learning requires a synthesis of these different processes. The dreamer is needed in order to form new ideas and goals. The realist is necessary as a means of transforming these ideas into concrete expressions. The critic is necessary as a filter for refining ideas and avoiding possible problems (Box 2).

Conclusion

The few practical approaches and techniques for reflective practice that have been discussed are far from being a complete guide to the process of reflection. Much depends on factors such as motivation, time, career commitment and commitment to patients and their families.

When you have identified the goals of your development, you will have a focus for reflection and subsequent actions. Working on personal and professional development need not be a chore if you have access to varied and informative techniques. ■

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