

# Reflective Practice in Nursing

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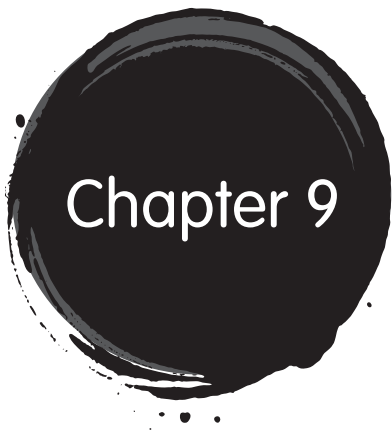
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## Chapter 9

# Reflective writing

### NMC Future Nurse: Standards of Proficiency for Registered Nurses

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This chapter will address the following platforms and proficiencies:

#### **Platform 1: Being an accountable professional**

- 1.5 Understand the demands of professional practice and demonstrate how to recognise signs of vulnerability in themselves or their colleagues and the action required to minimise risks to health.
- 1.17 Take responsibility for continuous self-reflection, seeking and responding to support and feedback to develop their professional knowledge and skills.

#### **Platform 5: Leading and managing nursing care and working in teams**

- 5.10 Contribute to supervision and team reflection activities to promote improvements in practice and services.

### Chapter aims

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After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- define writing reflectively;
- understand the principles of confidentiality and reflective writing;
- undertake personal reflective writing, such as keeping a reflective journal;
- undertake personal development planning;
- write reflectively in assignments as appropriate;
- record guided reflection.

# Introduction

This chapter explores reflective writing and includes ideas for registered nurses when writing their Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) revalidation documents. Registered nurses should view this chapter as complementary to information included on the NMC website ([www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/revalidation/completed-revalidation-forms-and-templates.pdf](http://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/revalidation/completed-revalidation-forms-and-templates.pdf)) and consider the learning activities in terms of the reflective accounts required for revalidation.

We may have an idea that reflective accounts are onerous and ‘something extra’ needing to be done. Nothing can be further from the truth if we see our reflective activities as part of a journey of discovery. There are few experiences more exciting than discovering how we think or feel about a situation, and why this is. Reflective accounts can offer us options and opportunities to experiment with creative ways of expressing ourselves (Newton and Plummer, 2009; Webster, 2009; Pavill, 2011) such as photography (Steenfeldt et al., 2019), dance (Picard, 1995; Dimonte et al., 2021), art (McAndrew and Roberts, 2015; Leyden et al., 2018) and poetry (Hunter, 2002; Coleman and Willis, 2015; Jack, 2015; Cronin and Hawthorne, 2019), with some of these authors suggesting that creative expression feeds the art of nursing, counterbalancing the science of nursing; the combination of art and science allows us to provide mindful, holistic and person-centred care.

## Activity 9.1 Reflection

### Molly Case’s creative reflection

Please watch the YouTube clip ‘Nursing the Nation’, a poem by student nurse Molly Case from the 2013 Royal College of Nursing Congress ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHue5ZQf9jY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHue5ZQf9jY))

Take some time to reflect on the poem and note what you feel are the strengths and limitations of using poetry as a medium to reflect.

*As this activity is based on your own experiences there are limited answers at the end of the chapter.*

The poem shows that writing reflectively requires depth of thinking with regard to content and how to represent your ideas coherently and effectively. Besides allowing us to consider our experiences in a different way, writing reflectively equips us with ethical and analytical skills, allowing us to benefit from our practice experiences more fully. To do this, we need to look back on significant incidents, examine associated concepts and engage with analysing them.

This chapter explores the purpose of reflective writing in relation to the NMC Standards of Proficiency (NMC, 2018a). You are introduced to different techniques and encouraged to undertake exercises that help develop this skill. You are invited to begin personal development planning related to your reflective log, and reflective writing in assignments is developed in more detail.

## Writing reflectively

Writing about your experiences helps you to make sense of them, internalise the new insights and contributes to your life-long learning. Reflection on experiences is articulated in different ways when we speak or write about them; speaking about situations is often exploratory as we put thoughts into words, whereas writing about circumstances is very powerful as we place our thoughts outside ourselves. Reading and re-reading our writing allow us to ‘objectify’ our thoughts and behaviour, and it is fascinating to experience how differently we view situations depending on our state of mind at the time. We often focus on unpleasant situations when reflecting, so reflective writing and re-reading these accounts help us view the situation retrospectively and from a less emotional position. We may feel uncomfortable about putting things in black and white because of concerns with the presentation and what an ‘invisible audience’ could think of our ideas. It is, therefore, important when we start out writing reflectively that we manage concerns about who might read it, so that we are able to be honest and authentic in our reflective evaluation and writing about our experiences. Bolton (2014) suggests that, like Alice in Wonderland, we are open to uncertainty and new experience in playful ways; in other words, *to venture outside the firmly boundaried inner self into a place of exploration* (Bolton, 2014, p11). This links with one of the ‘6 Cs’ – courage:

- to include breadth and depth of thoughts;
- commitment to explore our thoughts and ideas;
- not be afraid of what we might find out.

Starting a writing journey means writing in formative and unfinished ways, first capturing our deepest thoughts and feelings as they start to surface. Consider the following examples of reflective writing from the perspectives of student nurse (Joe) and practice supervisor (Ross), then answer the questions in Activity 9.2.

### Scenario 9.1: Joe and Ross’s confrontation

#### Student reflection example (Joe)

I’m a mental health student nurse and having difficulties with my practice supervisor, Ross. I’ve had personal issues that make me feel unwell and need time off sick. I phoned the  
(Continued)

ward and left a message for Ross. But, when I came back to work, Ross told me (in front of other staff) that it was unprofessional not to notify the ward that I wasn't coming in, and said it seemed to be becoming a habit. He said he would report this to the university.

