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Reflective Writing in Basic Nursing Concept Course: A Qualitative Study of the Freshmen Nursing Students

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ABSTRACT

Background: Reflective writing is a mode of reflection that encourages nursing students to question their learning experiences and acquire new understandings. Though it may seem more difficult and demanding than other sorts of academic writing, it is an effective way of reinforcing nursing students' learning engagement. Moreover, nursing students need to be trained in reflective competence as early as possible since it is an essential attribute for developing autonomous, critical and advanced practitioners in the future. However, there remains less attention in utilization in bachelor nursing programs at the academic stage, particularly in the first year level.

Purpose: This study aimed to explore freshman nursing students' reflective writing experience in basic nursing concept courses.

Methods: Descriptive qualitative study was used in this study. Focus group interviews using zoom meeting platform were conducted with six participants recruited through purposive sampling using the inclusion criteria, such as freshman nursing students who successively take basic nursing concept courses in semester 1 and 2 in academic year of 2019-2020 and attended learning process using reflective writing. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: The experience of freshmen nursing students of reflective writing can be summarized into three themes, including difficulty at the initial process, challenging in the progress, and satisfying at the end of the process.

Conclusion: Although freshmen nursing students struggled to understand the purpose and work on reflective writing, by the end of the two semesters, it had become a fun and satisfying experience. It has benefited both the learning process and the students personal lives. Students will be challenged to become proficient in reflective writing and improve self regulated learning over the course of two semesters. Reflective writing utilization based on other guidelines could be adopted. Nursing student critical thinking evaluation in reflective writing successively is needed to be considered.

Keywords: Reflective learning; qualitative study; freshmen nursing students



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1. Introduction

Most nursing education, including school of nursing at Universitas Advent Indonesia, designate competencies of creativity, critical thinking, global citizenship, and leadership as graduation qualities (Mendikbud RI, 2020; Nurakhir, Palupi, Langveld, Nurmalia, 2020; Baker, Cary, Bento, 2020). Traditional learning strategies on the other hand, have failed to demonstrate that these learning outcomes are being developed (Raducu, 2021; Robbins, Onodipe, Marks, 2020). To fulfill these outcomes, nursing institutions are turning to alternative learning approaches. Reflective writing is now commonly utilized as an experiential learning approach (Chan, Wong, Luo, 2020). Several studies have demonstrated the imperative of employing reflective writing to allow nursing students to think deeply about their own and their peers' behaviors and experiences. Therefore, they may grow both personally and professionally (Forsberg, Rasmusson, 2020; Hoa, Tuan, 2021).

Reflective writing entails diving into a single experience to describe it. It may seem more difficult and demanding than other sorts of academic writing. It requires students to consider and write about their worries, errors, and achievements in their relationships with others or when performing a practical task (Ayers, Bryant, Missimer, 2020). However, numerous studies have shown that reflective writing facilitates benefits in learning. This is an interactive process in which students examine their experiences as learners, reflect on them through spontaneous or routine activities, discover and subconsciously construct new meanings and insights (Leng, 2020). Moreover, it anticipates new perspectives and integrates previous knowledge with new knowledge by putting theoretical knowledge into practice (Lucas, Anticevinch, Scheider, Smith, 2017).

As early as possible, nursing students need to be trained in reflective competence as it is an essential attribute for developing autonomous, critical and advanced practitioners in the future (Cheng, Huang, Yang, Chang, 2020). Specifically, in learning, this reflective competence improves self-knowledge, relating experience to knowledge, self-reflection, and self regulation. Therefore, in nursing education, reflective competence enhances nursing care and better understands their actions, developing their professional skills with more emotions (Contreras, et al, 2020). It was also identified as a strategy to assist nursing students better understand themselves, engage in self-reflection about the learning process, maximize their strengths, identify additional training needs, and strive for continuous growth in learning along the program (Barbagallo, 2021).

Whilst reflective writing suggested by (Yates, 2021) is a mode of reflection that encourage nursing students to question their learning experiences and acquire new understandings, it remains less attention in utilization in bachelor nursing program in academic stage, particularly in the first year level. Moreover, it has not been found in the material survey for the Faculty Lesson Plan for 2015-2019 at the Faculty of Nursing in Universitas Advent Indonesia (UNAI) Bandung, Indonesia. Therefore, reflective writing needs to be introduced to nursing students as early as possible. First level nursing students will be trained using reflective writing to obtain the learning outcomes set by KKNI 2016 in the Basic Nursing Concepts (KDK) 1 and 2 course for two semesters in the academic year 2019-2020. Then the students' experience will be explored through online focus group discussion using semi-structured questions to find out how the students' experience during the learning process using reflective writing.



