Educate, Excite, Engage

Critical self-reflection for nurse educators: Now more than ever!

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The dynamic healthcare world and increased demands on nurses call for a parallel shift in nursing education that is optimally geared toward effectiveness. Just as student nurses are taught to reflect on their practice to effectively meet clients' needs, educators also need to be well versed in self-reflection to enhance their teaching methods. Self-reflection is the deliberate consideration of experiences, which when guided by the literature helps an individual gain insight and improve practice. Educators should not only opt for personal reflection but should also seek the views of their students and peers. Self-reflection becomes critical when it goes beyond mere reflection, questioning teaching assumptions, and addressing their social and political context. Given the remarked benefits of using self-reflection in education, and the current COVID-19 global repercussions which have urged faculties to try alternative methods of teaching, a concise guide to self-reflection is hereby provided for use by nurse educators.

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Introduction

Over the past years, there has been an increased interest in the understanding of teaching effectiveness in higher educational institutions (Kirpalani, 2017). Another notion that has received importance in the literature is self-efficacy (Hemmings, 2015), a key component of Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory which is "concerned with judgement of personal capabilities" (Bandura, 1997, p.11), described within higher education as the educator's personal belief and confidence in his/her's ability to carry out appropriate actions to attain specific performance goals (Artino, 2012). These two concepts are interrelated; teachers' self-efficacy is interlinked with teaching effectiveness, both with respect to the teacher's performance and also as it pertains to students' achievements (Klassen & Tze, 2014). Although all educators aim to be effective, societal and healthcare changes and increasing demands on nurses (Handwerker, 2012; Nielsen, Noone, Voss, & Rae, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2020) expect nurse educators to continuously monitor their teaching practice to adequately prepare future nurses. Just as student nurses and practicing nurses reflect on their practice to improve their professional and personal skills and knowledge in line with today's challenges and requirements (Jootun & McGarry, 2014), nursing faculties should also follow suit to ensure successful teaching. Given the current unprecedented global situation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic,

where nursing faculties are adjusting their teaching and learning methods, ensuring success in the revised teaching methods is paramount, now more than ever.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of using personal reflection, or self-reflection to improve nursing education and to promote this practice among nurse educators working within nursing faculties worldwide, especially during these extraordinary times. An outline of the use of self-reflection amongst nurse educators is provided followed by a description of the concept of self-reflection. Reference is made to a deeper and more comprehensive concept of self-reflection, that is, critical self-reflection. Furthermore, based on the identified literature, the author provides a concise guide to self-reflection for nurse educators, referring to current times.

Use of self-reflection by nurse educators

Reflection is defined as the individual's deliberate consideration of a particular experience, guided by the literature to gain insight, ultimately developing and improving practice (Graham & Johns, 2019). It can help route teaching practices towards effectiveness (Gardner, 2014), resulting in the development of scholarship in the teaching of nursing (Lubbe & Botha, 2020). Self-reflection, together with confidence building, is considered a distinctive requirement for the advancement of educators, particularly those who are new to the nursing faculty (Jetha, Boschma & Clauson, 2016). As highlighted by Lubbe & Botha (2020, p.9), "students can smell fear and poor knowledge." If the educator is not knowledgeable or confident in his/her teaching practices, his/her credibility may be questioned. Self-refection can help identify gaps in knowledge and the need for

professional development in a particular area (Lubbe & Botha, 2020). Given the ongoing developments in healthcare, educators must remain in touch with the dynamic health care needs (Lubbe & Botha, 2020), while embarking on a lifelong self-reflective journey to sustain their continuous professional development (Graham & Johns, 2019; Jetha et al., 2016; Lubbe & Botha, 2020). Furthermore, if nurse educators are not trained and well versed in self-reflection, their role in promoting the use of reflective learning among their students will be limited (Kemp & Baker, 2013; Naicker & van Rensburg, 2018).