I feel bullied and upset because, despite telling Ross that I had informed the ward, he still threatens to tell the university. This is affecting my learning as I am anxious around Ross. I spoke to the link tutor, Elaine, who arranged a meeting with Ross and me. The meeting with Elaine and Ross clarified our expectations of each other and helped me explain that I had contacted the ward and left a message. I was able to say how anxious this episode has left me feeling and that we need to plan a way forward.

After the meeting I felt more positive because Elaine had noted that messages are not always passed on, so I feel she believed me. I'm not confident that Ross will stick to the actions of the communication pathway we discussed. I'm still on edge around him and focus on doing everything perfectly. Consequently, I'm reluctant to try new things and expand my scope of practice. I would describe my relationship with Ross as 'wary collaboration', which doesn't feel like a good learning relationship. He doesn't seem to notice but I think that a practice supervisor should perceive the quality of a learning relationship.

If I were Ross I would welcome my student back, ask how he was and then take him aside to find out what had happened. This would allow us to talk in a supportive atmosphere and help us manage any emotions. I have realised that, when qualified, I would like to be supportive, nurturing and empowering. I want to discuss this with Ross at our next meeting, so have kept this reflection to return to.

### **Practice supervisor reflection example (Ross)**

I've been a practice supervisor for 6 months and am currently supporting a student, Joe, and two other students. The ward is busy, and we are short staffed and I was cross that Joe had not turned up on shift yesterday and had not notified me. Does he realise the implications for the patient and staff if he does not come on duty? He arrived back on duty today as though nothing had happened – that made me very angry. My first reaction was to ask him why he hadn't notified me. I told him that his behaviour was unprofessional and that I would report it to the university. I could see that Joe was angry, but I was busy, and angry, and wanted him to think about his behaviour before discussing it further. Since then, I have had a meeting with Joe and the university lecturer, Elaine. Joe explained that he had called and left a message with Tom – a new member of staff. I remember the ward was busy that day so Tom had probably forgotten to pass the message on. We discussed introducing a communication book on the ward.

I realise that I need to get on with things before I forget them, and that I can be impatient, but I feel guilty for not establishing the facts first. At our next meeting I want to discuss how things are going for Joe, and how I can support him. I'll ask him and the other students for feedback on my style of supporting them. I see that I have a lot to learn about communication and leadership and will discuss my own learning points with the practice assessor.

## Activity 9.2 Reflection

After reading the two examples of early reflective writing above, answer the following questions:

- What is Joe's focus for reflection?
- What is Ross's focus for reflection?
- Are any further actions planned?
- If you were either Joe or Ross, how could you add depth to the reflection?

*There are outline answers to these questions at the end of the chapter.*

Reasons for reflective writing may vary, but the result is that you feel more empowered as you take control of your own development and learning, and you can come to a more positive view of difficult situations. However, the process can be emotionally demanding in what it reveals about you as a person and perhaps about others too. There are many reasons for undertaking reflective writing. These include:

- to log and record personal and professional experience and development;
- to help make sense of emotionally charged situations;
- to record other forms of reflection, such as guided reflection;
- to identify and plan career progression;
- to provide evidence of learning;
- to fulfil assignment requirements;
- to deepen understanding;
- for your own interest.

Read Scenario 9.2 to consider what opportunity it presents for reflective writing.

### Scenario 9.2: Faheed's experience of group cultural differences

Faheed was in the first year of his learning disability nursing programme. His peer group included a range of students from different backgrounds and professional pathways. They were studying a collaborative module that required them, in groups, to develop sections of writing reflecting on professional values and then present their writing to the class for peer feedback at the development stage.

Faheed saw problems with group dynamics when they were on a break and some students complained about the task and did not see the benefit of learning with other pathway students. Faheed responded, stressing the importance of professions understanding each other and collaborating for the good of the patient. He shared a personal experience of a family member recovering from serious injury with the help of different professions working together. The group began to see the relevance of the learning activity and returned to the task with more enthusiasm.

### Activity 9.3 Reflection

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- What learning might Faheed take from this situation?
- How might Faheed compose his patch text about different professions working together?

*There is an outline answer to these questions at the end of the chapter.*

Group dynamics can be a strength or a weakness in terms of personal development and Ehrmann (2005) identifies that disruptive and aggressive behaviours arise from power struggles and a sense of competitiveness. This behaviour may result in a failure to control 'self' in practice, which has implications for patients and staff. Team relationships in any situation are always influenced by the personalities, psychological states and cultures of the people involved. Xu and Davidhizar (2005) suggest that there are cultural differences in communication patterns that can lead to misinterpretations and breakdowns; Western and European culture follows an individualistic pattern, whereas Eastern and African cultures favour group patterns. Group dynamics can leave students feeling disempowered and reluctant to share their ideas and needs for fear of discrimination (Dalton, 2005). When faced by a dominant group in the classroom, it could feel challenging to have your voice heard and, if others' responses are not encouraging, it is easy to become discouraged and silenced.

Numerous authors (Freshwater, 2000; Farrell, 2001; Hutchinson et al., 2006) discuss the phenomenon of workplace **bullying** and **horizontal violence**. Although it is not the intention to focus on less positive experiences of study and work, the scenarios of Joe and Ross, and Faheed, do have the ring of bullying and victimisation. It is, then, wise to pause to consider the implications of this behaviour within a group as this could form part of your reflections and reflective writing as you progress through your career.

