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# Promoting Reflective Writing among Psychiatry Students

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on a study on the use of online learning to teach reflective writing to psychiatry students. The students learnt about reflection and reflective writing using an interactive learning unit and a discussion forum. They posted responses to an article at three levels of reflection. Their learning was assessed using a reflective essay. The majority of students engaged with the discussion forum though some had difficulty in distinguishing the levels of reflection. The students rarely commented on each other's posts. Modifications will be made for future use based on ongoing research.

## Introduction

There is an increasing emphasis on reflective practice in professional practice in medicine (Raw et al 2005). It is increasingly recognised as a skill crucial to lifelong learning. The Medical Council of Ireland (2007) list the encouragement of a "reflective practice" process as one of the key indicators of good practice.

Medical students in the School of Medicine and Medical Science (SMMS) in University College Dublin (UCD) complete a six-week rotation in Psychiatry, which includes both lectures and clinical practice. Their placements are in hospitals around Ireland. The use of online learning helps to ensure that students at all locations receive consistent teaching at a time and place that suits them.

To help students develop as reflective learners and become reflective practitioners, UCD Psychiatry lecturers created an online learning unit on reflection and reflective writing. The lecturers' role was to design, assess and evaluate the learning unit. UCD Teaching and Learning assisted in the design by providing expertise in the facilitation and assessment of reflection and reflective practice. UCD Media Services provided video recording and online learning development services. All three parties had previous experience of working together.

The elearning unit consists of a short, interactive lesson on reflection followed by an online discussion of a psychiatric topic. This discussion takes place at three, increasingly deep, levels of reflection. This mirrors the assessment criteria, which require students to write at deeper levels of reflection (Hatton & Smith 1995). The discussion is to help prepare students to write a reflective essay of 1,500 words. This essay is part of their formal assessment.

## Reflection and Reflective Practice

Schön (1983) developed the concept of the reflective practitioner based on his studies of how professionals actually worked. He argued that in the world of practice problems could not be solved solely by the application of technical rationality. Instead, the professional acted as a "reflective practitioner", who analysed, reflected and learnt from their experiences.

Moon (1999) has described reflection as a form of mental processing, like a form of thinking, which is used to fulfill a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. It is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and is largely based on the further processing of existing knowledge, understanding and emotions.

Hatton and Smith (1995) defined three categories of reflection: descriptive, dialogic and critical. *Descriptive Reflection* is a description of events with an element of reflection. (Descriptive writing is description without any discussion or reflection). Such reflection is largely based on the reflector's own perspective. *Dialogic Reflection* demonstrates a "stepping back" where reflectors question their own perspectives by exploring and analysing a range of possible explanations and points of view. In *Critical Reflection* the reflector explores and analyses the impact of wider social and cultural perspectives on the issue. The aim of reflection is to arrive at an outcome which may be a new understanding or perspective,

Raw et al (2005) describe reflection in medical practice as an awareness of thoughts/feelings about an event or events, a critical analysis of the situation and the development of a new perspective on the situation.

## **Discussion Forum**

Online discussion is best suited to the exploration of complex ideas and the consideration of multiple perspectives. It is rarely suited to reaching a definitive conclusion (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). It is, therefore, an appropriate tool for the exploration of the relatively complicated or unstructured ideas which Moon (1999) identifies as reflection and for the consideration of multiple perspectives which Hatton and Smith (1995) characterise as dialogic and critical reflection. Discussion works best when the participants have some knowledge of the topic under discussion and are prepared to apply that knowledge to explore questions of 'intriguing ambiguity'. There are no right or wrong answers to such questions but their exploration can help the development of critical thinking skills (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Garrison and Anderson (2003) describe such construction of meaning through discourse and reflection as 'cognitive presence'. This can only be effective when there is also 'social presence' and 'teaching presence'.

The role of the online teacher is to guide or tutor the participants by providing feedback and keeping the discussion on topic. Such a 'teaching presence' is essential to sustain effective participation in the forum (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Salmon (2004) describes this role as e-moderating. One part of the e-moderator's role is the development of 'social presence' so that the participants feel comfortable collaborating with each other online. Salmon (2004) stresses the equal importance of computer skills and support. The e-moderator must ensure that the students are able to use the discussion board and know how to post messages and reply to or comment on other postings. Technical support must be available in case of difficulties. 'Social presence' and technical skills are particularly important where students do not know each other and are new to the use of e-learning in general or discussion boards, in particular. Based on her action research on tutoring large numbers of students in the Open University (UK) Business School, Salmon (2004) developed her five-stage model for e-moderating. It illustrates a series of transformational steps where students develop from novices to independent learners. Reflection and critical thinking take place at Salmon's stages four and five, 'Knowledge Construction' and 'Development'.

## **The Study**

The design of the learning outcomes was based on the work of the main theorists in the area of reflection (Hatton & Smith 1995, Moon 1999, Brockbank & McGill 2007, Raw et al 2005). In particular, the learning activities were designed so that students could share their reflections with others; this was to counteract the argument that reflection is as a form of "navel-gazing" (Hatton & Smith 1995, Moon 1999, Brockbank & McGill 2007).

The team developed a storyboard based on the learning outcomes. This consisted of a mix of short video extracts from a lecture on reflection interspersed with interactive exercises, leading to the use of a discussion forum.