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2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This present study was a qualitative descriptive design using a focus group. When the aim is to develop rich descriptions and obtain inside information about a phenomenon from someone who has experienced it, this strategy is ideal (Polit and Beck, 2018). Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews because the interactive process of sharing and comparing understandings and viewpoints in a group, as well as engaging in conversations initiated by other group members, may provide additional and different insights (Creswell, 2018).

2.2. Setting and participants

The study was undertaken at the Universitas Advent Indonesia, a private university in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia which offers a total of 14 higher education degrees, two of which belong to the faculty of nursing science: diploma and bachelor of nursing. Specifically, the study was carried out within the bachelor nursing degree, which has a duration of four academic years. Basic nursing concepts course 1 and 2 placement distributed in first and second semester of the bachelor nursing program. Hence this study was carried out in the academic year of 2019 and 2020.

The participants in the study were purposely recruited, they were freshmen nursing students enrolled on Basis Nursing Concepts 1 and 2, who had not previously experienced the reflective writing as one of the learning strategies used. A total of 7 freshmen nursing students were recruited in focus group discussion, who successively took a basic nursing concepts course in the first and second semester of 2019-2020 academic year.

2.3 Data collection

The data were collected through focus group discussion via zoom meeting platform, using semi-structured interview guidelines for 90 minutes. The ten questions contained to guide the focus group discussion were made to get specific information related to their experiences in the basic nursing concepts 1 and 2 courses using reflective writing. The interview was conducted after the students completed the basic nursing concepts course in the second semester of the 2019-2020 academic year. The eight times reflective writing were given as a requirement of completing six topics in accordance to predetermined learning objectives. The topics included are ethical issues in nursing practice, legal aspects in nursing practice, ethical legal decision making, critical thinking concepts, assessment in nursing process and intervention in nursing process. Although reflective writing was one of the learning strategies in higher education students, it was still unfamiliar to the freshman nursing students. The freshmen nursing students were introduced and guided in reflective writing, as well as what things should be contained in reflective writing requirements. The interview was recorded using a zoom recording media while the interview was conducted and the results of observations were written as field notes.

2.4 Data analysis



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Qualitative content analysis was used in this study. It involved analyzing the content of narrative data to identify prominent themes specifically, N-Vivo 10 software was used for data management. The protocol applied: (1) imported interview transcripts into software for coding and analysis, and 2) conducted coding and identified themes from codes. For validation, researchers sought through taking back findings to participants for verification (Creswell, 2018).

2.5 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was maintained through the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To obtain high data credibility for the results of this study, member checking was employed. This technique was used by giving the interviews findings to all participants in the form of transcripts to determine the suitable data obtained from participants. Transferability was obtained through thick description and purposeful sampling. It was used to provide a detailed description of the exploration themes and participants were selected purposively to facilitate transferability of the enquiry. The dependability was obtained through stepwise replication and peer examination. Stepwise replication was used by researchers to analyze the same data separately and compare the results. In addition, peer examination was used by discussing the research process and findings with other colleague who have experience of qualitative research. Lastly, confirmability was obtained by reflexive journal. Researchers kept the reflexive documents in order to clearly interpret findings derived from data.

2.6 Ethical consideration

This study received approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee Universitas Advent Indonesia (Reference Number 031/KEPK-FIK.UNAI/EC/XI/19). Written information was presented to participants, and they were given time to determine whether or not they wished to participate. Informed consent was signed by all participants and they were told that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that they might withdraw at any time without giving a reason. After the focus group interview, all participants were given the opportunity to talk with the first author if they needed debriefing.

3. Results

3.1 Characteristics of participants

The participants in this study were seven freshman nursing students. Most of them were aged 18-19 years old (86%), female students were 4 (57%) and male students were 3 (43%).

3.2 Themes emerged

Freshmen nursing students' experiences of learning basic nursing concept units through reflective writing strategy, were evident in the text. These perspectives were organized into the following themes: (1) difficult at the initial process, (2) challenging in the progress, (3) satisfying at the end of the process. These themes, along with selected quotes are presented below.