### Activity 9.4 Reflection

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Please read the articles by Freshwater (2000), Farrell (2001) and Hutchinson et al. (2006) and then consider the ideas you had concerning Activities 9.2 and 9.3. Perhaps you could jot down a few thoughts on the following points:

- How do you view Scenarios 9.2 and 9.3 after reading these articles?
- Have your view and interpretation of the scenario changed through reading the three papers? If so, please jot down how your perception has changed, and whether you would offer different insights and advice when asked to comment.



- Do any of the issues raised in the articles resonate with your experiences in either the university or the practice setting? If so, how did you address the issues when they arose, and could you address the situation differently after reading these articles?

*This activity is based on your reading the suggested articles. The full references can be found at the end of the chapter. As this is your own reflection, there is no outline answer.*

Wherever we work, we will always need to adapt to people from different cultures for us to communicate effectively. We should be mindful that, when talking about cultures, we do not always refer to ethnicity, language, religion, etc., but should also be aware that profession, gender, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, geographical location, etc. are all elements of culture that could result in different ideas and behaviour. Part of our professional duty is to bridge these divides and develop learning opportunities. Curiosity and reflection about difference, commonality and inclusion are core concepts in interpersonal communication, respect and acceptance – accepting and respecting ‘the other’ means first accepting and respecting ‘self’. We can develop in this area by continued reflection on what is happening, potential reasons why, and considering alternatives. Writing reflectively helps us deal with these situations and with the implementation of ideas, and is a powerful way of gaining **empowerment**. However, as our experiences inevitably involve others, it is important, within our reflective writing, to recognise personal responsibility and accountability to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. We consider this in more detail in the next section.

## The principles of confidentiality in reflective writing

Confidentiality is a key ethical issue in professional practice in terms of what is written and discussed (NMC, 2018a). Patient confidentiality is prioritised, but corporate confidentiality is not always considered. The Caldicott Committee recommended that all items of information relating to an individual should be treated as potentially capable of identifying them and be appropriately protected to safeguard confidentiality (Department of Health, 1997). Confidentiality means keeping information private. Corporate confidentiality means that institutions and organisations are also entitled to have their business kept private. This may be achieved by using a pseudonym and removal of any identifiers of the issues being written about. It is important when using someone else’s information (such as a patient’s case) to gain their consent for its use.

Some authors raise concerns about the morality of using interpreted information about someone as a learning resource (Hargreaves, 1997; Dawber, 2012; McCarthy et al., 2016). This applies to information about clients, or others, when writing reflectively,

and creates a professional conduct issue and an ethical dilemma. One method is to 'bracket' identifiers and focus on the core issues; removing all descriptors that cause distraction allows foundation issues to emerge and be analysed. In Chapter 4, John's (2013) framework offers an alternative by examining background philosophy, theory and problem presentation, and the interpretation of reality, role and self-awareness through questioning, eliminating the need for descriptors. Background philosophy relates to which values and beliefs may be present in assumptions made about the problem, whereas theory is about the frameworks that surround our thinking about the problem. These are both used in how we present a problem and how we interpret our reality of the problem. Questioning our own role reflectively and developing self-awareness in relation to the problem is necessary, and this might be a useful model to try.

### Activity 9.5 Reflection

Revisit John's (2013) Model for Structured Reflection that we discussed in Chapter 4 and, using his questions of philosophy, theory, problem presentation, interpretation of reality, role and self-awareness, write a reflective account of the episode relating to your practice that you identified in Activity 9.4.

*As this activity relates to your practice, there is no outline answer at the end of the chapter.*

Please be mindful that when using student and client knowledge we need to be ethically considerate and sensitive, focusing on issues in an evaluative and analytical manner, and examining personal parameters of our responsibility. This applies not only to reflections on clinical experiences, but also classroom discussions, group work or any other joint activity. We need to consider this when writing reflectively, regardless of whether your writing will be seen by others. It is advisable not to focus on others in your reflections because they are not present to argue their case, or discuss issues with you in person; it is better to focus on issues, rather than people, and how an issue affected *you* and how *you* addressed it. This means that others' confidentiality is assured and that your and their professional roles are ethically protected (Brockbank and McGill, 2007).

Read Scenario 9.3 and answer the questions in Activity 9.6, to help you think of how you might approach these issues.

### Scenario 9.3: Mia's reflection on collaborative learning

Mia, a registered nurse who had trained overseas, works in a renal unit where two third-year nurses, Josh and Ray, are placed. Mia had started an academic development course, which included how to search for information and complete academic assignments before

registering for a practice supervisor/practice assessor programme. She had completed formative work reflecting on what she had learned on the programme so far, but the feedback from her tutor indicated that her failure was because she had not maintained confidentiality or reflected adequately. Mia was confused and worried about **losing face** with her tutor; she was having difficulty grasping the principles of reflection (something she was not used to because she had completed an exam-based course for her basic nursing education). In the formative work she had described her learning and what she wanted to do, identifying the type of unit she worked in, the trust and where she was studying, but she had not named any of the patients.

Mia approached Josh to explain how he reflected so that she could understand where she was going wrong. He asked Mia to think back on how she felt when she started in the trust and how she felt about it now. As she described how she felt from different time perspectives, Josh asked her various questions, which he wrote down with her answers. At the end he asked Mia to read back what he had recorded from their dialogue. Mia was amazed at how Josh had captured her experience in a few words, but also how the questions had made her think differently about things. She decided to write about this process that evening and asked Josh for feedback on it the next day.

