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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE FOR VETERINARY NURSES
AND THE USE OF REFLECTIVE JOURNALS

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The following sections are the work of the first author. After the first author's content has concluded, there follow two reflective accounts from the first author's mentors.

INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice critically examines one's experiences and actions to learn from them and create an action plan to improve future performance. It involves analysing and evaluating situations, experiences and the decisions made, considering the impact, and deciding on action plans for moving forwards. This practice can lead to developing new skills and insight, although it takes skill and learning to undertake a genuine and meaningful reflection. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions to engage in the process of continuous learning (Schön, 1987).

The reflective practice process typically involves the following steps:

1. Describing the situation or experience on which you are reflecting.
2. Analysing your thoughts, feelings, and actions during the situation.
3. Evaluating the impact and outcomes of your actions.
4. Identifying areas for improvement and considering alternative courses of action.
5. Developing a plan for implementing changes in your future practice.

As veterinary nurses, we use this skill both in clinical practice to learn and develop our nursing skills, and as veterinary nurse educators to develop our teaching practices. My research looked at reflective practices in the classroom and the veterinary industry. I wanted to find out what educators thought about reflective practices and how they taught them to students. This led to looking at how veterinary nurses use reflective practices to help with stress and anxiety, which can lead to compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue can be described as the loss of ability to care due to emotional and physical exhaustion and is characterised by a loss of empathy or compassion towards co-workers and patients (Foote, 2020). My research found that reflection is a skill underutilised both within the veterinary industry and by educators. More teaching is needed so stakeholders can fully engage with reflective practices; this learning needs to happen now.

From 2024, veterinary nurses, including veterinary nursing educators, will be required to carry out Reflective Continuing Professional Development (RCPD) as part of their registration as a veterinary nurse, a model similar to what the veterinarians undertake with the Vet Council of New Zealand (VCNZ). They will need to complete professional development (PD) in a field relevant to their practice and then complete reflective writings showing the learning gained from that PD. This reflective way of completing continuing professional development (CPD) is not a new concept. This process is undertaken in other fields such as pharmacology and health; however, this will be new for the veterinary nursing industry. Reflective journals are one way of introducing reflective practice to our learners and educators and developing that positive learning and knowledge of what it means to be a

reflective practitioner. I referred to our learners as students when undertaking this research over two years. As I have researched this topic further and throughout this article, I shift to the word “learners,” as one does not need to be in a formal educational institution to be a learner. Instead, a learner is someone who has the mindset to engage in their learning to help them develop and grow their knowledge and skills well after they have left the classroom (Bagranoff, 2020).

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Ethical approval was sought and approved by the Capable NZ Ethics Panel, application number 91. I used a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), unsure where my research idea would take me. This flexible method allows the researcher to see and develop new ideas as the information and evidence are collected and analysed (Dawson, 2019). I developed and sent out surveys to educators who teach the New Zealand Diploma in Veterinary Nursing Level 6 to learn about the use of reflective practice within the classroom. My second survey went to veterinary nurses in the industry to find out their thoughts and whether they used reflective practice in both their place of work and their personal life. I also conferred with other veterinary nursing educators within my own organisation about their thoughts on reflective practice in regard to assessment and teaching to their students.

FINDINGS

The data collected gave me insight into both parts of the industry, from teaching to clinical veterinary workplaces. The information gathered throughout my research showed a lack of understanding from educators around reflective practices. While veterinary nurses out in practice did have some understanding and practised some form of reflectiveness, there was a lack of support from workplaces which contributed to high levels of stress and compassion fatigue. These responses told me that educators and veterinary nurses do not fully understand reflective practice concepts and steps. More teaching is needed so that the positive benefits of being a reflective practitioner are known and understood.

DISCUSSION

From my research, the assessing and marking of learner reflective writing created the most differing thoughts and answers from educators I surveyed. Many educators treat reflective writing as an assessment and design marking rubrics that mirror other written assessments without any understanding of the reasons behind why we ask the learner to undertake reflective writing.

Reflection is the raw material of an experience and exploring that to make sense of what happened (Boud, 2001). Reflective writing then takes that raw learning material and turns it into a place where that experience or event can be recorded and processed (Boud, 2001). Moon (2004) suggests this could be the same as the notes taken during a lecture or study before writing an essay. The learner could use this basic information to help complete their assignment, as part of a group team reflecting session, or to help promote new learning.

