

REFLECTIVE WRITING

Practical experience is as important as theory in fields such as education and nursing. Reflection on that experience helps you to make links between theory and practice, integrate new knowledge with previous knowledge and develop your understanding. Reflecting on and learning from your experiences, including your mistakes, can help you to avoid repeated mistakes and, at the same time, identify successful aspects of an experience and useful principles which might usefully be applied to other situations. Reflection provides the opportunity to make sense of and learn from any experience and handle similar situations appropriately another time. It gives you the chance to explore thoughts and feelings, work through difficult or painful experiences, and develop self awareness and fresh insights. It can help you to get away from routine, automatic action and make conscious and informed decisions after weighing up all aspects of a situation.

Reflection may take place at different times:

- Before action – weighing up different aspects before deciding on a particular approach
- During action – thinking on your feet
- After action – looking back

Reflective writing is largely concerned with looking back - but with a view to the future.

To be effective and constructive, reflective writing needs to go beyond description of events and your own associated feelings. You need to:

- step back, explore and analyse your own role in the experience
- consider the different perspectives of other people involved
- make connections with relevant theories, supporting your ideas by reference to literature and research
- consider legal and organisational implications
- show awareness of social and political influences
- show what you have learned from the process

Because reflective writing involves personal analysis of personal experience and feelings, it is acceptable to use the first person – i.e. to describe what “I did” and how “I felt”. However, the style should not be too informal and the tone not conversational.

Several frameworks have been developed to help carry out the process of reflection in a structured way. Some of these are described by Girot (2001). Students other than nurses might also find them useful. The following checklist of questions, based on three main questions, combines elements from some of these frameworks and could be a useful starting point if you are unfamiliar with reflective writing:

Student Services

1. What?

- is the purpose of returning to this situation?
- exactly happened, in your own words?
- did you see? did you do?
- was your reaction?
- did other people do, e.g. colleague, child?
- do you see as the key aspects of the situation?

2. So what?

- were you trying to achieve?
- were the reasons for the way you responded?
- beliefs and values influenced your actions?
- assumptions did you make?
- were your feelings at this time?
- are your feelings now? Are there differences? Why?
- "good" emerged from the situation e.g. for self, others?
- troubles you, if anything?
- were your experiences in comparison to your colleagues, etc.?
- were the feelings of others involved? How do you know?
- are the main reasons for feeling differently from your colleagues, etc.?
- knowledge did or should have informed you?

3. Now what?

- are the implications for you, others involved.?
- needs to happen to alter the situation?
- happens if you decide not to alter anything?
- might you do differently if faced with a similar situation again?
- would be the consequences of alternative actions for yourself, others?
- information do you need to face a similar situation?
- are the best ways of getting further information about the situation should it arise again?

References:

Girof E.A. "Reflective skills". In S.Maslin-Prothero (ed.) *Baillere's Study Skills for Nurses* – second edition. 2001. Baillere Tindall/RCN. London.