Mia rewrote the piece of dialogue by including how she felt her knowledge had changed and how building relationships with people had made things easier. She was careful not to include Josh's name, but to focus on the issue of developing knowledge through working and learning collaboratively with students. Mia included some critical points on how her arrival could have been facilitated better.

After reading her account, Josh made a few comments and identified a book that Mia might find helpful to inform her thinking about reflection. Mia felt more affirmed through this experience.

## Activity 9.6 Reflection

- In Scenario 9.3, how did Mia breach confidentiality within her formative piece of writing?
- What might be the consequences for her and what might be the consequences for Josh if he breached confidentiality in a similar way in his written work?

*There are outline answers to these questions at the end of the chapter.*

Collaborative learning between qualified staff and students is a valuable process. This is especially useful when considering issues of ethics and confidentiality; these help the student understand the parameters of accountability and why practice supervisors might see situations differently. Leaving out all descriptors could result in losing the situational context, so realistic description with patient or colleague

consent might be a more reliable, and ethical, option. Remember to include that you have obtained patient or colleague consent in your reflective account; it is unusual and difficult to obtain corporate consent, which means that any identifiable markers relating to the healthcare provider or educational institution need to be removed. Also, even with patient or colleague consent, you need to anonymise anyone you include in your work.

We now consider personal reflective writing as a part of this process.

## Personal reflective writing

Reflection in nursing has a dual function: supporting learning and supporting the individual. It requires confidence and courage to acknowledge limitations and deficits, and a degree of insight to admit these to ourselves. According to Bolton (2014, p116) and Mahon and O'Neill (2020), 'through the mirror' (this relates to the *Alice in Wonderland* analogy in the Writing reflectively section earlier in this chapter) writing can facilitate deeper learning through:

- gaining perspective;
- giving confidential and relatively safe access;
- releasing power to take more responsibility for actions;
- using narrative to offer accurate observation, metaphor and critique.

From a 'through the mirror' perspective, writing is always evolving and may generate unexpected ideas. For example, when thinking about what caring means to you, you might remember when you were last ill and how wretched and unwell you felt. You might *feel* the rumpled sheets and the resulting discomfort, the clamminess of the temperature and how lonely you felt because everyone was involved in their own lives. This might stimulate you to revise your ideas around caring and think about what it means to you from a more personal perspective.

Returning to the theme of using art forms, as introduced in Activity 9.1, a medium such as poetry could increase fluidity of expression and help deal with difficult emotions by creating **cathartic** expression through the writing. Some people find it helpful to create a collage of pictures, cut out from magazines, that symbolise their ideas and/or feelings and then, once these have been visually portrayed, to write about the issue on which they need to focus. Other people use photography, painting, dance and movement to express their ideas and emotions and, in doing this, make their abstract thoughts more tangible before writing them down (McCarthy et al., 2016). Writing in this way can be exciting and empowering; you can develop different ways of formulating your ideas to make sense of your personal experience and, in doing so, gain control of the emotions and the issues focused on in the reflection.

Richardson (1997) and Coleman and Willis (2015) invite the reflective writer to find new forms of expression. Empowering ourselves requires coming to know ourselves as being more than a professional identity (think of the personal biography that we explored in Chapter 3). It is in knowing ourselves that we can come to know our ‘becoming’ as well (Chan and Schwind, 2006). Poetic expression can express a unique part of who we are and does not necessarily need to follow rules. Rather, it provides opportunities for the playfulness described earlier in this chapter by Bolton (2014) as an essential part of *going through the mirror*, rather than becoming fixated with its surface. Poetry may not be something with which you feel comfortable, and it is not essential to use this form of expression; but experiment with it and you may surprise yourself. Remember, no one needs to see your writing. An example of poetry follows.

*What do you see when you look at me?*

*A caring nurse or a man alone;*

*What do you see when you look at me?*

*A capable helper or someone losing his home;*

*What do you see when you look at me?*

*Someone missing class or trying to phone;*

*What do you see when you look at me?*

*See the person, see the problem, see ME.*

*(Anonymous)*

This could have been how Joe might have started writing about his frustration in the student reflection earlier. The next activity offers you an opportunity to express yourself differently.

### Activity 9.7 Reflection

Think of something relating to your personal development that is very significant to you. Spend a little time reflecting on the situation or issue. Now try to write a reflection about it using one (or more) of the creative suggestions suggested earlier in the chapter. Reread this and consider what response and insights this form of expression elicits.

*As this activity is based on your personal experiences, there is an outline answer to only part of this activity at the end of the chapter.*

Personal writing may never be seen by another person because it is a form of a diary that records your deepest impressions and considerations about what you are thinking and doing. This differs marginally from a reflective journal, which we consider next.

# The reflective journal

Although reflective writing can be cathartic and **catalytic**, helping you let go of your emotions and achieve deep exploration (Driscoll, 2007), there also needs to be reflection on how your role develops as healthcare progresses and you develop professionally throughout your career. Logging reflective entries within a reflective journal helps keep track of what you are learning and your practice experiences, including those encountered during your preparation programme. In addition, consistent writing helps you to consider assessment, feedback and practice in terms of your whole experience and can, therefore, be a powerful way to integrate theory and practice. This approach, often introduced as part of the nursing programme, is imperative to professional life-long learning and is used in maintaining a professional portfolio and revalidation as a registered nurse (NMC, 2019).

## Example of a reflective log entry

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### **Self-assessing experience**

I took on teaching a course that was new to me, and the first session had gone well. However, by the third session the students were confused by the advice I was giving them. I checked with the module leader regarding the assignment, but I found their explanation as vague as the written guidelines. Several students emailed the module leader directly and I was copied into the replies, which gave some clarity. At the next session I was able to provide concrete examples of what they might want to write about. Ultimately, my teaching of this aspect of the module was badly evaluated, which was disappointing.

