

Enhancing Your Professional Nursing Practice Through Critical Reflection

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On completion of this article, you will be able to:

- Describe a critical reflective nursing practitioner
- Utilise a simple model to enhance your reflection skills

Nurses practicing in today's rapidly changing health care environment are increasingly becoming aware of the need to evaluate and improve their practice as well as consider the political, social and structural issues affecting it (Bettie et al 1996:28). Because change is occurring all around us, it is important for nurses to be able to analyse and respond to new and different challenges in a proactive way. Developing critical thinking and reflective skills will assist you to meet the challenges of providing care in a context of rapid change and to become a critically reflective practitioner.

I know you are thinking, 'exactly what is a critically reflective practitioner?' Attempt to answer the questions in activity one, before we explore these ideas together.

Activity 1

A critically reflective practitioner

Write your description of a critically reflective practitioner.

To help you begin, you might list what it is that a critically reflective practitioner does and how this tells you that they do think and reflect critically. Does this help you 'get at' what you mean by 'critical'?

Describing as opposed to defining

You will note in activity 1 you were asked to describe rather than define, a critically reflective practitioner. Why do you think this was done? Is there a

difference between defining or describing something? To answer this question go back to the activity and think about what your response would have been if the word define had been used rather than describe.

Often when we are asked to provide definitions we immediately think in textbook or dictionary terms and try to recall definitions that we have read or heard quoted. The word definition implies a precise answer, which already exists. A definition is usually described in quite objective terms, for example:

A critical reflective practitioner is a type of nurse or category of nurse who thinks critically about and reflects on their practice.

But how useful is this definition in trying to find out what a critically reflective practitioner is and, more importantly, what a critically reflective practitioner does. This kind of definition gives little understanding of what it is that a critically reflective practitioner actually does and in itself shows no evidence of critical thinking or reflection. It is merely an example of recalling knowledge or facts, or regurgitating the question or of someone else's definition. This is rote learning, where we can recall without understanding.

Now think about the word describe, and what you wrote in your description. A description of something usually provides a much more complete picture, which is rich with detail. For example, a description of a critical reflective practitioner might be as follows:

A nurse who uses a questioning approach, does not take things at face value, who constantly evaluates, re-

views and thinks about their practice with a focus on doing things better.

Can you see the difference between the two?

By describing rather than defining something it is often much easier to see the relationship to practice. It does not seem so removed, distant or unreachable. It turns rote learning into something that we use and can relate to, rather than what someone else said or did.

Description of our practice provide a basis from which to reflect and ask questions of our practice. It acts as a springboard for improving or affirming our practice.

This reflective process of asking questions about and inquiring into our practice can be enhanced if we take a critical approach to our reflection. What is meant here by a critical approach is more than just asking how and why questions about our practice. It is more than just critical thinking, although critical thinking assists critical reflection.

A critical approach is about questioning our practice in a particular way that takes a broader perspective. It is asking these questions from a framework, considering our nursing practice, not just in terms of the immediate situation or problem but from a perspective whereby we consider issues beyond the immediate situation, and beyond the personal, taking account of issues such as the historical and situational elements (Fitzgerald 1994:69). It is an approach that involves looking at the power relations that exist in the health care environment and asking questions about how and why they exist and

whose interests are served by their existence.

Now think back to your description of a critically reflective practitioner.

- When writing your description, what informed your description?
- Did you think about a nurse you know who you consider is a critically reflective practitioner and describe them?
- Did you draw on previous knowledge from undertaking other courses, or reading, or discussions with colleagues, or was your description drawn from all or a number of these sources?
- Did you only think within a nursing context or did you think more broadly? What influenced your understanding?
- What attitudes, values and assumptions are evident in your description?
- Where did these attitudes and values come from?

Was your description ideal or real? That is, is it possible to be the type of nurse you described in the Abu Dhabi facility you work in today?

- Is the nurse in your description you?
- Would you like the nurse in your description to be you?

These are examples of the types of questions we need to ask if we are reflecting from a critical perspective. As you can see, these questions relate to examining both ourselves and our ideas from a personal perspective, but also looking what influences our ideas in a broader way and challenging them.

To summarise, critical reflection involves us taking a 'fresh look' at our practice, viewing our practice through a different lens and questioning our previously accepted, taken-for-granted values, belief systems and routines. This is the personal aspect. It also involves thinking beyond the personal to how these are related to the wider social environments of nursing and health care and society.

Fitzgerald (1994:68) states that;

Nurses develop competence through a process of critical reflection on experience; they examine their work and the contribution their nursing, and nursing generally makes socially. Then, in turn, they also consider the effect social forces have upon themselves and their work.

