Exploring new nurse teachers’ perception and understanding of reflection: An exploratory study

Mary E. Braine*

School of Nursing, Faculty of Health and Social Care, University of Salford, Frederick Road, Salford M6 6PU, UK

Accepted 24 August 2008

KEYWORDS
Nursing; Reflection; New Lecturer; Reflective practice

Summary
Reflection and the development of reflective practitioners are integral in many nursing programmes. This study set out to explore new lecturers’ perception and understanding of reflection and how well they are preparing nurses to be reflective practitioners. Using a mixed method, new lecturers appointed to the school of nursing within the last 18 months were questioned using a semi-structured questionnaire. Participants were recruited from the purposeful sample and two focus groups interviews were carried out.

Data analysis revealed five major themes: (1) perceived lack of efficacy in teaching reflection; (2) skills required for reflection; (3) reflection in the curriculum; (4) strategies used in teaching reflection and (5) educators preparation.

It is suggested that new lecturers need more preparation in the highly complex skill of reflection in order to facilitate the reflective learning process in their students. The use of more overt and innovative ways of facilitating reflection in the nursing curriculum is advocated.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Background and literature review

The concepts of reflection and reflective practice have become important issues for the nursing profession despite some apparent ambivalence highlighted in the literature. On the one hand, reflection claims to be a valuable and powerful educational process enabling nurses, among many other things: to develop their individual theories of nursing (Reid, 1993), to reduce or eliminate the theory and practice divide (Landeen et al., 1995), to encourage practitioners to evaluate their practice (Saylor, 1990), to promote learner self-awareness, to challenge habitual practice and finally to bring to the consciousness tacit knowledge (Scanlan et al., 2002). Reflection also purports to facilitate nurses in becoming critical thinkers and
doers (Scanlan and Chernomas, 1997; and Burton, 2000). On the other hand, researchers point out that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support these claims and that its unstructured implementation may have a detrimental effect on the practitioners’ psychological well-being and the outcomes of nursing education (Newell, 1994; Mackintosh, 1998). Recent developments in the nursing curriculum in the UK have sought to embrace the concept of the reflective practitioner. Professional bodies, such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council (2004) have advocated the need to produce a reflective practitioner and for the curriculum to be responsive to meet this need. The QAA benchmark statement (QAA, 2001) also encourages reflection to be embedded in the curriculum and makes considerable reference to the reflective activities to be expected of students at honours degree level. Professionals such nurses aspire to be reflective practitioner as one of the goals of pre-registration education and reflective practice appears to be an important element in nursing curriculums. Indeed a competent practitioner at registration is deemed to have many underpinning attributes of reflective practice i.e. critical thinking and problem-solving skills (NMC, 2004). In the current pre-registration B.Sc Nursing programme, in which the study took place, it is an explicit component of the programme, but integrated, rather than a discrete module, with the students undertaking personal action planning, personal development plans and nine assessments of reflective writing. The pre-registration Diploma programme, however, is less explicit with students expected to undertake one formal reflective narrative in year three and undertake personal development planning or action planning.

The empirical evidence of the impact of inputting reflection into the nursing curriculum and upon student learning is inconclusive. Some authors claim that reflection had a positive impact on changing clinical practice as suggested by (Paget, 2001; Penden-McAlpine et al., 2005). Suhre and Harskamp (2001) contend that reflection is necessary for students to be able to analyse their current feelings and knowledge, and identify which knowledge and experience need further expansion. Lowe and Kerr (1998) posit that students learnt just as well using reflective methods when compared with conventional methods. Nicholl and Higgins (2004) and Carroll et al. (2002a, b) are two such exponents who criticise the value of reflection arguing that it is difficult for educators to justify the teaching of a subject where little research evidence exists to support its use. Even though the underpinning skills of reflection; problem solving, critical thinking and self awareness, are undoubtedly prerequisites to enable a nurse to deliver safe competent care.

Despite there being substantial literature concerning the various strategies that can be employed to foster reflection; learning diaries, journaling, critical incident analysis and group discussions (Burnard, 1995; Jasper, 1999; Moon, 2001), there appears to be little guidance or research on the subject of teaching or assessing reflective practice. But what would seem to be crucial to both are the role of the teacher and the use of language and writing in facilitating this process.

Although nurse educators are clearly pivotal in the development of reflective practitioner, what seems to be irking nurse education is the preparation for this complex process. Scanlan and Chernomas (1997) assert that there is sparse literature on how teachers are to become reflective. As Phil Race articulates;

"If we aren’t very skilled at reflecting, how on earth are we going to help our students to become skilled?" (Race, 2006).