### **Main points identified from reflection on the experience**

- When I agreed to teach on the module, I was not proactive and didn't ensure that I understood what the learning outcomes for the module were and how the assessment related to the outcomes.
- I did not communicate my understanding clearly to the module leader when I asked for advice on the guidelines. I should have asked for further clarification.
- I did not tell the students at the start that this was the first time I was teaching the module. I should have done this because, in hindsight, we could have worked better together to clarify the guidelines with the module leader. Using the knowledge of other, experienced tutors of the module would also have been helpful.

### **Learning points**

- I need to be prepared to ask for help from both colleagues and students, to work together.
- I need to be open to identifying alternative strategies, which could aid learning.

- I need to acknowledge to myself and the other person that I do not understand the information being given.

### **How will this learning be applied in the future?**

- I will ensure that I have a good understanding of what the module entails and how the assessment relates to the learning outcomes.
- I will address my feelings associated with asking for help and further explanation.
- I will tell students if I am new to teaching a module and work with them in less formal ways.

As indicated earlier, a registered nurse is also expected to keep a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate learning for the NMC. A reflective journal is a good starting point to demonstrate what and how you are learning. How you interact with different people is also important, because nursing is about communicating with a variety of different people. Group dynamics are often key to learning and need to be given early attention (Jacques, 2000). Activity 9.8 will help you get started with logging such experiences.

## **Activity 9.8 Reflection**

Think of a recent experience (this could be from within the university or from practice). Now write about the following using one of the models discussed in Chapter 4:

- Describe the experience.
- What essential factors contributed to this experience and are there significant features?
- When you have kept your journal for a week or so, revisit it and consider the following:
- What are the themes emerging from the journal entries?
- What sense do you make of this and using what evidence?

*As this activity is based on your personal experiences, there is an outline answer to only part of this activity at the end of the chapter.*

It is human to want to blame someone else if things do not go according to plan, or if we feel embarrassed by our mistake or oversight. Expressing dissatisfaction with others is known as a form of ‘othering’ that can remove personal responsibility and accountability to address the situation. It is important, as a professional, to identify and acknowledge when this happens. If you find yourself starting to use ‘othering’, there is an option, through reflection, consciously to reject this path (Freshwater, 2000). In this case, reflection and open dialogue are vital, but can be confronting if we are less confident. Writing in the privacy of your reflective journal about your options to deal with the situation is a good starting point for taking proactive action, rather than

leaving things to drift and relationships to suffer. The reflective journal is a useful tool for evaluating your strengths, weaknesses, interests and areas for development through reviewing difficult issues and the emerging themes, as discussed at the start of this section. These journal entries can inform your personal development planning and are discussed next.

## Personal development planning

Scanlan and Chernomas (1997) discussed how reflection creates vulnerability in terms of exposing thinking and practice to criticism, and self-concept to realignment. This is supported by Padykula (2017) and Ruyak et al. (2017), who suggest that reflection and self-awareness take courage, commitment, cognitive insight and emotional resilience. Planning involves reflecting on strengths and areas for improvement, and the interplay between the past and the future, to inform and shape implementation strategies, and translate them into actions. We perhaps need to refocus at this point by reminding ourselves that reflection is a learning strategy, leading to personal and/or professional development. As such, the action that results from such processes requires courage and commitment to try something new, acknowledge the possibility of being wrong, but still recognise the learning gain. This means making use of past learning experiences to interpret present practice and knowledge when writing reflectively, and for personal development planning, projecting outcomes and perhaps further learning into the future. This is an important point to consider when thinking about your learning contracts and whether they are product-, rather than process-, focused.

A product-focused plan may be dictated by time constraints but may not achieve the ongoing learning process, raising questions of accountability for both practice supervisors and learners. In this regard, feedback is an important component of reviewing progress, in that it provides evaluative information that can be reflected on and incorporated into planning future action and learning. It is important to have thought through what you are attempting to achieve, and your potential commitment, to ensure that you can deliver consistently and equitably on the activities. Table 9.1 gives some headings that you might consider as part of your personal development planning.

As illustrated in Table 9.1, it is important to identify learning objectives that you want to achieve from a situation and ensure that you understand what is expected of you. It is equally important that you articulate your expectations when going into practice, or when being asked to complete independent study. This is helpful for you because it means that: (1) you have clarity in terms of expectations; (2) it is beneficial for your practice or academic supervisor because they are clear as to your level of understanding; and (3) most importantly, you are taking control of your learning by being proactive. Activity 9.9 offers an opportunity to think reflectively about these issues.



Table 9.1 Headings to organise your personal development

What are my learning and development needs?	What do I want to gain from this development?	What support do I need and from whom?	Evaluation/ review
<p><b>Practitioner:</b> I need to learn more about how to build positive learning relationships</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Be able to support a range of students by creating a positive learning environment</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Organise an experienced practice supervisor who will support and advise me in developing a positive learning environment</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Evaluate whether the student is settled in the clinical environment and whether they feel comfortable and safe on the placement</li> </ol>
<p>Learning objective: By week 10 of supporting a student on placement, I am able to:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Develop awareness of and understand which factors influence my student's learning</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Organise an experienced practice supervisor such as a practice assessor to support and advise me in the assessment process</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Review the student's progress every 3 weeks and establish whether they have sufficient opportunity to achieve their learning objectives</li> </ol>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate understanding factors influencing how students integrate into, and learn from, practice settings</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Develop a plan of action to help the student adapt to a new placement</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Discuss which skills the student has achieved in previous placements and what they need to achieve in this placement</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Ask the student for specific feedback on my practice supervisor style</li> </ol>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide constructive support to allow student transition from one learning environment to another</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Be confident that I have supported the student to develop professional and interprofessional relationships</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Discuss how the student learns and what they expect from my practice supervision</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Final student placement evaluation</li> </ol>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have working relationships to support learning for the entry to register</li> </ul>			

