

Use of Clinical Journals to Enhance Critical Thinking

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Abstract:

The clinical journal offers a valuable medium through which faculty can teach critical thinking. Both analysis and evaluation of the interactions and relationships between clinical practice, theory, and research can be greatly enhanced through careful structuring of clinical journal assignments. The authors discuss ideas about structuring clinical and journal assignments and strategies for giving feedback.

Article:

Critical thinking is an important criterion set by the National League for Nursing and nurse educators across the country as one standard for measuring quality of a program. Unfortunately, a confusing variety of definitions of critical thinking have been put forth. In fact, Beyer¹ referred to critical thinking as one of the most abused terms in relation to thinking skills. Critical thinking often is viewed as synonymous with analytical thinking. Beyer,¹ however, described critical thinking as "judging the authenticity, worth, or accuracy of something," a process that involves both analysis and evaluation. It is this meaning that we use in relation to fostering critical thinking skills in nursing students.

Research in education indicates that critical thinking does not "just happen" for students.^{1,2} Although activities of reading, discussing, and writing about subject matter provide opportunities for thinking, these methods in themselves approach thinking only indirectly. Beyer¹ proposed that educators need to teach thinking directly, engaging students in substantive learning activities that require the kinds of thinking we want them to develop.

Bevis and Watson³ proposed that new "caring" models of nursing curricula should emphasize the oral and written interactions occurring between students and faculty. Writing across the curriculum programs also emphasizes the importance of using writing to enhance thinking⁴. In practicums at all levels of nursing education, writing in clinical journals is a common assignment. In masters level practicums, or in practicums with registered nurse students, an especially high percentage of the interaction between students and faculty occurs through writing in clinical journals. Thus the clinical journal becomes a valuable opportunity for faculty to teach

thinking directly, involving students actively in analyzing and evaluating their practicum experiences.

Our personal experience indicates that the quality of students' entries in the journal often are disappointing to their professors, in that the journals do not reflect the anticipated critical thinking. Through careful structuring of assignments for the clinical journal and provision of appropriate feedback, we have seen positive changes in students' development of critical thinking skills.

Structuring of Assignments

The use of clinical journals can seem deceptively simple. Unless faculty identify clear expectations for the journal assignments and communicate these expectations, students may perceive the journal merely as "busy work," rather than a valid strategy for enhancing critical thinking.

Clear Purpose

An important purpose of the clinical journal is to provide guided opportunities for students to "think aloud" on paper, reflecting on their own perceptions or understandings of the situations they encounter in the practicum. In doing so, they learn to synthesize theory and practice, apply relevant research and literature to actual practicum experiences, and raise questions for further study. This purpose must be clear to both faculty and students, so that the writing is viewed not as a formal, scholarly paper, but as an in-process dialogue between students and faculty that integrates previous learning within the context of the practicum.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Evaluation

To think critically, students need to know what they are thinking about. Through journal entries, students can be guided to carefully document objective and subjective observations from their practicum. When students are clearly focused on the data to be examined, the next step is to examine these data and describe what they have learned about nursing practice, analyzing and evaluating the data according to appropriate theories, principles, or other criteria. As students develop expertise in analyzing their observations, they learn to search for confirming evidence that directly relates to their perceptions.

Generation of Hypothesis

Benner⁴ noted that expertise in nursing practice is fostered by refining propositions, hypotheses, and principle-based expectations. By using the journal to analyze and evaluate their experiences, students can be guided to engage in the systematic examination of events in a particular context, thus using theory to shape questions for clinical practice.

Examples of Structured Assignments

Once faculty have identified the desired outcomes of the clinical journal, they can help the students attain these outcomes by providing clear guidelines for assignments. Below are a few examples of assignments that can be used within the journal format to enhance the development of critical thinking skills. It is often helpful to suggest maximum lengths for each assignment, e.g. not more than one or two pages for a summary or critique.

