

## **Value of reflective learning for nursing students: case studies of critical reflection within applied Gibbs' model of reflection**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

This workshop aimed to explore the value and importance of reflective practices in academic writing among nursing students at the University of Bradford.

The presentation is based around case studies of students who presented to academic skills for support following their failed attempts in assessed reflective essays. In guiding students through their academic writing development, it becomes apparent students often underestimate the value of critical and analytical approaches towards academic writing process when they reflect on their own practical experience.

Analysis of the students' understanding focuses on key stages of learning as outlined in Honey and Mumford (1992) and the application of a process of reflection that is based on Gibbs' model of reflection but emphasises the importance of involvement of critical reflection. Students' comments and evaluations of their reflective writing processes were considered and matched with the expectations course leaders hold for their students. This is in line with the importance of dialogue within this approach that McDrury and Alterio have explored (2002).

Responses were gathered through a set of open questions given to students after their assignment submission and further insights through a subsequent discussion with their tutors.

Through this process, students were supported to gain insight and thus bring their stages of reflective learning to a close by learning that reflection is integral part of their learning patterns as well as their professional development.

**Keywords:** academic reflective writing; critical reflection; nursing.

## **Community response**

Reflecting on professional experiences and using the produced reflection to evaluate and develop professional practice is a fundamental part of UK Health Sciences professionals' daily routine. Thus, learning to reflect using common reflective models (like Gibbs') is an essential skill that Health Sciences students are required to develop while at university.

The presenter started by exploring the specific institutional context they work in and the overall value of reflective writing for UK higher education students. Then, the specific instructions that students receive for their reflective assignment and the related challenges that students face were reviewed. An analysis of the gaps in the prior students' learning journey and their eminent needs in relation to the given reflective assignment were shared (case studies). Each unique case study explored the provided assignment instructions, the arising confusing areas and questions in the student's mind, and a sample of the student's related writing.

**Image 1. Visual representation of the 5 steps of reflective writing using Gibbs' model and applied critical evidence by Tanja Tolar.**



This presentation sparked a lot of interest from the audience and resulted in lively exchanges afterwards. Some attendees reflected on their related professional experiences:

Thank you for such a rich and thought-provoking session Tanja, I completely relate to your experiences supporting students in reflective writing practices, especially in the Health Science field. One area that particularly stood out to me was the Academic Skills team as a kind of mediator or bridge between the student and academic staff. There can often be a gap between what an academic thinks they're asking of their students and how the students interpret this and is an area often requiring nurturing and development to bring them both in alignment. It was refreshing to hear that this is not a unique experience!

The closing section of the presentation revealed the follow-up collaboration with the subject teaching team and a possible solution to this teaching challenge. The offered approach is three-fold, and it encompasses a student's whole degree. It is recommended to carefully scaffold multiple reflective writing opportunities and to establish a consistent emphasis of the learning value of reflective writing for the students. These actions should be supplemented with a continuous collaboration between the subject teaching team and the learning development team at the specific institution.

### ***Author's reflection***

When first faced with discussing reflective writing with students at the University of Bradford, I noticed that once they recognised the value of reflection, they performed much better. This paper took three examples to discuss how we approached this learning and how to bridge the gap between students' understanding of the assignment and tutor's instruction. I am at the early stage of this exploration and understanding of effective ways in teaching reflective writing, so I appreciated the opportunity to discuss this with the wider community and learnt to dig deeper in the ways of reflective writing for Health Sciences students.

I value all comments and suggestions shared, especially from the chair Dustin Hosseini who so graciously guided me to some further resources. I was also glad to hear others face similar issues with their Health Sciences students, especially Nursing students and their reflective assignments. In fact, some colleagues had exactly the same issues as I outlined so this helped me with understanding that the challenges of these assignments are much wider and complex than expected. As a follow up to this presentation, I plan to work more with a selected group of students to gather feedback and research further published material on reflective writing with the end goal to produce a resource for students that would equip them with some helping points for their reflective assignments.

Thank you, Sam, for your comments and encouragement that I am looking in the right direction. Student support in this particular assignment where critical writing is applied to a personal reflection seems to be a real challenge. I am keen on taking on board all comments received here and during the presentation, and further my quest for answers about how best to teach students' reflective skills with critical understanding of the academic evidence they need to use to support their claims. Ultimately, it is their understanding of the importance of reflective skills in their clinical practice that is crucial for their professional work, not only for their academic performance.

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The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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### **Further reading**

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