Through the process of critical reflection we gain a heightened awareness of the variety of factors that shape our practice resulting in informed action or, in relation to nursing, informed practice. This is sometimes called praxis.

What knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are necessary to be a critically reflective practitioner?

The previous activity and discussion may have provided you with an understanding of the value of critical reflection in enhancing your practice. It is important to recognise that reflection, like a number of other aspects of our nursing practice is a skill that cannot be developed overnight or perfected instantly. It requires hard work and involves much personal challenge. It is also important to recognise that reflecting on practice does not necessarily provide solutions; it often provides more questions than answers. However, in asking ourselves questions related to our practice, we often gain a deeper understanding of, and insight into practice. In identifying the qualities necessary to become a reflective practitioner L'Aiguille (1994) talks about commitment, energy and importantly showing a willingness to learn. Do you feel that you possess these qualities?

Developing Skills in Critical Reflection

You may have used a diary or journal to assist the reflective process in the past. A journal could have been a requirement of a course, or maybe you kept a personal diary once but gave it up as you moved into adulthood. Have you ever wondered why writing your responses or ideas seems to be so popular. This form of exercise is a popular learning tool, not only in nursing education and practice, but also in other fields, such as education and management? You may even have had thoughts such as: "I'll do the reading and forget about the writing", "I'll jump straight in and skip the exercises". Did you do the previous activity? If you didn't then you have missed out on important reflective moment in our discussion, reflection on nursing practice, and critical reflection on your own practice.

Have you also wondered why nurses are often resistant to the ideas of writing and reflecting their practice? Street(1995) suggests it is because traditionally nursing as a profession emphasises **doing**, not reflecting by looking at one particular nurse named Jenny:

When we talked about Jenny's experience of analysing her work as a nurse, she acknowledged that it had been limited in the extreme. The only time she spent any time on duty discussing her work, or even reading about the various conditions suffered by the children in her care, was when it was so quiet on the ward that the other available options were reading New Idea (a popular weekly woman's magazine) or watching TV...In reality what this means is that involvement in taking time to develop your knowledge/understanding is not highly valued by Jenny, especially when compared to completing the important tasks/rituals associated with what nurses call 'patient care'. In this respect, Jenny's values reflect the values of the wider nursing culture which values doing above thinking or reflecting or analysing...

(Street 1995: 155).

Can you relate to what this nurse is saying? Have you seen evidence of this in your practice setting? Do you believe this yourself?

What this nurse has identified in her reflections is one of the taken-for-granted assumptions in nursing that is rarely acknowledged that doing is more important than thinking or reflecting. Nurses' unwillingness to engage in activities such as reflection and writing their responses reflect assumptions such as these.

Possibly some of the issues related to nurses and their practice stems from not enough reflection or thinking about what is being done and why. Jenny in the above story is not used to being a reflective practitioner. It may be that she has not been encouraged to be or that she may not even have been exposed to the ideas of critical analysis and reflective practice. If she had been, Jenny may have understood that value of writing down thoughts and impressions, of forming into words and sentences the deeper thoughts in her mind. Like Jenny, you may even get to enjoy and learn from the experience of being a reflective practitioner.

Using a Framework to Reflect

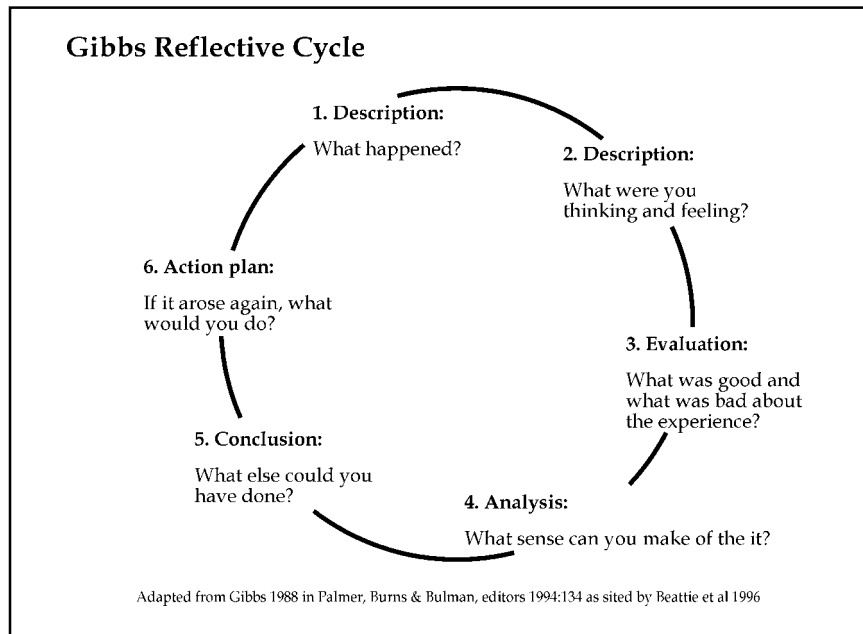
There are no set rules on the ideal way to reflect and you'll find that, with experience, you will gradually build up your own framework. It is helpful, however, to have an idea of questions you can ask yourself in order to focus your thinking on a situation, eventually incorporating not only reflections on your own actions, but ethical, political and broader social issues that develop for a given experience.