(Continued)

Table 9.1 (Continued)

What are my learning and development needs?	What do I want to gain from this development?	What support do I need and from whom?	Evaluation/review
<p><b>Student:</b> I need to learn more about drug administration</p> <p>Learning objective:</p> <p>By week 10 of my placement, I am able to explain and administer six medications in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action</li> <li>• Effect/indication</li> <li>• Route</li> <li>• Dose</li> <li>• Common side effects (in relation to a patient)</li> <li>• Risks (in relation to a patient)</li> <li>• Drug calculation (in relation to a patient)</li> <li>• Correct management, administration and storage of the medication</li> <li>• Safe administration (in relation to an identified individual patient with specification of the route used)</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To be more proficient and have greater knowledge of different drug groups</li> <li>2. To be aware of, and recognise, risks and side effects of the medications I administer</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My practice supervisor to give me opportunity to practice</li> <li>2. Access to formulary books</li> <li>3. Create opportunities to discuss the medications I see in practice, with my practice supervisor, in relation to actual patients</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review progress with my practice supervisor at the second and third meeting dates</li> <li>2. Evaluate with my practice supervisor whether I have achieved the learning objectives set at the start of the placement</li> <li>3. Set learning objectives for my next placement that allow me to develop my skills and knowledge</li> </ol>

## Activity 9.9 Critical thinking

Think about your next placement, or next year, if appropriate. If you are an experienced practitioner, think about your next appraisal. Now consider the following questions:

- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- How do you know this (are there aspects that make you feel uncertain)?
- What are you planning to do about this?
- What, from reflection, do you need to take forward (what opportunities will this offer)?

Now write a reflective account to draw these strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) into a whole as evidence for your portfolio.

*As this activity is based on your personal experiences, there is an outline answer to only part of this activity at the end of the chapter.*

Personal development planning is a way to develop agency in, and take control of, your learning and ensure that it is linked to your needs. This principle continues throughout your career and often a personal learning plan forms the basis of annual appraisal meetings. For registered healthcare professionals, it is incorporated into professional validation and triennial reviews.

Providing evidence of your personal development requires you to write about it within formal assignments, whether as a preregistration learner or an experienced practitioner undertaking further study. This leads us to consider reflective writing in assignments.

## Reflective writing in assignments

When discussing reflective writing it is worth considering an interesting point made by Hargreaves (2004, p200). She suggests that we generally produce three types of reflective narrative:

- *valedictory*: where we save a 'bad situation' and come out victorious at the end;
- *condemnatory*: where a situation goes wrong and we cannot resolve it, and emerge feeling dissatisfied and, possibly, guilty;
- *redemptive*: where we respond inappropriately to a situation, but then redeem ourselves, suggesting that we have improved our practice.

These three narrative types may develop unconsciously, and it is worth trying to recognise whether you favour a particular approach as we discuss reflective writing in assignments.

Nursing's voice is situated in practice and practitioners 'know nursing' as insiders. When including reflective accounts in academic work, we sometimes do not include threatening or contentious experiences or oversimplify into more acceptable versions to meet course requirements, rather than using the opportunity to make sense of the experience. For example, we might not write about mistakes or less positive placement experiences for fear of being penalised. In this respect we need to remain mindful that there is an ethical tension if unsafe or unprofessional practice situations are included in reflective accounts because academic staff are also professionally bound to escalate concerns while balancing confidentiality with the duty of care to the learner. There is normally an escalation policy that is clear to all parties, with well-defined outcomes for the process. Within this, academic and practice responsibility is shared to enable learning and build your self-confidence. Clearly, this can happen only in an open and trusting environment that calls for clear intercollegiate communication and sound professional values from all parties concerned. This shared responsibility to maintain professional values is strengthened by the understanding practitioners have of the process and cyclical nature of healthcare, the contextual decision making and educational practice making this 'inside knowledge' easier to articulate. The complementary, academic, voice in nursing sometimes feels less straightforward, requiring intellectual effort to negotiate different viewpoints, parameters and theoretical models, but the combination represents the professional voice of nursing.

Reflection, as already discussed, is a valuable tool to learning and teaching, but must be purposeful and carefully integrated within curricula to achieve relevant and credible learning. Marking and, therefore, producing reflective writing in assignments are focused on the breadth and depth of the reflective content. This follows a continuum of whether written reflections are perceptive and significant with convincing conclusions, or whether they are superficial and lack relevance. Developing our reflective writing means moving beyond a description of reflection and the immediate context of the situation to offering perceptive insights and that includes subtle thought and originality. This can be achieved by:

- considering what theoretical concepts are active in the situation;
- any unique features that the situation is demonstrating;
- what your view is, based on experience and reflection – give examples;
- keeping the focus on *your* practice and not generalising to some abstract generic view.

Below is a brief example of a paragraph that might be part of reflective writing in assignments.