Reflective writing can take many forms from journals, diaries, and logbooks to peer review and self-assessment (Tsingos-Lucas et al., 2017). It can be useful to use the one that best suits what we want from the learners; however, any form can be used if the concepts of reflective practice are followed. For our veterinary nursing students, a journal can easily be used to record weekly or monthly entries throughout the semester. This could be a Word document or an online blog posted in restricted areas on a learning platform such as Moodle.

A reflective journal can be defined as a personal record of thoughts, feelings, and experiences that encourages self-reflection and growth. It is a tool that can document and examine learning and personal development over time.

The concept of using reflective journals to encourage learners to learn reflective practice is used in different sectors, such as health and teacher training, to maintain communication with learners and grow and develop their skills and reflective practice. The aim is that reflective journals will form the pathway toward their assessments and be used as a formative exercise and not be assessed. We could use reflective journals to provide feedback and feedforward to learners and help them see a learning transformation during their studies (Mezirow 1978a, 1978b).

For our veterinary nursing students, practical/clinical skill learning makes up a large part of their training, as veterinary nursing is a practically based vocation. It can be hard to assess clinical skills when tutors are not present with the learners at work placements or vet clinics. So, I suggest we use reflective journals as part of their practical/clinical skill learning and one that can be used by both the tutor and the workplace supervisor in a three-way collaboration with the learner. The goal here would be to use this to communicate between the three parties to help the learner as they learn and reflect on their practical skills. Donald Schön (1987) talks about effective practitioners being able to reflect on their actions in their day-to-day lives. He called this reflection-in-action the ability to think on your feet and use observation and listening to solve problems (Schön, 1987). Our veterinary nurses need to learn this practical skill in a fast-paced and busy veterinary hospital. I also recommend teaching our learners to stop at the end of a busy day and reflect on their experiences. This “reflection-on-action” (Schön, 1987) ensures that the day’s experiences are thought about and actions are examined. This form of reflecting is associated with reflective journal writing and ties in well with our learners as they attempt to work through the day’s events and learn and grow from this (Boud et al., 2013).

As educators, we need to understand that new learning is based on the learner’s past experiences and that each learner will bring new perceptions to that experience which will differ from those of other learners. Making reflective practice a student learning approach, with questions about why they are doing this and what they are learning, shifts it away from a teacher-centred approach. This can help to encourage learners to have a deeper reflection on their experiences and make a connection between their experiences and understanding (Kim, 2013). Using effective feedback from the educator and the clinical supervisor at this stage can help to promote this learning. “Feedbacking is essential for students as it helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses during the learning process” (Alt et al., 2022).

As suggested above, reflective writing should not be assessed or graded, but if we are to assess reflective writing, we must consider the challenges this poses. Firstly, learners who are uncomfortable with academic writing or for whom English is not their first language can struggle to write reflectively. We should be offering different ways of reflecting, whether verbal or online. Secondly, if reflection is meant to be a personal experience, are we taking this away by defining the exact standards and requirements for an assessment?

Designing an assessment to cover this will be tricky, and not one singular assessment task will suit everyone, as both educators and students can struggle to define and understand reflective practice. Some will cope better than others when asked to write reflectively. As educators, we need to consider the purpose of the reflective task, whether it will promote reflective practice, and how we will judge the reflection (DePaul University, n.d.).

If we must assess reflective writing, we should use a model of reflection to help with grading. Reflective writing has four progression levels (Hatton & Smith, 1995). The first stage starts with descriptive writing, followed by descriptive reflection and then dialogic reflection. This third stage is when the learner looks at what they themselves are thinking, considers others, and develops an awareness of what is going on around them. This is the step that is needed to be taken to have an awareness of being reflective (Hatton & Smith, 1995). The fourth and final stage is critical reflection. We can design a marking rubric based on these four levels, with each level showing a deeper understanding of reflective writing. This marking rubric can be divided into sections that separate the areas needing assessment. Sections such as “demonstrates reflective writing and writing standards” could be used. It should be clearly stated and defined in the assignment’s criteria what is being assessed, so learners are aware of what is needed.