Self-reflection is not only a means to ensure effectiveness in the teaching of nursing. According to Kirpalani (2017), the process of self-reflecting on the educator's teaching methods may be an effective supplement to evaluative quantitative measures that are already available, such as students' evaluations. These may not truly reflect the efficacy of the teacher's interventions (Vanacore & Pellegrino, 2019), however, self-reflection activities that consider students' informal feedback have proven to be beneficial (Greer et al., 2010).

Engaging in self-reflection in the nursing faculty

Given the remarked benefits of engaging in self-reflection, the nurse educator, who is a reflective practitioner, should continuously explore the question, "Why do I teach the way I do?" Lubbe and Botha (2020, p.7). Following the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic where many nursing education institutions had to transition from traditional classroom-based education to online teaching and learning, keeping this question in mind helps nurse educators ensure that any revisions being made are still geared toward effectiveness.

According to Kirpalani (2017), reflections may be carried out on:

- The teaching content − reflecting on whether the content is adequately updated to current events and needs;
- The teaching processes − the understanding of how students learn;
- And the teaching premise − seeing one's contribution to the overall goals of the institution.

Once an issue is identified, Kirpalani (2017) suggests deciding on the appropriate time to engage in reflection. Reflection is concerned with three critical time periods of practice: before; in; and on action. In the study by Lubbe & Botha (2020), where they elucidated on their teaching reflective journey before action, reflection was done through self-assessment by looking at their personal teaching development and experience and relating this to the context in which they had to teach, while also identifying their own learning needs. Reflection in action was done during teaching; by getting students' feedback, and acting on it right away (Lubbe & Botha, 2020). Reflection on action involved getting an informal evaluation of the course content, style, and presentation, learning from feedback, and carrying out the necessary revisions (Lubbe & Botha, 2020).

In reflection, apart from contemplating on personal experiences and looking at theory and research, Brookfield (2017) suggests that educators should ask for their students' and colleagues' views. In Kemp and Baker (2013)'s study, where one of the authors, a nurse educator, reflected both in action and on action in revising a continuous professional development program, the educator amplified his reflection by collecting student evaluations for feedback and discussing his views with his peers. This enabled the author to identify several positive outcomes and opportunities for improvement (Kemp & Baker, 2013).

Critical self-reflection

Despite the various methods outlined to embark in this lifelong developing process, this approach can remain superficial because of its technical dimension (Brookfield, 2017). Critical self-reflection goes beyond that. Legare and Armstrong (2017) refer to critical self-reflection as a deeper state of personal reflection, one which was found to support the transition from clinical practice to the nursing faculty, however, a more appropriate definition that looks beyond deep reflection to ensure comprehensiveness, was provided by Brookfield (2017). According to Brookfield (2017), in education, self-reflection becomes critical when the identified teaching practices are seen within their social and political context. In being critical, self-reflecting educators must understand and question the power exerted by education and the wider society on the teaching processes and interactions being carried out, consequentially challenging the hegemonistic processes (Brookfield, 2017). Hence, to be a critical self-reflective educator, one should look beyond his/her reflection, exploring the impact of outside forces (including the faculty itself) on teaching practices and not holding back from questioning assumptions and beliefs commonly accepted as normal and common sense. Moreover, he/she should uncover and reframe any processes whereby teaching practices benefit mostly those in power, those in control in structuring educational experiences (Rothman, Kelly-Woessner & Woessner, 2011), such as the educator him/herself, even if this is viewed by the faculty members and administrators as naturalistic and orderly (Brookfield, 2017; Rothman et al., 2011), as this will not be effective toward student education in the long term (Brookfield, 2017).

The use of critical self-reflection is illustrated in Lubbe and Botha (2020)'s study where they share their journal of reflective practice. Although their module's learning outcomes were already set within the framework, Lubbe & Botha (2020) challenged hegemonistic processes, asking for their students' input on their learning needs. With further planning and evaluation, they succeeded in ensuring scholarship in their teaching.