The following includes some different framework to assist you to reflect. You may feel in tune with a particular model or framework presented, or you may find a combination of these models suits you.

Read through them and try a few out

Framework for Reflection

Gibbs (1998) developed the following reflective cycle in order to provide structure for reflecting on a nursing experience or situation.



in practice. It is usually only by trying something out that we determine whether it works for us. The frameworks presented are a selection of those that practitioners have used and found helpful. There are numerous other frameworks available in the literature.

same clinical situation and compare your reflections. Did you gain any further insights from using this framework that were not apparent when using the Gibbs model?

Reflecting in a Group

Sometimes you will find it useful to reflect in a group, particularly in relation to an incident or situation that involved a number of staff. Use one of the frameworks presented here to guide your reflection, making sure that each person has the opportunity to contribute to the reflective process. This can be particularly useful in fostering collaboration and a team approach to care.

Final word

Descriptions of our practice provide a basis from which we can begin to critically reflect. Critical reflection is like any other nursing skill; it takes commitment, energy and importantly a willingness to learn. Nursing is not just about doing tasks rather it is about using informed practice (or praxis) to nurse. Utilising a framework such as Gibbs(1998) or Stephenson's(1993) can assist you to critically reflect on your practice. The pathway to become a critical reflective practitioner is one that challenges but also offers rewards, as you become more aware of how you practice and change that practice, the possibilities begin to grow before you.

It only takes one step to start, so go on, make the first move and see where your journey takes you.

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Activity 2

Applying a model for reflection

To see if Gibb's reflective cycle can help you reflect on aspects of your practice, recall a recent clinical nursing situation that you were involved in. Write your description of the situation, and then apply the rest of Gibb's model to reflect on the situation.

Did you find that using these framework in activity two helped you to reflect on your practice? Did you identify anything new in the situation or your role in it that you hadn't thought about or recognised previously? Have you learned anything about yourself or your practice that was not clear to you previously?

Another very useful framework was developed by a nursing student (Stephenson 1993 cited in Palmer, Burns and Bulman, editors, 1994) as a result of four years experience of reflecting on her practice. This framework takes a critical approach moving from personal reflection to consideration of ethical, political and social issues.

Essentially Stephenson's (1993 cited in Palmer, Burns and Bulman, editors, 1995:56-57) framework involves,

choosing a situation and then ask yourself the following questions:

- What was my role in this situation? Did I feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Why?
- What actions did I take? How did I, and others act? Was it appropriate?
- How could I have improved the situation for myself, the patient, others involved?
- What can I change in future?
- Do I feel as if I have learnt anything new about myself?
- Did I expect anything different to happen? What and why?
- Has it changed my way of thinking in any way?
- What knowledge from my theory and research can I apply in this situation?
- What broader issues, for example ethical, political or social, arise from this situation? What do I think about these broader issues?

Once again, as with previous model, try to use this framework to reflect on a clinical nursing situation you were involved in. It may be useful to use the

of the professional practitioner edited by A.M. Palmer, S. Burns and C. Bulman 1994, Blackwell Scientific Publications, London, pp 85-99.

Stephenson 1993, *In Reflective practice in nursing: the growth of the professional practitioner*, ed. A.M. Palmer, S. Burns and C. Bulman 1994, Blackwell Scientific Publications, Oxford, UK and Boston, USA.