However, this type of reflection could be called academic or professional reflection. This differs from a personal reflection as the learner is being asked to write at an academic level and present it for assessment. This type of writing could include evidence-based practice, a formal writing structure with no mistakes, and be appropriate for the audience reading it. It would feed from the raw personal reflection written first and used to complete the formal assessment. Providing and citing references as part of this academic reflective writing is best placed in the evaluation or action plan step. This is the step where research can help create an action plan for moving forward or help evaluate what has happened compared with the research.

To ask for this type of reflection as educators, we must re-evaluate what we want from the learner regarding reflective practice. If it is a summative assessment requirement for them to produce formal academic reflective writing, then we need to provide precise assessment guidelines on what is required and design a marking rubric that reflects this. If it is a formative assessment for the learner to learn and grow by providing feedback/feed forward, we should not assess reflective writing. If we want the learner to provide evidence, they can draw from experiences, verbal discussions, and work placements without the need to provide formal referencing.

CHALLENGES TO TEACHING REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

One of the challenges facing educators in undertaking reflective practice is the ability to undertake reflectivity at work. A workplace must accept and embrace reflective practices to make educators comfortable with the process. Encouraging and providing guidance around reflective steps and how to move through them will foster a more positive relationship between doing and teaching reflective practices. Lack of support from the workplace is a common reason why educators are unsure or unwilling to be reflective, as it is viewed as an unnecessary part of our day. To overcome this, workplaces should encourage reflective practices, especially in the tertiary sector, where teaching reflectiveness is becoming more common. Educators can use reflective practices as part of a team to look at teaching practices, look back at assessments, and plan for future teaching. Embracing it within a workplace will have the roll-on effect of making our educators more comfortable with reflective practices. This familiarity should then transfer into the classroom and increase their ability to teach reflective concepts to our learners.

Using a reflective model with steps and prompt questions will significantly help educators who are perhaps unfamiliar with, or lack confidence in, the concept of reflective practice. A model of reflection or a framework of reflection is a structured process or steps that guide you through the description, analysis, evaluation, and improvement of an experience (Brush, 2020). A wide variety of models can be used, and an individual must decide which model or combination of frameworks suits them best. It is also essential to add that not everyone needs to use a model as long as the reflective thinking process is used (Brush, 2020).

For beginning reflective practitioners, a simpler model such as Rolfe et al.'s (2001) reflective model, "What? So What? Now what?," a three-step approach to reflecting, can make it easier to understand and undertake the reflection process. For more experienced practitioners, a model such as the Gibbs reflective cycle (1988) with its seven steps could promote a more in-depth reflection. This model introduces the learner to thinking about analysing and evaluating their own feelings and to start developing awareness and perception of those who were involved in the reflective situation. Both models can have prompt questions added at each step to help practitioners. These questions can be tailored to suit the learning or situation.

It is important to emphasise that the reflective process is a learning cycle where one thought or experience can lead to new learning ideas (and the cycle starts again). It can change an individual's ideas and involves looking at issues in various ways (Brush, 2020).

To ensure reflective practices are taught to learners, we first need to make the educators comfortable and familiar with reflectiveness by encouraging and promoting the positive benefits of being a reflective practitioner.

In turn, educators should then promote the benefits of reflective practice to our learners. This will lead to reflective practices becoming more widely accepted and used in the classroom and the broader veterinary industry.

BENEFITS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Being a reflective practitioner benefits your growth and development when learning new practical skills or coping with new situations and experiences. It can have a positive outcome in our personal and work relationships. Being reflective teaches you to describe a situation, to look at how this affected you and potentially others around you, and then make an action plan for moving forwards should a situation or similar happen again. This technique can be applied to any part of one's life; being reflective is a tool that can help with stress and anxiety, which in the veterinary industry, if left unchecked, can lead to compassion fatigue and burnout (Fontaine, 2018; Foote, 2020).

Reflective teaching has many benefits for both educators and learners. Educators can use reflectiveness to help grow our practice with improved teaching techniques, assessment skills, and teaching content. We can teach our learners to use reflective practices to help their skills and knowledge and to develop critical thinking skills. It can also help build the relationship between educator and learner plus build on the team relationships with fellow work colleagues. For our veterinary nursing students, this allows them to take and use reflective practices in their workplace once they graduate (York-Barr et al., 2016).