The use of critical self-reflection is particularly warranted in these extraordinary circumstances. Educators should not hold themselves back from questioning changes in module curricula and delivery, where practical placements may be on hold or inadequately being covered, or where new online methods of teaching and learning are being used. Attention must also be given to equilibrate the power dynamics in the virtual classroom, particularly if student interactions are noticed to be minimal or completely absent. "Sharing power" with students may help them achieve a sense of identity within the online learning community, and avoid disconnectedness (Koole, 2014). Given that students are less likely to perceive the faculty as able to identify their educational needs (Rothman et al., 2011), it is important, now, more than ever, that nurse educators reflect on their new teaching practices with a critical perspective to ensure that students' learning needs are still being met, in line with the evolving healthcare world.

A guide to self-reflection for nurse educators

Despite the recognition of value from reflective practice, it was determined that nurse educators do not necessarily endeavor to develop their reflective practices (Naicker & van Rensburg, 2018).

Self-reflection on teaching practices may not be automatic for most educators. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many nurse educators are being urged to take on new teaching methods. Rather than opting for a particular teaching method and style, or making assumptions, nurse educators should see this period as an opportunity to deeply engage in reflective practices. Various recommendations and strategies for engaging in self-reflection within the nursing faculty have been outlined in the literature and referred to in this article. A concise strategy to help educators to start is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
A guide to self-reflection for nurse educators

Questions to ask[a]	Prompts and tips
Why should I teach this way?	Never assume − always keep this question in mind.
	Asking students for feedback will help.
	Following the transition to online teaching because of the COVID-19 pandemic, are you engaging in certain teaching practices that benefit yourself, your students, or both?
What should I focus on?	Is there a problem that you have been thinking about?
	Is there a situation that you are curious about and requires reframing?
	Following the transition to online teaching, what do you think are students missing out on? Are these negatively impacting on their learning outcomes?
Where do I start?	You do not need to be formal or complex at the start.
	Make sure that you couple in significance and meaning with your reflections.
	Consider having this exercise formal by starting a teaching portfolio.
When is the best time to self-reflect?	You can reflect before, in, and on action.
	Make a plan. No matter how busy your schedule is, make sure you allocate time for self-reflection.
	A reflective diary or an online folder to keep track of thoughts may help.
Who can help me in self-reflection?	No matter how proficient you are, support is always warranted.
	Consider informal/formal feedback from students and peers.
	Look into theory and research.
How can I take this to the next level?	Self-reflection is about questioning your assumptions. It means getting out of your comfort zone.
	Be critical. Have you thought about other influences?
	In current times, seek opportunities, rather than barriers, or critically think solutions.
Do I have the required resources?	Guidelines/frameworks can help you keep your self-reflection exercises focused and systematic.
	Time is the most important resource. Ensure that you are dedicating enough time to self-reflect regularly.

[a] Based on Kirpalani (2017)'s and Lubbe & Botha (2020)'s work.

Conclusion

To increase nurse educators' self-efficacy and effectiveness in their teaching practices, and to meet the demands of students in an ever-changing healthcare environment, the development of self-reflective skills is encouraged within the nursing faculty. Self-reflection can be carried out on an individual level; however, it is more likely that the educator progresses to a higher level if students and peer feedback are factored in. Self-reflection is a starting point, not an endpoint. Educators should embark on a lifelong self-reflective journey to sustain their continuous professional development, and learn to be critical, looking at identified issues/problems within their social and political context for obtaining meaningful outcomes. The benefits of reflection extend beyond improving effectiveness in teaching. Only when educators are well versed in using self-reflection can they ask their students to incorporate this approach, which is a

means of learning and practice development. In light of the benefits associated with the engagement in self-reflective practice, and especially given the current global situation that limits teaching delivery, this article provided a concise guide to self-reflection for nurse educators.

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