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3.2.1 Difficult at the initial process

Most of the participants expressed that the learning strategy using reflective writing in basic nursing concepts course was tough at the first and initially several times. The background of most freshmen nursing students were not familiar with this learning strategy. They have never used reflective writing in previous learning experiences during high school. As a result, most of them had difficulty expressing their feelings in writing. The participants' statements are quote below:

"At first, the professor's requirement for reflective writing was quite difficult (while scratching head)...I didn't know where to begin or what to write in my essay...." (P1)

"...It was hard at the beginning (pause); this is my first experience doing reflective writing, despite having been provided instructions on how to do so....I really didn't understand what the purpose of this learning requirement..(P2)

"This is the first time I've ever done a learning task like this.... During my studies in high school, I've never done any requirement like this, so this is my first time; I have learned to express my feelings and learning experiences using reflective writing...It was an initial hard work ...(P4)

The use of reflective writing as one of the learning evaluation strategies to obtain predetermined learning objectives has a psychological effect on freshmen nursing students. Difficulties in meeting the rubric requirements have an impact on a mental or emotional strain, it took time to adapt this new learning strategy. This experience was articulated by two participants:

"It was very stressful until the third time I did reflective writing...I didn't understand the purpose of doing reflective writing at first until at several times (pause) I did understand why professor required this task..." (P5)

"The requirement for reflective writing has put a pressure on me, particularly in terms of achieving rubric score (pause)...in some of the early feedback rubrics, some points were not achieved. In several of the latter rubrics, I felt I reach the maximum point..." (P7)

3.2.2 Challenging in the progress

The freshmen nursing students have experienced growth in the learning process using reflective writing. The use of learning, unlearning, and relearning has made students more self regulated in the learning process of basic nursing concepts for two semesters. This experiences was described as follow:

"During these two semesters of learning basic nursing concepts, I have improved my ability to learn more, particularly in relearning parts on reflective writing. I need to keep going because learning is never stops..." (P2)



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"I've learned more.....thanks to reflective writing that incorporates learning, unlearning, and relearning (pause);... I needed to learn more about what I didn't know and what I had misunderstood.." (P5)

"....what I've done in terms of learning in the past, and how I may better in the future..." (P6)

"...help us more from the feedback to improve my learning (pause);...provide direction to me in anticipation of encountering the next learning process..." (P7)

The freshmen nursing students felt challenged along the process of learning the basic nursing concepts 1 and 2. Feedback in the assessment rubric given by the professor directed freshmen nursing students to be able to use reflective writing as a means to obtain predetermined learning objectives. This was stated by participants as follow:

"While doing reflective writing, I was able to understand the topics discussed (pause); I reviewed the related materials and I remembered them..." (P1)

"...this is what we learned from the class. For example, we were asked to choose one of the topics relevant to the learning objectives, then use reflective writing to better understand the concept..." (P3)

"I realize that reflective writing really helped me to understand the concepts as written in the learning objectives (pause); in the essay, I reflect what we learn about the concepts..." (P7)

Learning, unlearning and relearning process were used in basic nursing concepts course 1 and 2 along the two semesters. It challenged freshmen nursing students to more proficient in reflective writing competency, as what articulated below:

"...despite my first confusion, I was challenged by my professor to try to comprehend step by step reflective writing using learning, unlearning and relearning process." (P2)

"....when the professor provides feedback, I want to achieve the maximum point as mentioned in the evaluation rubric..." (P4)

3.2.3 Satisfying at the end of process

At the end of the basic nursing concepts learning process, freshmen nursing students feel better understand the purpose of using reflective writing. Both predetermined learning objectives and reflective writing competencies are fulfilled. The articulated of this experiences as follow:

"Difficult a beginning and became easier to used (pause); ... as a means of obtaining learning objectives (pause);....after doing reflective writing several times, it becomes easier for me to express my feelings in the learning process..." (P5)



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"....reflective writing taught me what do I know, then how much I learned (pause); after several reflective writing assignments, easy after all..." (P6)

Using reflective writing, freshmen nursing students admitted that it is easier for them to comprehend, understand and remember the concepts being studied. Yet the concepts learned are abstract at first, using reflective writing can elaborate on specific applicable concepts. The two participants articulated their experiences as follow:

"I feel reflective writing has satisfied me (pause);...remember and comprehend some concepts being studied...the concepts were get in my mind..."(P4)

"...after understanding how to do reflective writing about the learning process (pause); this method was very good in my mind. Finally I understand the concept better and associate it with practical things..." (P7)

The experience of learning basic nursing concepts for two semesters has a positive impact on freshmen nursing students, namely being able to apply learning concepts in everyday life and it satisfies students' feelings, as stated below:

"....because the theoretical concept has been understood using reflective writing, I automatically exemplified....downloaded already. The concept was unintentionally implemented...." (P6)

