

# **Reflective writing for medical students**

**Denise Parker  
Dilys Thorp**

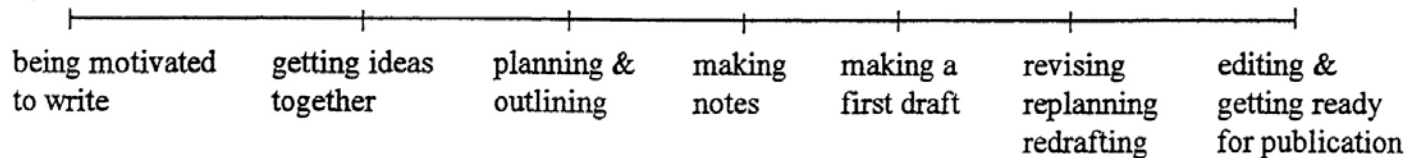
# **Objectives:**

**to enable you (students) to:**

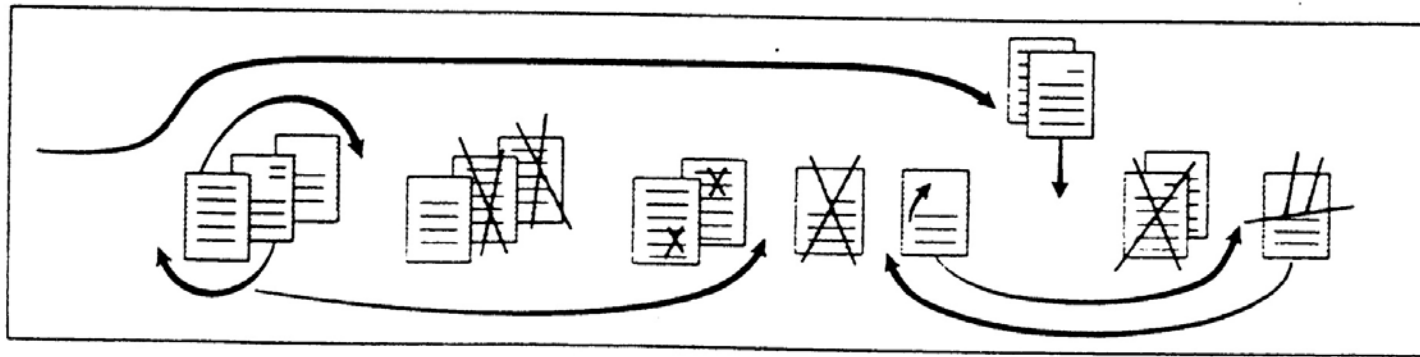
- consider the role of reflective writing**
- notice key features of reflective writing shown in sample PAs**
- understand the competencies & descriptors used in the assessment criteria for PAs**
- develop strategies for effective reflective writing**

# Writing as a messy process

Hedge (1988), describes the process in the form of linear stages like this:



However, this, she admits is an oversimplification, and Frank Smith's (1982 in Hedge 1988) diagram is more representative of the messy process that is involved.





# The writing process

## Three main groups of activities:

- prewriting (thinking & planning)
- writing & rewriting
- editing

# Genres of writing

Handouts of four different genres:

- a newspaper article
- an extract from an academic journal
- a letter
- an advertisement
- and...
- reflective writing



# Distinguishing features

- Layout
- Organisation and structure (e.g. paragraphs)
- Grammatical features (e.g. pronouns, clause complexity, sentence length, active v. passive verbs)

# Definitions of Reflective Writing

Boud Keogh & Walker's (1985:19) definition:

‘Reflection in the context of learning is a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation’.



# Definitions of Reflective Writing (contd):

‘the process of internally examining & exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates & clarifies meaning in terms of self, & which results in a changed conceptual perspective’

Boyd & Fales (1983, p100)



# The importance of reflective writing

- to develop skills that will be needed in future professional life, dealing with multifaceted problems for which there is no ideal solution
- to recognise the importance of being able to frame a problem before trying to solve it
- to be able to stand back from yourself and question your behaviours and attitudes
- to understand that problems/situations can be viewed in many different ways depending on the perspective of the person involved



# The importance of RW - contd

- Dewey (1933) argued that a person who is not sufficiently critical might reach a hasty conclusion without examining all the possible outcomes

Kember (2003:11)

# General Aim of Reflective Writing:

to assist students to internalise their learning in both cognitive and affective domains



# Why is reflection especially important for medics?

- It integrates theoretical learning & clinical practice
- It prepares medics for dealing with messy, ill-defined issues
- It is part of student-centred learning, action research & experiential learning
- It is an alternative to technical rationality, which forms the basis of traditional teaching

## Extract 1 – male

- *Meeting a man living with HIV and listening to him discussing his illness really shocked me and made me remember the reason why I chose to become a doctor. This experience helped me when I met a girl with cystic fibrosis..... the girl said that she knew there was not much time left for her and there was not a lot doctors could do for her. This made me feel angry and sad because I really wanted to help her but I knew I couldn't.*

## Extract 1 – male (contd)

- *The GMC states that doctors should be able to understand the impact of illnesses on patients and their families – these two experiences have certainly given me a small insight into the value of life and the impact of illness on patients and loved ones. I hope in future practice I will not forget this lesson and ensure that I always have time for patients and that I will treat them as people and not as illnesses*