Writing Objectives

The clinical journal is an ideal place for students to write objectives specific to their learning needs and related to course objectives. Invariably, students have difficulty writing objectives in the areas of both content and structure. In the content area, their objectives may fail to reflect the course objectives, clearly define what the student wants to accomplish, or show progress in levels of learning. Structurally, the student's written objectives may not be stated in measurable terms and may reflect two or more different goals.

Through dialogue in the journal between faculty and students, students can be guided to look at such factors as how their objectives are interpreted by others, e.g. their preceptors; how their objectives have limited or expanded their practicum experiences; and how educational theory relates to the structuring of clearly written objectives. Critical thinking is fostered in helping the student move toward writing objectives that are clear, specific to individual learning, measurable, and directly related to course objectives.

Writing a Summary

Writing a complete, succinct summary of an event attended or an article read is a cognitively difficult task. The student must determine the essential information to include, eliminating extraneous details, and must then express the critical ideas in a cohesive, readable description. Students can practice this skill by summarizing such activities as an administrative meeting or research seminar they attended or an article they read related to their practicum.

This process of writing a summary encourages objective analysis, helping to move the student away from what Piaget⁶ referred to as egocentric thinking, or the tendency of individuals to view the world only from their own point of view. Students may unconsciously block out ideas that create dissonance with their own ideas, and may turn disturbing ideas into ones that seem more comfortable. Thus when asked to write an objective summary of an event or an article, they may write instead about their personal interpretation, unaware that they are no longer providing objective documentation. It is critical that students, as mature thinkers, learn to differentiate between objective documentation and personal interpretation.

Writing a Critique

Mature thinkers should also be offered opportunities to practice this skill not only in a formal research course, but throughout the nursing curriculum. Writing a well-thought-out critique of an experience or an article related to their practicum helps students move beyond summary and evaluate data that they have gathered.

Faculty can help students identify criteria to look for in writing a critique. Important criteria should include distinguishing relevant from irrelevant data, distinguishing factual statements from value judgments, detecting bias, and determining the credibility of sources.¹ The need to cite specific evidence to support their point of view makes students more aware of the need for careful attention to evaluation of "facts." This critiquing process requires that students draw on their previous learning and integrate information from concurrent coursework with data gathered in their practicum. As they move through this process, they learn to identify their assumptions and those of others and the strengths and weaknesses of the data on which they base their decisions.

Writing a Focused Argument

Nurses practicing in today's complex healthcare environment must be able to formulate a point of view and present data to substantiate that point of view. The clinical journal can offer "safe" opportunities to practice this skill without the intimidation of real-world constraints. To write a focused argument, the student must select an issue and make an assertion, or a "thesis statement." This thesis statement serves as the controlling focus for the writing. Students then carefully gather and sort through information to include only that which supports their thesis.⁵ Assignments for practicing this skill in the clinical journal may include such diverse activities as writing letters (hypothetical or real) to decision makers, e.g. hospital administrators or legislators, to argue for a change in practice; writing a proposal for a project that will enhance practice; or writing from the viewpoint of a patient, family member, or nursing assistant about a problematic practice in nursing.

This type of clinical journal entry encourages students to move from passive to active thinking and to simulate an advocacy role. They must imagine a doubting audience and support their assertion succinctly, using clear evidence and reasoning. Often this requires them to seek out supporting evidence from the library or other resources and then to weigh, synthesize, and reshape the information to build a logical, cohesive argument.⁶ In the process of writing to convince a doubting audience, students become aware of nursing not only as a body of facts to be memorized, but as a profession with inherent controversies and dilemmas that require critical thinking.

Provision of Appropriate Feedback

Faculty need to provide thoughtful immediate feedback to students, so that the journal truly reflects a dialogue between faculty, student, and the context of the practicum. To do this within the time constraints of the nurse educator role, it is important to target specific strategies for feedback.