"The concept of decision making process discussion last semester, gave me direction in making the current decision. For example, whether to go home or stay in the dorm due to the lock down provision of Covid-19 pandemic.." (P3)

"I feel this process of reflective writing exercises has helped me think more critically (pause);...I use analysis more in making decisions, such as complying with health protocols during the Covid-19 pandemic...." (P2)

Comments by freshmen nursing students indicated that reflective writing has a positive impact on learning experiences and personal life. Reflective learning was seen as an excited, enjoyable and satisfying things. Indeed, there was a change in the way of thinking. These experiences were describe below:

"....I really enjoyed the reflective learning process, though it was very difficult at first. When I was competent in doing reflective writing, It made me happy. I feel I was trained to think critically..."(P1)

"....in terms of my own life, I feel that reflective writing has impacted me. I'm better at making decisions, logically in thinking..." (P4)

4. Discussion



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The current study revealed that reflective writing in the basic nursing concept course learning process experienced by freshmen nursing students were difficult at the initial process, challenging in the progress, and satisfying at the end of the process.

4.1 Difficult at the initial process

The result of this study showed that reflective writing was difficult in the process of learning, unlearning and relearning. It was consistent with results found both in Indonesia and other countries. Aliarosa's (2020) research findings shows that nursing students have not been able to understand the instructions in doing reflective writing and how to relate it to the case study being studied. Another study also confirmed that the use of writing structures of students who do not use reflective writing guidelines are less able to express in depth events in writing. They tend to rewrite what has been read without expressing feelings, opinion or judgments on the learning process or the material being studied. Furthermore, the researchers found that there were not results of analysis, evaluation and conclusions in the writing (Adeani, Febriani, Syafryadin, 2020; Colomer, Serra, Canabate, Bubnys, 2020). Moreover, learning experiences, especially in the Covid-19 pandemic era, where electronics become a medium of learning, has impacted nursing students' mental health. Various learning strategies, including academic writing are demanded in obtaining the learning objectives both at the academic and professional stages of nursing education in Indonesia. Students experience many difficulties, including doing requirements that are dominated by writing (Angelica & Tambunan, 2021; Gultom & Tambunan 2021; Situmorang & Tambunan, 2021). Accordingly, Holder, Sim, and Pallath (2019) validated that indeed reflective writing is a distinguished type of writing from other academic writing. Writers are expected to write not only to reflect what they feel and what happens when reading a book. However, the writer also has to analyze and explore materials related to it. Yet, this ability could be trained and developed to be fruitful and various in meaning (Abiogu, et al., 2020).

4.2 Challenging in the progress

The process of basic nursing concepts 1 and 2 learning for two semesters has a positive impact on freshmen nursing students. Most students in this study commented on improved self-regulated learning. It has been revealed that reflective writing promotes self regulated learning. Nuckles et al, (2020) validated that the self regulated learning is divided into three phases: forethought, performance and reflection. Learners who self-regulate develop objectives and organize their learning during the forethought phase. Learners work in the assignment, check their progress, seek support when needed, and focus their attention during the performance phase. Learners reflect on their development and the cognitive skills they utilized during the reflection phase. Obviously, the three phases were a challenge for freshmen nursing students. Through reflective writing, freshmen nursing students go deeper into the knowledge they just learned. This results study is consistent with qualitative studies by Zohouri, Amini and Sagheb (2017). Reflective writing has encouraged students to think more deeply about experiences, feelings and concerns about certain topics. Furthermore, various aspects concerned include emotional experience, effective communication, empathy,



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spirituality, and dignity (Reljic, Pajnkihar, Fekonja, 2019). Where these concepts are often found in the nursing.

Feedback is an essential matter in the reflective learning process. The major purpose of written feedback on students' reflective writing is to stimulate and improve students' reflective skills to promote their professional development. In the present, this has challenged freshmen nursing students to be more competent in reflective writing. Shvidko (2020) suggests five guidelines for responding to student reflective writing that take into consideration the interpersonal element of feedback. These principles are delivering positive remarks, avoiding appropriation, responding as a reader, integrating students in the revision process, and minimizing student frustration. It is a way how instructors provide supportive and encouraging feedback to students that demonstrates their genuine interest in their ideas. Moreover, acknowledges students efforts and writing progress, respects their voice and agency, and fosters their growing motivation and self confidence as writers (Hoo, Tan and Deneen, 2019; Lee, 2020).