There is evidence to suggest that nurses require time to reflect (James and Clark, 1994; Pierson, 1998). Lack of training is also cited as being responsible for nurse educators’ lack of knowledge on how be reflective and how to assist students to reflect (Atkins and Williams, 1995; Haddock, 1997). How these important resources are being considered when reflection or reflective practice are being introduced into nursing curricula is unclear. In the Republic of Ireland Nicholl and Higgins (2004) study attempted to investigate this very issue and concluded that there was a need to clarify curricular content in relation to reflective practice and prepare nurse tutors in the teaching of this subject. In an earlier study carried out by O’Connor et al. (2003) which explored nurse teachers’ perceptions and experiences of using reflection within the nursing curricula the authors reported that some lecturers had little experience of reflection and that is was viewed as an occasional and separate activity and as a problem-solving activity.

The desire to address this fundamental issue of whether we are prepared, ultimately impacts upon the learning experience of our students and the development of their reflective skills. Indeed it could be argued that any ill considered attempt to promote reflectivity could result in single rather than double-loop learning. Argyris and Schön (1978) made a distinction between single-loop and dou-
ble-loop learning. They content that the single-loop learning can be viewed as a simple version of the Lewin/Kolb cycle, in which performance is evaluated through reflection and then corrected or improved. In double-loop learning, the whole activity is part of a larger cycle, in which the reflection involves looking beyond the solutions and symptoms of a problem to the underlying assumption and values implicit within it and in doing so Argyris (1976) proposes that learning to change our underlying values and assumptions occurs. Thus it is argued that the aim of any meaningful reflection is double-loop learning. Reflection is an essential step in the learning process whether it is personal or professional. It is particularly valuable in the professional context because of its potential to enhance learning in the practice setting. If we are to use reflection effectively then we as educators need to understand the concept, its underpinning assumptions, limitations and value. Moreover, we need to be aware that reflection is a highly sophisticated intellectual skill and like all skills, requires learning, and the ability to assess students’ acquiescence of these skills.

The study sets out to achieve five primary objectives:

1. To identify how new lecturers perceive and understand reflective practice.
2. Explore how new lecturers facilitate student nurses in developing reflection.
3. Clarify the reflective content within the nursing curriculum.
4. To understand the perceived preparation for teaching reflective practice amongst new nurse teachers.
5. What expectations do the new lecturers have of the Higher Educational Institute in preparing them to teach reflection?

Design and methods

This study utilised both qualitative and quantitative methods. A purposeful sampling (Creswell, 1994) was used to select new lecturers who had been appointed to the School of Nursing within the last 18-months. A semi-structured self-reported questionnaire was designed for the study and posted to 24 new lecturers along with an information letter inviting participation in a focus group interview. A total of seven participants volunteered to take part in the subsequent two focus groups. This was deemed sufficient given that the study was not seeking high numbers to generalise results or use them for predictive purposes, but rather to generate sufficient data to bring about a change in practice. Additionally this is in congruence with the assumptions of qualitative research, which emphasises the context dependent quality of the process and experience rather then volume of data.

Ethics

Ethical clearance to proceed with the project was obtained through the University’s ethical committee. The participants were assured confidentially and anonymity.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained prior to the commencement of the study. Although Smith (1995) reaffirms informed consent as the first step in protecting the participants, the notion that consent is an abstract, once only permission, obtained at the beginning of the research process was not entirely applicable in this study. The process was iterative and changed constantly as the study proceeded, thus in this study informed consent was conceptualised as a continuous process, and one by which the participants were informed throughout the process and included the dissemination and publishing of its findings.

Withdrawal

The study’s approach also raised the issue of withdrawing from the study. The potentially could have been difficult due to the participants feeling that they are forced to co-operate with their colleagues. In an effort to address this issue, an ethically agreed framework was discussed, facilitated by the agreement of ground rules prior to the commencement of the focus group interviews. Finally in an attempt to redress the unequal power relationship between the researcher and the participants it was made clear what the researchers’ expectations, values and beliefs were.