## Extract 2 – female

- *On my first shift I showed up in an oversized uniform, without a pen, and without a clue as to what was expected of me! However, knowing how important it is to recognise my personal and professional limitations, I asked for help at every opportunity possible and was surprised at how willing staff were to help me despite being so busy. Reflecting on the experience showed me that at first I was not much use at all to anyone,*

## Extract 2 – female (contd)

- *however, the more the team helped me, the more I was able to help the team. I now confidently carry out the role that is expected of me and do everything I can to help others when they are unsure of things. I can now really see how important team work is in the medical setting and how valuable each member of the team is.*



## Extract 3 – female

- *My most significant experiences of working with others and of personal development have been continued exposures to patients in community settings and even more so at work. I find most patients easy to communicate with but have encountered more difficult scenarios with people who are frightened, uncooperative, angry or mentally ill. I am more confident in handling these situations but continually find it difficult on the wards where patients are often older or more ill.*

## Extract 3 – female (contd)

- *It was especially difficult over Christmas with patients who clearly just wanted someone to talk to and who would become tearful and tell me how lonely they were. It always stays with me long after the shift. Short of talking or holding a hand, I feel pretty hopeless, then guilty for having to walk away and go to the next patient. I'm sure I will experience this to a much greater extent as a doctor and I will continue to be aware of it and try to find how I personally will cope with it.*

# Extracts from a poorer model:

- **Reflection and analysis**
- ...However, as in Peninsula, much self-Directed Learning is required, and in most of my time available, I would study and revise past topics on my own, and would go to the library to study with some of my course mates sometimes. I understand that becoming more interactive while studying sets your mind to critical thinking, as when we share information, our brains does not just absorb, but also becomes more engaged as to judge the accuracy of the information

# Extracts from a poorer model (Contd)

- I have been carrying out individual learning most of time which I feel need to be balanced by doing more collaborative learning. Often in collaborative learning, I will seek the same partner constantly. I feel that this may not be the best as by pairing up with the same partner, he or she would only spot a mistake while maybe others would spot many more. This has an advantage as well, as the same partner would see the improvements and would follow up if I did not correct my previous mistake.

## Extracts from a poorer model (contd)

- After evaluating reviews and feedbacks given by peers and tutors, I realised XYZ had improved my confidence and ability to communicate effectively. Nevertheless, there are always rooms for improvement and I will continue to work to improve my communication skills. I also received some constructive feedback from my PBL group members and tutors. One of the feedbacks which I am targeting to improve is relating more previous case studies in the current case study unit

# Extracts from a poorer model

- **Reflection and analysis**
- ...However, as in Peninsula, much self-Directed Learning is required, and in most of my time available, I would study and **revise past topics on my own**, [D1] and would go to the library to study with some of my course mates sometimes. I understand that becoming more interactive while studying sets your mind to critical thinking, **as when we share information, our brains does not just absorb, but also becomes more engaged as to judge the accuracy of the information.**[D2]
- [D1]The Q is WHY ?
- [D2]Could be more clearly expressed – is it just ACCURACY of info that is at issue ?

- I have been carrying out individual learning most of time which I feel need to be balanced by doing more collaborative learning. Often in collaborative learning, I will seek the same partner constantly. [D1] I feel that this may not be the best as by pairing up with the same partner, he or she would only spot a mistake while maybe others would spot many more. This has an advantage as well, as the same partner would see the improvements and would follow up if I did not correct my previous mistake. [D2]
- [D1]Q is WHY? The underlying psych reasons need to be explored
- [D2]Unclear – needs to be more clearly thought out. Is he/she saying that actually it isn't really a problem to keep to the same partner? Clearer thinking needed

- After evaluating reviews and feedbacks given by peers and tutors, I realised XYZ had improved my confidence and ability to communicate effectively. Nevertheless, **there are always rooms for improvement [D2]** and **I will continue to work to improve my communication skills [D3]** . I also received some constructive **feedback [D4]** from my PBL group members and tutors. One of the feedbacks which I am targeting to improve is **relating [D5]** more previous case studies in the current case study unit

- **[D2]**What exactly ?
- **[D3]**How specifically ?
- **[D4]**What exactly ?
- **[D5]**Relating it to what ?



## Strategies to help with Reflective Writing:

- Write your diary entries immediately after the activity/ visit, then reflect and write a comment a few days later
- Explain your feelings in relation to your strengths, capacities, fears, weaknesses and biases
- Suggest alternative actions you might have taken (or might take next time) to improve the activity/ visit and make it a better learning experience

# Strategies (cont.)

- Give advice to yourself about what to do in the future
- Find questions which you need to think about/ issues which you don't yet understand, but need to understand!

# Use these phrases:

- I can see clearly that .....
- What I can't make sense of is .....
- What went well/ badly was .....
- I think / felt/ discovered/ wondered/ was aware that ...
- From the feedback I received, .....
- This was because .....
- Next time I shall .....
- In order to ....., I shall .....
- This will enable me to .....
- I need to .....
- I am planning to .....

# References:

Boud,D., Keogh,R. & Walker, D. (1985) *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. London: Kogan Page

Boyd, E.M. & Fales, A.W. (1983) Reflective learning: Key to learning from experience. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 23 (2), 99 -117.