### Example of reflective writing in assignments

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The long-term conditions module is making me consider how I approach and think about people with long-term and often complex illnesses. I realise that I'm often

focused on the tasks within the context of providing their specific care and forget about the patient's experience and expertise. It's easy to get caught up in problem solving and leave them out. I find that I don't include the patient in the decision making because I don't want to give them the impression that I'm uncertain or lack knowledge and skill in a particular area. I try to integrate the theory I've learned in my practice, but I'm aware that trying to think theoretically separates me from subjective and intuitive elements. I'm afraid that my care can become objectified rather than me responding to the person. I know that I need to communicate my decision making to the patient so that they are included and can offer their insights and expert experience from living with their condition and, consequently, be part of the solution. I will revisit person-centred care, shared decision making and partnership literature, and make a conscious effort to include patients in my assessment and decision making. I will discuss my plan of action with my practice supervisor and ask that they observe me with patients and provide me with specific feedback.

It can be helpful to analyse reflection more deeply through guided reflection, as discussed in Chapter 8. When you are involved in guided reflection it is important to record the learning that this generates, to ensure that it is captured. We now consider how this is another form of reflective writing.

## Recording guided reflection

Guided reflection can help address some of the ethical issues identified earlier around student vulnerability. This is achieved by using a partnership approach between student and practice/academic supervisor, to set clear outcomes for the issue and provide support during the process. The issue of a reconstructed past remains challenging, although careful questioning of and attentive listening to yourself, as well as questioning and active listening by the reflective guide, may facilitate this. You may find it helpful to use the template (based on the one provided in Chapter 1) to record guided reflection.

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### **Pro forma for documenting guided reflection**

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Practice-based experience:

Main points identified from reflection on the experience:

Main points identified from guided exploration of the experience:

Learning points:

How will this learning be applied in practice?

Professional development achieved?

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## Chapter summary

Reflection often dissolves in the reality of everyday work and life. Holism is achieved by embedding a continuous cycle of experimentation and review through reflective writing. Reflection is an art that requires insight and self-awareness, and it will take longer than the time allocated for a programme to develop fully because it is an aspect of professional life-long learning. Writing is one way to start embedding the process. The activities in this chapter have provided different opportunities to expand your writing and develop different techniques that could generate further reflective insights.

## Brief outline answers

### Activity 9.1 Reflection

Reflecting on Molly Case's poem 'Nursing the Nation', you may have responded in different ways. For example:

- Emotional: the content of Molly Case's poem may have resonated strongly with your own experiences or, perhaps, you were struck by the power of the words and their intonation.
- Sad: the poem's content may have conjured up memories of working in extreme conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic and the contradiction of your work as a nurse with laconic public and political attitudes.
- Irritated: perhaps you found the presentation of the poem altogether too melodramatic and patronising.

The important part of this exercise is to reflect on your reaction to the poem and try to analyse what triggered your response and why you responded as you did. What does this say about you? Do you recognise your response to service users and carers or colleagues and peers? Does your response impact positively/negatively on your care and/or collegiality?

### Activity 9.2 Reflection

Joe focuses on emotions and the impact on his learning. He has thought of what Ross could do differently and how he might respond if he were a practice supervisor.

Ross considers his and Joe's feelings. He has considered how his actions contributed to the current situation and what he can do about it.

Joe and Ross have considered a communication book, but neither has reflected on addressing the emotional aspects. Further analysis could add depth to the reflection and include how the actions and influence of others and events could influence future behaviour.

Things that you may have thought about in terms of how Joe and Ross could develop their reflection further include:

- Joe could explore why he feels bullied and victimised by the situation. Where does this come from (his biography)? What risks are involved in maintaining this behaviour? Could this (rather than Ross) be limiting his development on the ward? Does he understand how the lack of communication could be seen as unprofessional and what it means for the organisation and operationalisation of care? Which learning objectives could Joe formulate

to overcome this feeling? How could Joe apply feedback guidelines to the situation? What would be the aim of a meeting with Ross?

- Ross could reflect on several issues; for example, his strategies for coping with stress and how he sets his boundaries. Why did he accept responsibility for three students and team leadership when he has little experience? Another area could be his impatience and his perfectionism. A third area might be his communication strategy as practice supervisor and role model – issues about emotional intelligence and power could inform his reflection in this area.

### Activity 9.3 Reflection

- Faheed might sense tensions within the group and who the leaders of the group are. He might recognise with whom he should discuss the group dynamics to achieve the best outcome. This could indicate his leadership potential.
- Faheed might have learned about his communication and assertiveness skills by how his interaction had inspired the group. This could increase his confidence.
- He might have identified how to minimise barriers between different professions. Faheed's story might have said something like:
  - My uncle was injured in an accident. He was ventilated for 4 days in intensive care and then transferred to a ward. He was discharged 3 weeks later but needed help at home for another 2 weeks. The professionals involved in his recovery included doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and community nurses. I saw the different professions working closely together in the intensive care unit, each demonstrating their expertise. The professionals consulted each other on an equal level as they worked within their own professional boundaries.
  - On the ward there was less joined-up communication, and different professions worked independently. I reflected on this. Intensive care focuses on acute detail and the professionals contribute to understanding the case. On the ward, patients may be at different stages of recovery and have diverse needs. The opportunities to collaborate and interact can be disjointed, resulting in a task-based approach, so it can be difficult to construct a picture of each profession's contribution to holistic care. Through this experience I recognise that physiotherapists help with physical mobility rehabilitation and are vital in preventing chest infections by clearing the chest of secretions. Occupational therapists ensure that people are ready to manage independently at home. Doctors and nurses' roles overlap in that the doctors prescribe treatment based on nurses' observations. I think that interprofessional collaboration is based on professionals recognising each other's strengths and expertise and avoiding power issues.