Methods

The ultimate aim and expectations from this study was not only an attempt to understand reflective practice within the nursing curriculum and the perceptions of other educators on the subject but, through collaborative working enlighten others to the problem in question. The
use of mixed methods of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, rather than to oppose each other, was advocated to corroborate each other as posited by Sandelowski (2000). Within this study a triangulation method approach was used. According to Denzin (1989) triangulation can take several forms, for the purpose of this research a methodological triangulation was chosen in which of two or more methods to study the problem in question are used. As the study's aim was to gain insight through understanding and exploration and not to establish causality the utilisation of mixed methodologies was felt to not only strengthen the research design as advocated by Patton (1990), but also to provide a more accurate representation of the problem in question then perhaps one method would offer. Cowman (1993) suggests that one method in isolation cannot provide a true understanding of the problem. Furthermore, Cowman (1993) and Jones (1996) both advocate that triangulation provides the opportunity to increase the validity of the data findings and that the weaknesses of one method can be compensated by the use of another. With this in mind a broad general overview was sought through the use of a semi-structured questionnaire with the intention of providing an expedient collection of both subjective and objective data from all the new lecturers within the school of nursing. In addition it was felt that by being anonymous and self-reporting it would reduce bias and facilitate honest responses from the participants. This was followed by a more open in-depth insightful approach through the use of focus group interviews. These were chosen as a means of expanding on the themes and data collected from the questionnaires.

**Questionnaire**

As there appeared to be no available instrument to use in the study an assessment tool in the form of a questionnaire was devised. Once drafted it was given to two lecturers within the school for critical feedback, and to assess the questionnaire for face and content validity. The resultant semi-structured, self-reported questionnaire consisted of fifteen questions which included both closed and open format responses. 11 respondents who had been in their current posts between 7–24 months, completed and returned the questionnaire, achieving a response rate of 46% which is above the expected 30% predicted by Oppenheim (1996) for a postal questionnaire. Of these respondents, two taught only on the pre-registration diploma programme and all but one had not worked as a lecturer in nursing prior to their appointment in the school. The questionnaires were analysed according to the data; quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics whilst the qualitative data was analysed using content analysis, to make inferences by systematic analysing the written data (Gillis and Jackson, 2002). From the questionnaire analysis the interview schedule was devised.

**Focus group interview**

Krueger (1994) defines focus groups as;

"... a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment”

(p.6).

The use of focus groups was thought to provide insight into the attitudes, perceptions and opinions of the participants and to further validate the findings from the questionnaire and allow for further exploration of the subject in question. The interviews were perceived to provide the additional potential advantage of discovering unexpected opinions. The semi-structured interviews were scheduled for approximately one hour. An interview guide consisting of ten pre-determined open-ended questions was used, not just to guide the interview conversation but to gain further insight and clarification on the perspectives uncovered in the questionnaire responses, these included:

- What is your understanding of the reflection within the nursing curriculum?
- Do you feel that reflection is explicit enough within the curriculum?
- What skills and attributes do you need to develop reflective practitioners?
- What is your experience of using reflection in your teaching practice or that of others?

Prior to the focus groups a volunteer agreed to observe and record the discussion and group interactions, as it was felt that that researcher could not conduct the interview and transcribe at the same time. Although the literature appears to be inconclusive on the size of focus groups, the decision to schedule two focus groups was determined purely by the practicality of not being able to get all the participants together at one time.

In order to ensure credibility and minimise the researchers’ bias, the interviews, once transcribed
were sent to the participants for 'members checking'. Higginbottom (1998) describes this as a means of checking the validity or plausibility as an explanation as to what was said. Thus the participants were able to check that the data represented the interview accurately and add clarification to any issues if required. This active encouragement in the data analysis, Krueger (1994) argues gives high face validity to the data. A view echoed by Titchen (1995), but describes it as participant validation. Undoubtedly this process helped the participants, as it gives them descriptive feedback on their practice, which, in turn facilitated personal action planning to improve their practice. All participants responded and any amendments were duly made. Analysis of the focus groups involved content analysis to inductively identify themes, emerging patterns and keywords. Finally, both sets of data were amalgamated resulting in five significant themes: (i) perceived lack of efficacy in teaching reflection, (ii) skills required for reflection, (iii) reflection in the curriculum, (iv) strategies used in teaching reflection, and (v) educators preparation.

Results and discussion

The findings are presented and discussed under five sub-headings and are interspersed with commentary about various points that were raised.

Theme 1 – Perceived lack of efficacy in teaching reflection

Both the questionnaire and the focus group demonstrated a perceived lack of self-efficacy in teaching and facilitating reflection. The questionnaire data indicates a lack of probing questioning by the educators in their teaching, thus limiting the stimulation of reflective thinking. The focus group added, that although they felt inadequate they had good example of how they had tried to facilitate reflective thinking both individually and in group work.

