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## Reflections on reflection: An audit of students' use of structured models within specific assessments.

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### Abstract

This paper presents the results of an audit aimed to ascertain the extent to which using a structured model of reflection improved the quality of students' reflective assignments. An eight item anonymous audit tool was used to collect data from 221 student assessments. Findings reveal that student performance is directly related to use of structured model of reflection. The majority of students who did not utilise a structured model, to support their reflections (89% n=85), scored less than 65%, most of these scored less than 60% (68% n=68). Moreover most students who did not achieve a pass mark, did not use a model as a guide (69% n=11). Nursing students' performance at the assessment was enhanced by structured model use. Their inclusion of a reflective component within their essay appeared to improve not only their reflective skills, but enhanced higher levels of learning. While many students performed very well without a structured approach, overall students ought to be encouraged to incorporate a clear structure of reflection and engage in all phases of the cycle.

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### 1. Introduction

Reflection is cited as a useful and valuable tool for professional development in nursing (Taylor, 2006; Rolfe, 2005) and is also utilised widely as a teaching and learning methodology for nursing students. The importance of reflection as a means of developing student learning is evidenced by the bulk of literature on this topic (McMullan et al, 2003). Although internationally reflection is an accepted feature in nursing education and practice, students often struggle with this particular concept, and the extent to which students benefit from reflection in terms of academic achievement or professional development is not clear. At the same time students often express negative attitudes and apathy towards the use of models of reflection (Facebook, 2009; Langen, & Prendergast, 2007). Additionally, there are also teacher concerns about the adequacy of the teaching of reflection to nursing students and the extent to which students are prepared for the reflective process (Braine, 2009). These concerns are not unfounded, as one recent study found only superficial use of the model by students in their portfolios (Timmins & Dunne, 2009).

Students completing one taught module combine their learning of communication and clinical skills and are assessed through an essay outlining their reflection on their performance of a clinical skill. Learning outcomes for this module required that students demonstrate skills of reflection and self awareness, and to foster these skills the use of a structured model of reflection is encouraged but not an absolute requirement. Anecdotally, concern was expressed that use of reflection within the assessment was suboptimal by some students, with resultant negative

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effect on performance. In order to improve students overall performance at the assessment, three hours of explicit teaching of reflection was introduced to the module content with a specific focus on Gibbs (1988) model of reflection. Gibbs (1988) model of reflection is widely used for educational purposes (Rolfe et al., 2001; O'Donovan, 2006).

Following the introduction of these three hours structured teaching, it was decided to examine the extent to which students subsequently incorporated reflection into their writing for the related assessment and the effectiveness of this.

## **2. Materials and methods**

This audit aimed to ascertain the extent to which using a structured model of reflection improved the quality of their reflective assignments and the effect of this on their overall performance. The audit examined nursing students' essays (n=221), representing 97% of all students in this cohort, using an eight item anonymous audit tool to collect data.

## **3. Results**

Just over half of the students (n=118) attempted to include a framework for reflection within their essay, and most of these used Gibb's (1988) Model (n=112). Most students who used the model used it in its entirety (72%) and a further 20% used the majority of the required structure. Although use of a structured model of reflection was not an absolute requirement of the assignment, those who used the model structure scored higher on overall marks for the module (p=0.000). The mean score for the assignment was 60%. The minimum score was 40% and the maximum was 85%. Most students (97%) passed this module at first attempt. Of those students who did either did not achieve a pass mark, or achieved a borderline pass, the majority of these did not use a model as a guide (69% n=11). Most of those students who did not utilise a structured model to support their reflections (89% n=85) scored less than 65%. Sixty eight percent of these students scored less than 60% (n=68).

Marks awarded were also associated with levels of learning demonstrated (p=0.000). Students in the higher bands were more likely to demonstrate knowledge, application, comprehension, synthesis and analysis. Furthermore, those who used a model were more likely to demonstrate higher levels of learning (comprehension, synthesis and analysis) (p=0.000). The majority of students (81% n= 13) who demonstrated skills of evaluation had engaged in the cycle of reflection (p=0.000). Higher levels of learning were also associated with deeper levels of reflection and closing the loop (demonstrated by completing the cycle).

## **4. Discussion**

While students are often expected to prepare sometimes multiple reflective assignments they are often ill prepared for this aspect of their course (Braine, 2009). Reflection is often an expectation, without sufficient educational preparation for students (Braine, 2009). This audit reveals that preparing students in advance for model use appears to positively influence on the use of reflection for some students, although sizeable numbers of students still avoided comprehensive usage, with subsequent negative effects on performance. Moreover while some individual students performed well with creative approaches to reflection ( without model use) overall, using a structured model of reflection appears to have a positive influence on students' achievement of module learning outcomes, thus reflected in their overall grades.

## 5. Conclusion

Using a structured model of reflection within reflective assignments seems to be associated with higher levels of learning, thus students need to be encouraged to fully utilise and incorporate specific models of reflection into their written work when relevant, and receive comprehensive instruction on their usage.

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