The extracts introduced the concept of reflection, its relevance to clinical practice and the categories of reflection. Exercises allowed the students to develop their understanding of the levels of reflection. The elearning unit concluded with a summary, instructions for the discussion forum and tips for the essay assignment.

To allow students to revisit the complex concept of reflection, a twelve-minute lecture on “Reflection and Reflective Writing” was given by Teaching and Learning to Psychiatry staff, which was recorded and edited by Media Services. This lecture and the accompanying PowerPoint slides were used as the basis of the elearning unit.

The elearning unit was developed in Articulate, a commercial, PowerPoint based authoring tool. Articulate allows authors to add quizzes, interactive exercises and attachments to a PowerPoint presentation and publish it in a web format. Once development was complete and approved by the lecturers, the elearning unit was uploaded to Blackboard, the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE), where it was made available to the students for a short period of time.

A ‘spark’ – an attention-grabbing headline, illustration or quotation – can be used to engage learners in an online discussion (Salmon, 2002). The spark for this discussion was a link to an article in *The Times* entitled “Depression drugs don’t work, finds data review” (Rose, 2008). The class was divided into groups to discuss this article. Each group had seven or eight randomly selected participants. Each member of the group had to write short posts on the article during week two of the rotation. The first post was written using descriptive reflection. Group members read and could comment on each others’ posts. Tutors gave feedback on the individual posts. The forums were only left open for a few days each to encourage a quick response. Medical students on rotation are very busy and it was felt that they would be more likely to complete the reflective learning task, if given a specific, narrow time-frame to do so.

In the third week of their rotation, the students were given a choice of two essay titles. Essays had to be submitted by the end of week four. The elearning unit and the discussions in the forum helped them to prepare for the essay. Most of the students’ grade was for the reflective essay. They received a small grade for participating in the online discussion.

## Findings

Statistics generated as Blackboard course reports show that ‘Reflection elearning’ (comprising the elearning unit and the discussion board) received 1,875 hits by students in the two-week period when the discussion boards were open in one of the four annual rotations. This represented just under 33% of the total hits on the Blackboard course. Fifty (50) students were registered for that rotation, giving a mean of 37.5 hits per student with a range from 77 to 3 hits. All students contributed under their own name. No anonymous contributions were permitted.

#Hits	0 Posts	1 Post	2 Posts	3 Posts	Total
60-77	0	1	1	7	9
40-59	0	3	2	7	12
20-39	5	6	2	8	21
0-19	3	2	2	1	8
Total	8	12	7	23	50

**Table 1:** Comparison of Number of Posts per Student with Number of Hits

The comparison of hits to posts shows that, in general, the students with the most hits made three posts, the maximum number possible, though there is one student in the 0-19 hits range who made all 3 posts. Almost half the class (23 students) made all three posts while 8 students made no posts at all.

	# Participants	Descriptive Reflection	Dialogic Reflection	Critical Reflection	Total
Group 1	7	4	3	3	10
Group 2	7	2	1	3	6
Group 3	7	2	3	4	9
Group 4	7	6	5	5	16
Group 5	7	6	7	4	17
Group 6	7	7	7	7	21
Group 7	8	5	6	5	16
Total	50	32	32	31	95

**Table 2:** Breakdown of reflective postings (50 students)

On previous rotations, there was a tendency for the number of contributions to decline with the increasing complexity of reflection. This may have been due to time pressure or difficulty in distinguishing between the different kinds of reflection. However, on this occasion postings were evenly distributed among the categories of reflection.

Tutors gave feedback to the majority of the students. Students rarely commented, though there was evidence that they read each others' posts and sometimes referred to them in their own posts.

A small mark (2%) was awarded for participation in the forums. It was hoped that this would increase the levels of participation from previous years (when it was not rewarded). To date, this does not seem to have made a difference. The discussion forums were one element of blended learning on reflection with the reflective essay bearing most of the marks. In the essay, students were awarded 40% of marks for reflection, 45% for their knowledge and 15% for presentation and communication skills. The relationship between their essay mark and their participation in the forum is under investigation.

Social presence online was not considered important as the students were already in their fifth year of medical school and so would have shared similar experiences and know each other, at least, casually in the 'real world'. They had been using Blackboard throughout their university studies but had little experience of discussion forums before taking the reflection elearning unit.

The persistence of text-based postings allows for content analysis (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011). Ho (2002) suggests that students evaluating their own participation against the objectives of the online discussion could perform a similar function to content analysis. This would be easier for educators to assess and would help the students to develop deeper learning through reflection. However, it is planned to perform content analysis on at least some of the groups.

## Conclusions

The reflective essay as part of the formal assessment of undergraduate Psychiatry has been in use for two years. The introduction of the elearning unit has provided consistent teaching across the various sites where Psychiatry is taught. It has allowed the exchange of ideas and experiences through the discussion forums among those sites. It has encouraged the sharing of reflection. The unit has also been of benefit to all engaged in marking the essays. Essay assessors work through the unit themselves and then use the structured marking system to award a grade to the essay. This unit on reflection in medical practice is the first of its kind to be introduced at undergraduate level in Ireland and is in its first year of use. Feedback from the students is being processed and will enable the development team to focus on specific areas of the unit in order to improve it. The elearning unit and forums will continue to be used with future classes.

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