A reflective journal has many benefits in improving a learner's writing skills and personal development and helping them make sense of an experience. It has also been suggested that it can help with a student's negative emotions throughout a course (Waggoner-Denton, 2018).

CONCLUSION

To gain the full benefits of being reflective, we still need to understand or know the concept of reflective practices. Spending time outside or with loved ones is the first step; however, one must ensure reflective steps are followed by thinking about the problem or verbally discussing the problem and looking for solutions and moving forward. A reflective model with prompt questions can significantly benefit beginner reflective practitioners and help them start their reflective journey. To gain a deeper insight and understanding, reflective writing in a journal or blog can help reflective practitioners take that next step into reflective practice.

With the new RCPD that veterinary nurses will be undertaking from 2024, we need to look at how we teach our veterinary nursing students so they are prepared for when they graduate and head out into clinical practice. They will need to perform reflectively as part of the new registration scheme, but we should also reinforce the positive benefits of being a reflective practitioner. The veterinary industry is under incredible pressure and stress, with high mental health issues and burnout rates. Using reflective practices is one small tool in a much larger toolbox that can help lower stress and reduce compassion fatigue and burnout.

As Te Pūkenga and the subsidiaries merge to create and teach unified programmes, this is the opportunity to ensure reflective practices are part of this change. With the new programmes being developed and written within Te Pūkenga for veterinary nursing and animal healthcare across Levels 4 and 6, now is the time to ensure reflective practices are part of these new qualifications. Embedding reflective practices at the undergraduate level can ensure that future reflective practices are familiarised and facilitated (McCarthy, 2011).

The veterinary industry involves a high level of practical skills; it is here that reflective practices can help improve our learners' growth and development of these skills. This would have several aims, to help grow and produce

well-skilled veterinary nurses and to ensure that they can undertake the new RCPD requirements for veterinary nurse registration. In addition, they will understand the concept of reflective practice to use this to help with the ever-increasing stress and anxiety within the industry.

My research shows it is a circle of learning from educators to our learners, for graduates to carry this knowledge when working in clinical practice in the veterinary industry, and then feeding back to vet nursing educators. By making reflective practice more understandable, accessible, and positive, we can aim to increase people's confidence to become reflective practitioners.

Mentor 1's contribution

Clare has highlighted the need for educators in the veterinary nursing profession to develop competency in the use of reflective practice so that this practice becomes embedded in learners working in this profession. Just as 'an apple a day keeps the doctor away' so the use of reflective practice, not only in the vet nursing profession, enables educators and learners, including clinical practitioners, to become more effective in their (often stressful) work and in life in general. To this end, Clare has been able to develop her own reflective practice skills while on her research journey. The importance of journalling and maintaining a reflexive journal was highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2022), as a key practice while on a research journey and is essential for developing a critical commentary for the Master of Professional Practice qualification. Clare has used journalling to be both reflective and reflexive and to develop a revised framework of pedagogy and professional practice that embraces an evidence-based use of reflection as an effective and powerful tool for her veterinary nursing profession.

Mentor 2's contribution

Through Clare's insightful account of summarising some of the most important findings from her recent research project, as well Clare taking precious time to explore the benefits associated with reflective practice, the reader is taken on a journey of discovery. In this regard, Clare has not only advanced her own understanding of reflective practice but has made a worthwhile contribution, particularly within her domain of veterinary nursing. Lucas (1991) provides a useful definition of reflective practice when he argues that the process should be considered as a systematic inquiry centred around developing our understanding of practice. Although we live in an age of increasing demands around our time, the implication is still clear: if veterinary nursing practitioners desire ongoing improvements, then time will not only be needed for personal reflection but techniques such as journalling will need to be considered. As Bassot (2020) reminds us, journalling is a very conscious action and provides a permanent record for the writer that makes them accountable for any progress that needs to be made. Without such deliberate actions being taken, there is the ever present danger of reflection leading a practitioner down the garden path, without any meaningful changes being realised. Clare's position though provides a useful roadmap for inquiring practitioners to learn and take their practice to more advanced levels.

Clare Morton is a senior lecturer with the School of Veterinary Nursing (RVN, GDTE, MPP) and works on the Level 6 diploma as a learning advisor and lead moderator. Her specialist area lies in reflective practice and how we can integrate this into our professional and personal lives.

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