More Is Not Always Better

It is not necessary to spend a great deal of time making detailed corrections of spelling and grammatical errors. Research in composition has shown that this type of negative and error-oriented feedback is not effective.⁷ Focusing too closely on grammatical aspects of the writing brings the "judge" into the process too early and discourages students from trying out new ideas on paper.⁸ Instead, faculty should provide one or two comments about the overall journal entry, encouraging the student to raise further questions to explore, and to analyze and evaluate their assumptions, observations, and perceptions in relation to appropriate theories or content in their coursework. Codes might be used to indicate good writing of objectives, focused argument, critique, and literature as it relates to practicum, etc. It is critical to note each part that is done well.

Maintain the Focus Around Critical Thinking

It is easy for both faculty and students to drift away from the primary focus of the journal. A focus on rigid accounting for all practicum hours and experiences diminishes the effectiveness of the clinical journal as a tool to enhance critical thinking. A separate section of the journal entry can be used to provide necessary documentation of practicum hours. Students should be discouraged from trying to recapture a complete narration of all of their hour-to-hour

experiences. Although this type of narrative may be interesting, it stays at the lowest level of learning. Instead, students should be encouraged to document, summarize, analyze, and evaluate critical incidents from their practicum, synthesizing the information to shape new questions for nursing practice.

Monitor Progress

Clinical journals are one of the few assignments where nurse educators read students' in-progress writing and give written and sometimes verbal feedback weekly, or at least regularly, throughout a term. Students should receive feedback before writing the next journal entry, so that this information can be used readily and synthesis of practicum and theory can occur quickly. Faculty need to communicate to students clear criteria regarding how evaluation of the journal writing will be incorporated into the practicum grade. Grades for the journal can be given to students periodically, along with other written feedback, to keep them informed of the quality of their work.

Oral feedback to students is also helpful in monitoring and communicating their progress. Conferences, either individual or group, can be used to discuss the clinical journals in relation to critical thinking. Group discussions at the beginning of the practicum and periodically throughout the term conserve faculty time, promote exchange of ideas, and provide helpful synthesis of information for students.

When the purpose of writing the journal has been met, this outcome should be validated for the students. Once a student writes the journal with individual objectives showing progression of levels of accomplishment and reflecting course objectives, applies literature appropriately, analyzes and evaluates experiences according to designated criteria, and completes all specific journal assignments at a satisfactory level, the purpose of the journal has been met. One option for grading is that if a student demonstrates the accomplishment of all of these components of the journal, they can be told that they have a "master" journal and have earned a grade of "A" or "Pass." This may occur in the middle of the term, but the student has met that course requirement for the journal. For the remainder of the course, the student may have the option of keeping only a time log, weekly objectives, and a brief analysis and evaluation, usually one to two pages, of special experiences of the week. The knowledge that as soon as they can keenly analyze and evaluate their work they may go to the short form of keeping the journal inspires students to spend more time and thought early in the practicum to synthesize material.

A part of teaching critical thinking is "to empower the students to control their own destiny."⁹ In this framework, a valid option is for students to contract for a grade for their clinical journal. For students who choose to accept a grade of less than "A," they should be allowed to progress to the short form when they reach their contracted level.

Conclusion

Critical thinking can enable students to control their own destiny by learning to ask probing questions, looking for evidence, seeking and scrutinizing alternatives, and critiquing their ideas and the ideas of others. One effective strategy for teaching students to think critically is by having them keep a clinical journal. The journal also can serve as one measure of whether the students are learning to think critically, an outcome criteria of which the National League for

Nursing requires evaluation. Journals could be compared at the beginning and end of the course or curriculum for changes in critical thinking ability.

Although keeping a journal requires a substantial commitment of time by both faculty and students, careful attention to structuring the assignments can decrease this time commitment and increase benefits for both faculty and students. When purposes and expectations are communicated clearly to students and when appropriate feedback is given, faculty have the satisfaction of directly teaching students to analyze and evaluate information so that they learn to think critically.

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