Theme 2 – Skills required for reflection

The skills required for reflective practice were identified in both the questionnaire Q6. “What attributes and skills do you think are required for you to be a reflective practitioner?” and in the focus groups as the following: self-awareness, critical thinking and problem solving, evaluation and synthesis skills. Open mindedness, ability to recall and honesty were also identified. These skills are similar to those identified within the published literature (Atkins and Murphy, 1993; Scanlan and Chernomas, 1997; Schön, 1983). The focus group added to this further by expressing that the experience of the educator was important in relating the theory to practice, along with the individual value that the educator placed on reflection. The learning context was highlighted in the focus group as being one of the most important influences on facilitating reflection and learning, echoing what has been previously reported in the literature (Boud et al., 1985; Scanlan et al., 2002).

As one participant stated “reflection is not just ‘story telling’ by lecturers, but using recent practice to make sense of reflection and increase credibility and thus close the theory-practice gap.”

Theme 3 – Perception of reflective practice within the curriculum

The questionnaire analysis suggested that reflection was not explicit within the curriculum, with 64% (n = 7) of the participants declaring that the students had not been given enough learning and training on reflection, and one respondent did not know if they were given enough or not. When asked in the questionnaire Q8. “How do you feel reflection is taught/facilitated within the current nursing curriculum?” only 27% (n = 3) described where that might occur naming lectures and tutorials, personal development plans (PDP), problem based learning (PBL) and during group work. Furthermore when specifically asked where in the curriculum reflection was taught 36% (n = 4) identified the reflective assignments whilst 45% (n = 5) did not know. The focus group concurs with these findings stating that reflection did not stand out in the curriculum, it was ‘trivialised’. Concern was expressed that there was an expectation of the B.Sc students to write nine reflective assignments during their programme of study placing the emphasis on assessment rather then the process.

The focus group developed this theme further articulating that reflection was compartmentalised, detached from the learning process and that it should be made more explicit within the current curriculum. This perception that reflection is compartmentalised, seen as a task rather then a way of thinking, is echoed in O’Connor et al. (2003) research. Rather than seeing reflection as a technical problem-solving task which Johns (2004) cautions against, it must be viewed as a way of thinking. The facilitation and development of reflection
may well be hindered by its compartmentalisation but, conversely can be fostered by the skilled personal tutor.

**Theme 4 — Strategies used to teach reflection**

The questionnaires revealed responses that were varied and included both student and teacher focused approaches to teaching reflection. However, the responses in the questionnaire were limited when asked “what approaches/strategies do you use in your teaching that you feel helps to develop the reflective practitioner?” 27% (n = 3) did not respond and of those that did most only identified one or two strategies. These included the following: group discussions, the use of critical incidents and questioning skills. The focus group elaborated this further identifying the use of PBL in the Diploma programme as an additional strategy that enhanced reflexivity. The focus group also identified the need for dialogue and discussion as a means of facilitating reflection in the classroom. The participants felt that a more structured approach such as discussions and workshops on the concept of reflection and the application of reflective models could be employed as a strategy. Indeed Johns (2004) emphasises the need to guide reflection to maximise its learning potential and maintains that it is profoundly difficult to undertake in isolation. Although there are many strategies advocated within the literature, how to teach and how to incorporate these into teaching and learning, however, is sparse. Some studies have indicated that educators did not teach reflection in a formal sense, but model it by demonstrating reflection-in-action to and with their students (Scanlan et al., 2002), whilst others have identified workshops with students (Burnard, 1995; Kit Ling Lau et al., 2002) and action-learning cycles and group discussions on clinical scenarios (Burns and Bulman, 2000; Bulman and Schutz, 2004). What clearly is called for is a more innovative approach to teaching and learning to encourage students to engage in reflection.

**Theme 5 — The teachers’ preparation to facilitate reflective practice**

The questionnaire clearly demonstrated that the new educators felt inadequately prepared for this aspect of their role with 55% stating that they needed support in developing the skills of reflection. This perceived lack of preparation and prerequisite skills to teach reflection emerged as a concern also in the focus group interview. Over 50% in the questionnaire analysis felt they had not been offered opportunities to develop this aspect of their role. When questioned about “What support do you think would help you in your development needs to enable you to facilitate reflection in the nursing curriculum?” the need for personal mentoring and more explicit teaching on reflection was stressed. There is a cautionary tale here, in that emphasising the theory rather then its application to practice could fuel the debate about the theory-practice gap and add to the notion of it being compartmentalised. The confounding variable that influenced the acquisition and development of reflective thinking from this study appear to be the student-teacher relationship, with some evidence that the educators do engage in facilitating reflective practice.