### Activity 9.4 Reflection

The articles required for this activity are:

- **Farrell, G** (2001) From Tall Poppies to Squashed Weeds. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 35: 26–33.
- **Freshwater, D** (2000) Crosscurrents Against Cultural Narration in Nursing. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 32(2): 481–484.
- **Hutchinson, M, Vickers, M, Jackson, D and Wilkes, L** (2006) Workplace Bullying in Nursing: Towards a More Critical Organisational Perspective. *Nursing Inquiry*, 13(2): 118–126.

### Activity 9.6 Reflection

Mia broke corporate confidentiality by naming the healthcare **trust** she worked in and the institution where she was studying. This meant that her work could, potentially, identify where any situation she was talking about was located. Some people call this the 'on the bus test'. If she left the work in a public place by mistake, are there sufficient identifiers to locate where situations

are happening? In terms of the consequences of breaching confidentiality, for Mia these would be greater (although these still depend on the seriousness of the breach), because she is a registered nurse and therefore accountable for her actions. The consequences for Josh, as a student, if he had followed the same actions as Mia, are less serious (although these still depend on the seriousness of the breach), because he has a responsibility for maintaining confidentiality, but is not yet a registered accountable practitioner. The best option is to leave any identifiers out of any account.

### Activity 9.7 Reflection

Although the content and structure of your reflection are likely to be unique to you, there are some common rules you may have followed. You may have plotted the reflective story as a sequence of scenes. Or perhaps you have chosen specific music, if using dance. If using poetry, you may have considered whether to use a chorus or rhyming mechanism to emphasise particular points. All of these considerations are important. When writing creatively, it is important to take a few things into account:

- Use a quiet, comfortable location, free from distraction and where you feel safe to write without anxiety that you may be interrupted or questioned.
- Organise your thoughts, ideas and/or emotions. It may help you to organise your thoughts by constructing a mind map that expresses your ideas (Figure 9.1).
- Read your work, slowly and aloud. Then edit it to include extra or different punctuation, change terminology or language, possibly change the style from a passive to an active sentence construction, establish whether it should be in the present, past or future tense, etc.
- Leave your work to rest for a few days and then reread it in the same way again and decide what (if anything) needs changing. You will know when it is ready.

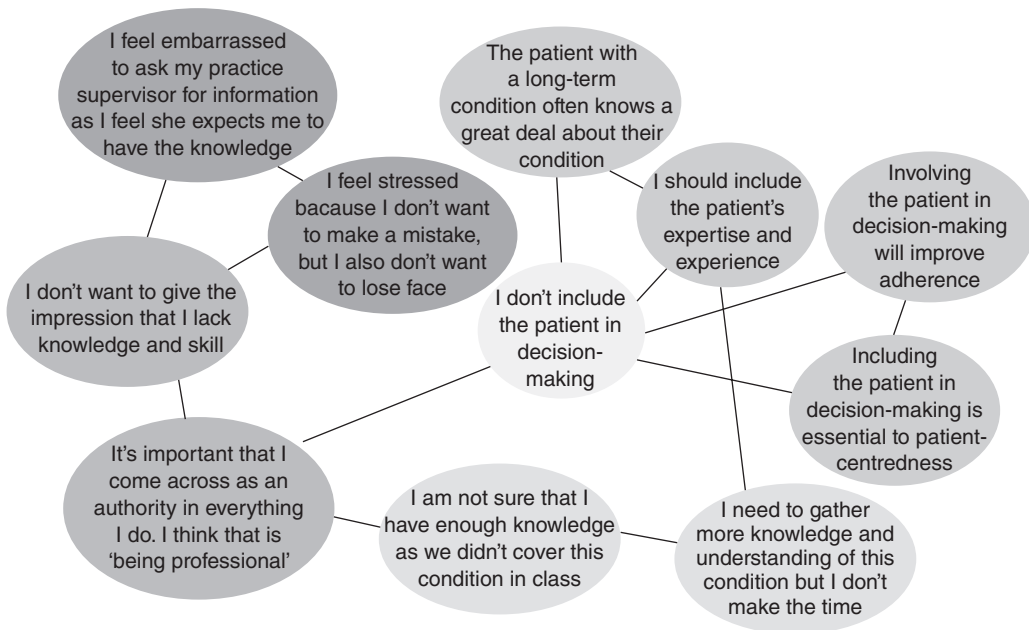


Figure 9.1 Mind map example to organise your thoughts and ideas.



## Activity 9.8 Reflection

The themes you identified may have been concerned with communication skills, decision making and relationships with service users, carers, peers, practice colleagues, clients or lecturers.

## Activity 9.9 Critical thinking

You might identify strengths in relation to particular skills and others that you want to improve. Possibly confidence or assertiveness have featured as an area for improvement – you may know this from previous feedback and your own reflections. Or perhaps you need more knowledge or practical skills. As a registered nurse this might involve a study day or training, which you need to request from your line manager. These insights should inform your learning contract; you will find that your reflection after planning your personal development is likely to be more positive because you will have developed some agency and taken control of your learning and development. (For a discussion on agency, return to Chapter 3.)

## Further reading

**Bolton, G and Delderfield, R** (2018) *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*, 5th edn. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

An in-depth guide to reflective writing, which is beyond the scope of this chapter.

**Mahon, P and O'Neill, M** (2020) Through the Looking Glass: The Rabbit Hole of Reflective Practice. *British Journal of Nursing*, 29(13): 777–783.

This is an interesting and critical discussion of reflection.

**Price, B** (2021) *Critical Thinking and Writing for Nursing Students*, 5th edn. London: SAGE.

This book provides a good explanation and examples of how to write reflective essays applying critical thinking skills that map to the NMC's *Future Nurse: Standards of Proficiency for Registered Nurses* (NMC, 2018a).