

# Clinical Faculty Preceptors and Mental Health Reflections: Learning Through Journaling

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## ABSTRACT

Evolving practice environments have increased the need for advanced practice nurses to serve as clinical faculty preceptors at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Guided clinical journaling allows students to reflect and retain their clinical experiences and become an active participant in the learning process. The journal presents opportunities for both evaluation and critical reflection of clinical performance and previously held assumptions related to mental health. Through careful consideration of components, clinical educators have the opportunity to ensure that student learning has occurred as well as provide prompts for guided reflection of the learning experience.

**Keywords:** clinical faculty preceptors, mental health nursing, nursing clinical education, reflective journal

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Evolving health care and educational environments have highlighted the need for nurse practitioners (NPs) in providing robust educational and clinical experiences for both undergraduate and graduate nursing students. Competition for clinical sites, large numbers of students requiring placements, and the limited number of qualified nursing faculty are among the driving forces behind the increasing number of NPs serving as clinical faculty. However, challenges exist that complicate supervision of clinical students at all levels. Clinical learning in nursing education is a complex process involving a variety of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. Given the limited amount of clinical hours and the inherent nature of the clinical unit, it is often difficult for NP students to find time to think and process their clinical learning experience, risking that those experiences will not become fully integrated into memory. Similarly, it may be difficult for clinical faculty to properly determine that each NP student has met the predefined clinical learning outcomes and has assimilated critical concepts into learning.

Clinical journaling enables NP students to reflect and retain their clinical experiences and become an

active participant in the learning process and reinforcing theoretical content. In addition, the student has the opportunity to express thoughts, feelings, questions, and beliefs they may have not been able or willing to express verbally during the clinical day. Utilizing careful and purposeful guidance, the clinical journal presents opportunities for both evaluation and critical reflection of clinical performance and previously held assumptions related to mental health, thereby engaging students in the learning process. Journaling is a mechanism for self-awareness and awareness of others in which the student can demonstrate empathetic understanding and humility, providing for a deeper meaning of their experiences. It helps NP students to reflect on complex issues including cultural and societal issues about mental health, social justice, and patient rights. It is also a mechanism by which clinical educators can incorporate and reinforce critical nursing concepts and engage with students on significant learning experiences while evaluating course- and site-specific learning objectives.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In their seminal texts, Dewey<sup>1</sup> and Schön<sup>2</sup> identified reflection as an active process, an operationalization

of thoughts followed by a rationalization to reject or accept those thoughts in the future. Schön<sup>2</sup> further validated reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as 2 important concepts specifically suited for nursing. Reflection-in-action refers to a concurrent critical analysis of an action or event and evaluating for the most effective intervention. Reflection-on-action is more of a retrospective critical analysis of an action or event after it has occurred to explore alternative ways of response in similar situations.<sup>2</sup> Nursing research early this century suggested nursing students benefit the most from instructor orientation and guidance when utilizing reflective journaling for evaluation and critical reflection of clinical performance.<sup>3-6</sup> Additional early research asserted student nurses in a psychiatric rotation must be aware of self and personal bias to establish a therapeutic relationship with patients. Through clinical journals, students reflected upon personal preconceived bias that caused them to explore attitudes and foster change for personal growth.<sup>7</sup>

In the current nursing educational climate, there are some geographic areas replete with nursing students vying for clinical experiences to practice skills and hone clinical judgment. Therefore, some nursing curricula use high-fidelity simulation to augment or even replace clinical experience. Use of reflective journaling with progressive high-fidelity simulation scenarios in a diploma medical-surgical course identified 8 positive themes, including confidence, improved clinical judgment, and transfer of knowledge to the clinical setting.<sup>8</sup> Ross et al<sup>9</sup> recognized clinical experience alone in the field of mental health does not accomplish all desirable learning objectives and critical self-reflection necessary for growth in practice. Students in a mental health course using reflective journaling augment knowledge, personal attitude exploration, and skills development. Moreover, the strategy of incorporation of reflective journaling provides an individualized tool for the instructor to evaluate experience, logical thought processes, and a focused needs analysis for the student in a mental health setting. Ross et al<sup>9</sup> concluded that, within a welcoming atmosphere in a community mental health course, students reflected more compassion and understanding toward the mental health community, as well as transforming negative

feelings of the students. Recently, Raterink<sup>10</sup> examined the use of reflective journaling in an NP program to guide the student to identify certain critical thinking habits of the mind for a deeper understanding of how students think and feel during a clinical scenario. The results from this qualitative study were favorable as students expressed an enhancement of their clinical decision skills by honing their critical thinking processes over time.

Allan and Driscoll<sup>11</sup> reported a 3-fold benefit of reflective writing in general education as both the improvement of student learning and program assessment, and the opportunity for the professional growth of faculty. In their study, using a triangulation method for the assessment findings from student papers, reflective essays, and instructor course materials, the method naturally highlighted the students' learning needs and processes. Faculty members were then able to set their own learning needs agenda to participate in continuing education or self-directed learning activities to further develop and stay current with their personal teaching skills. In most of the recent literature, reflective journaling stands the greatest chance of being a successful pedagogy with strong orientation, expectations, and goals for the student, as well as a rubric for guidance and feedback from the instructor.<sup>6,12-14</sup> Reflective journaling has become a more commonplace pedagogy used in nursing education to highlight learning and critical thinking development.

### JOURNALING IN A PSYCHIATRIC CLINICAL COURSE

Mental health is a field of nursing in which many students, undergraduate or graduate, may be initially hesitant and uncomfortable. Because the patient population can be unpredictable and media portrayals of mental illness are sensationalized, the student is often anxious yet curious about attending the clinical site. The ideal clinical psychiatric practicum contains a variety of clinical experiences, ranging from pediatric to adult and acute inpatient to outpatient. Before the start of the clinical rotation, students complete a quiz essay titled, "A Letter to Myself: How I Feel About Mental Health Nursing." Beginning with thoughts about mental health nursing and personal course goals and concluding with their thoughts about mental illness, culture, and stigma,

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