The questionnaire also highlighted an important point that to enable educators to use reflection in their teaching they needed to be also knowledgeable in the subject matter that they were teaching. The focus group interview demonstrated a strong belief that this was important to enable students to make the links between theory and practice. In addition the focus groups identified several methods for aiding the educators in developing reflection in their role these included; the opportunity to discuss with peers, mentorship, and a clearer understanding of where reflection fits into the curriculum along with more formal learning and development opportunities with the University. The suggestion was made to add reflection to the University induction programme for new lecturers. Conversely, the focus groups highlighted some barriers to developing reflection in education: time, the sheer number of students in both the classroom and during group work, lack of support for the students when engaging in reflection and the meta-cognitive skills of the students, all of which have been as identified as barriers within the literature (Pierson 1998; Nicholl and Higgins, 2004; Platzer et al., 2000). This study also raised a concern of the increased diversity within the nursing student population and the challenges that this brings especially when facilitating reflection. As diversity in the cultural background of the student population increases, then the issues of language and culture may need to be integrated into the teaching and learning process. Platzer et al. (2000) for example has identified that previous educational experience can make it difficult to engage in the adult learning process and reflective practice. This strengthens the case for a more explicit skills profile of the educators.
in facilitating students’ use and understanding of reflection. Equally it calls for more attention to the assessment and planning of reflection by educators to enable judgements to be made about a student’s strengths and weaknesses in this area, and provide future support. The development of reflective skills in both the student and the nurse educator will not only help to accommodate and deal with the increasing diversity in nursing student population but also the issues of diversity in practice, furthermore it may also improve practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion this study has raised many issues with regard to the reflective practice and how it is operationalised within the current nursing curricula in the school of nursing. Although reflection is explicitly emphasised by professional bodies and organisations such as the QAA it is clearly not maximised within the curriculum. Given the time limitations, resources and experience of the researcher, this study represents an initial exploration of the use of reflection within the schools’ nursing pre-registration curricula. It is evident from the questionnaire and from the focus group that reflection is viewed as a personal individual mental activity whilst others viewed it as a dialogue with others. If reflection is to become an integrated part of the nursing curriculum rather than being compartmentalised then it must be underpinned by the clear identification and development of the skills required. If the ability to practice reflectively is advocated as an important aspect of the role of the professional nurse then nurse educators must address the issues of how this is taught and how to enable students to develop this skill.

Reflection is a process that takes time and experience, and is clearly not an easy skill to develop. Given that this skill is complex and cognitively demanding, nurse teachers need to recognise that carefully planned strategies are required to enable the students to develop this skill and ultimately enhance practice. Furthermore, given that the strategic learner will not put effort into tasks such as journaling or reflective writing if they are not assessed, then this raises the issue of why these are not assessed and how this can be made more meaningful. This study has raised questions not just about what is taught but perhaps how it could be facilitated in a more articulate explicit fashion through the use of more innovative ways. If we value reflection and its learning power then nurse educator need to conquer the inherent difficulties highlighted in this research.

This study has also offered some insight into what is required for the preparation for new nurse educator. Unless educators have an understanding of reflective practice and writing, the purpose and the qualities that constitute a good performance, then they will not be able to help their learners. Reflective practice, however, is not just about translating the theory into lectures thus emphasising the theory, but translating and applying it into practice. Indeed it is this very engagement in personal reflective activities that surely does much to dispel the concept of the theory-practice gap. It is insightful educators who prepare not only the nurse teachers within the higher educational sector but those in higher education per se. Due consideration must be given to the wider context that nurse educators find themselves as to whether it is conducive to reflection and double-loop learning. Moreover learning that is deep and meaningful can only happen in situations where the time, training and feedback required for systematic reflection is made available.

This study has raised issues that other nurse educators have also described, contributing to the body of evidence on this topic. Based upon its findings the following recommendations for future research are offered.

- What are the differences between the novice lecturer and the experienced?
- Lecturer on the employment of teaching strategies when teaching reflection?
- Can reflection be taught in a more integrated way?
- How disparate is the understanding of reflection by lectures within the school of nursing?
- Does the notion of compartmentalisation of reflection permeate experienced senior lecturers also?

Finally the merits of this exploratory study cannot be judged solely on its findings but rather on the development of the researcher and the participants in their understanding of themselves, raising the critical awareness of the subject as well as the potential to change practice.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.
Acknowledgements

The author would like to take this opportunity to thank the participants in this research study for their time and effort in participating in the focus group interviews and for granting permission for this study to be published.

References