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Image Reference:

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Cut out and Keep - Stephenson's Framework

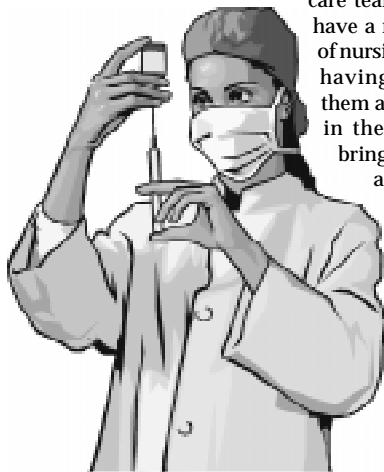
- Choose a situation and ask yourself:
- What was my role in this situation? Did I feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Why?
- What actions did I take? How did I, and other act? Was it appropriate?
- How could I have improved the situation for myself, the patient, others involved?
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- Do I feel as if I have learnt anything new about myself?
- Did I expect anything different to happen? What and why?
- Has it changed my way of thinking in any way?
- What knowledge from my theory and research can I apply in this situation?
- What broader issues, for example ethical, political or social, arise from this situation? What do I think about these broader issues?

Stephenson 1993, in Palmer, Burns and Bulman, editors, 1995:56-57.

NURSES: AT THE HEART OF HEALTH CARE

Submitted by nurses at SKMC

Have you ever wondered what nurses do? When you see a nurse at a clinic, or on a hospital ward, do you realize the value of their contribution to your health care? Abu Dhabi employs more than two thousand nurses from over fifty countries to work on wards and clinics as part of your health care team. Most of these nurses have a minimum of three years of nursing education, with many having even more. Many of them are certified as specialists in their areas. These nurses bring a wide variety of skills and abilities with them.



Nurses work in areas as diverse as medicine, surgery, dialysis, intensive care, cardiac care, paediatrics, obstetrics, operating rooms and recovery, emergency, oncology, orthopaedics, neurology and community.

Nurses provide care to their patients 24 hours a day and are an integral part of the health

care team. A nurse collaborates with other members of the health care team in developing and implementing a care plan that is derived from the best evidence based practice. Nurses provide many of the therapies that are prescribed and continuous nursing assessment provides the nurse with a clear picture of the patient's response. This knowledge is communicated to the rest of the health care team so that doctors, pharmacists and physiotherapists are kept up to date regarding a patient's condition.

Nurses strive to ensure that patients are safe and as comfortable as possible during their stay in hospital. They consider the physical, spiritual and psychological needs of the patient and the family, anticipating and addressing such needs before they occur. Often nurses are called upon to work in less than ideal conditions, with limited resources. Nurses continually share their knowledge and experiences with colleagues, patients and the public in an effort to improve health through education.

A nurse is also someone's parent, child, sibling, and friend. They care for those who are sick, in pain, dying, in need of care. They are skilled professionals that have chosen a career that asks them to set aside their own desires and do whatever needs to be done for any member of society whenever care is required.

Nurses care for you and your family from birth to death.

If you see a nurse today, take a minute to tell them how much you appreciate them.

Image courtesy of SKMC Intranet

De-Stress, Some tips

- An important step in tackling stress is to realise that it is causing you a problem. You need to make the connection between feeling tired or ill with the pressures you are faced with. Do not ignore physical warnings such as tense muscles, over-tiredness, headaches or migraines.
- If you find yourself becoming angry or upset you may find it helpful to take time out, even if its only for five minutes. Get yourself a drink of water or take a walk around the block until you feel calmer.
- If you notice you are becoming stressed, try to relax your muscles and calm yourself down by slow, deep breathing. Start by taking a deep breath, hold this for a count of three and then slowly breathe out. Continue this slow breathing until you feel more relaxed and then continue with what you were doing.

- Once you have recognised you are suffering from stress, try to identify the underlying causes. Sort the possible reasons for your stress into those with a practical solution, those that will get better anyway, given time, and those you can't do anything about. Try to let go of those in the second and third groups - there is no point in worrying about things you can't change or things that will sort themselves out.
- Once you've started to deal with the immediate causes of stress, try to review your lifestyle. Are you taking on too much? Are there things you are doing which could be handed over to someone else? Can you do things in a more leisurely way? You may need to prioritise things you are trying to achieve and reorganise your life so that you are not trying to do everything at once.
- You can help protect yourself from stress by in a number of ways. For example a healthy diet will help prevent you becoming overweight and will reduce the risks of other diet-related diseases.
- Physical exercise can be very effective in relieving stress. If you are feeling angry, for example, it can be really helpful to play a game of bitter squash in which you take out your anger on the ball (but not on the player). Even moderate physical exercise, like walking to the shops, can help.
- Sleeping problems are common when you're suffering from stress, but try to ensure you get enough rest.
- One of the best antidotes for stress is enjoying yourself so try to bring some fun into your life by giving yourself treats and rewards for positive actions, attitudes and thoughts. Even simple pleasures like a relaxing bath, a pleasant walk, or an interesting book can all help you deal with stress.
- Try to keep things in proportion and don't be too hard on yourself. After all, we all have bad days.

For more information about stress visit <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>