4.3 Satisfying at the end of process

It is vital to develop reflective writing skills in nursing students. Reflective writing for nursing students does not have to be difficult. They can develop this competence early in the study program, which is the responsibility of nursing educators. The merits of reflection writing as an instructional tool, according to Kadam et al (2020), is that it guides students' critical thinking about their own learning process. This study revealed that giving students the opportunity to practice the process of reflection and gradually enhance their reflective skills is possible. This is supported by the students' end of first reflection analysis, which revealed that they did not have a clear notion of reflection, but by several times or the end of 8th reflection none of the students were there without a clear concept. This demonstrates that all freshmen nursing students were made aware of the entire reflective writing process and strategy. It's also possible that more of this type of instruction will implant high quality reflecting skill in nursing students, boosting their proficiency with a holistic and ethical approach. Reflective summaries have been shown to help in reflective practice (Sweet, et al. 2019).

Reflective thinking is an important life skill linked to critical thinking in nursing students (El-demerdash et al., 2020). Reflective thinking is the ability to use past and present observations and experiences to influence decisions about what happened or is happening now in order to direct and control future activities (Dewey, 1993). It's a style of thinking and reflecting on how one responds to new information. This entails eliciting new insights, bringing previous experiences into play, and considering how "old knowledge" affects new situations. It also includes the interpretation and appraisal of one's own experiences, as well as the creation of meaning, justification of actions, and problem solving. This reflective thinking represents a cornerstone in the development of critical thinking which is the process of using concepts, applications, analysis, synthesis and evaluation to answer a question or draw conclusions (Eldemerdash, 2020). Nursing professionals must posses a variety of skills, including critical thinking. Nursing professionals can reflect on nursing problems and seek solutions throughout the nursing process, especially in the face of rapid changes in the medical environment. Nursing professionals must need to master problem solving competency (Von Colln-Appling and Giuliano, 2017). This must be developed from



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education. In the present study it has been commented by the participants that reflective writing has made students better understand the concepts learned and were able to apply them in personal life. For example, making decisions in students' everyday life.

When students are having fun, they more likely to learn more effectively and for a longer period of time (Wang, et al, 2020). This was reflected by freshmen nursing students who appreciated the reflective writing exercise and approach. Reflective learning was seen as an exciting, enjoyable and satisfying thing. This is evidenced by theory of Self-Determination described by Ryan and Deci (2020). This theory posits an intrinsic motivation spectrum encompasses a person's incentive to complete a task. An intrinsically motivated person performs a task because it is enjoyable or fulfilling in and of itself. An extrinsically motivated person, on the other hand, performs an activity because of the benefits. If the activity at hand is not intrinsically satisfying a person is also extrinsically driven to complete it out of self-control or because it is thought vital. Intrinsic motivation is preferred because intrinsically motivated conduct is more long lasting (Khan and Maes, 2021). In addition, this theory claims that when essential psychological requirements such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met, an externally motivated behavior can become internalized over time (Grolnick, et al., 2014).

5. Implication and Limitation

The outcomes of this study elucidates freshman nursing students' experiences of how reflective writing utilization as one of learning strategies supported their learning outcomes obtained during the basic nursing concept course learning. This study provides insights concerning the importance of reflective writing strategy in nursing education. Developing freshmen nursing students' reflective thinking skills can help them understand concepts better, make better decisions, and transfer knowledge. As a result, one of the key goals instructors, especially in science education, should be to create an effective learning environment that promotes a culture of reflection. Making scientific conceptions more real and reflective of actual scientific activities, which may promote students' development of reflective thinking skills, is a highly important responsibility for teachers. This study was limited to a single university and a small group of students, which could be considered a limitation the study. Despite the fact that the students' narratives were dense with meanings and descriptions, the methodological approach was determined to be appropriate.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, as suggested by the results of this study and based on recent investigations, the adoption of writing learning strategies such as reflective writing is an effective way of reinforcing nursing students' learning engagement. Though at first, freshmen nursing students had difficulty in understanding the purpose and working on reflective writing, it became a fun and satisfying thing at the end of the course. Reflective writing has had a positive impact on both the learning process and students' personal lives. While learning objectives obtained, students used the concepts learned in the practice of daily life. The two semesters reflective writing process provides a challenge for students to be proficient in doing reflective writing and improve self-regulated learning. However, reflective writing utilization based on other guidelines



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such as Gibb's cycle or John's model could be adapted. Nursing student critical thinking evaluation in reflective writing successively is needed to be considered.

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Conflict of interest

This author disclosed no possible conflicts of interest (s)

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