

Reflective Journaling

A Journal is not quite the same as a diary:

- A journal need not be written in every day.
- A journal does not record so much what you do as what you *think* and how you *feel about* what you do, about your life experiences and encounters, about what happens to you.
- A journal is much more deeply reflective than a diary.

You may be in this class for deeply personal reasons: you may be searching to figure out what you believe. If this is the case, maintaining a personal journal can be a very fruitful way to explore religion in a deeply personal way. Even if you are here only out of academic curiosity, I am interested in your personal response to the material about which you are learning. Journaling is a way for you to share your thoughts and feelings about the course material in an informal and more personal way than your other work in this course will allow for.

What you should do:

Maintain a personal journal (electronically or *legibly* handwritten), reflecting on what you have learned each day/week from what you have read, heard, done in class, explored on the Web, etc. How has the information touched or "spoken" to you? What did you find most interesting? surprising? thought provoking? What were your thoughts? You may feel free to interpret or modify any beliefs or practices you learn about to suit yourself personally. More question prompts:

To demonstrate your interest:

- Without looking at your notes, what was most memorable or stands out in your mind about today's class (or what you read)?
- What was the most surprising and/or unexpected idea expressed in today's discussion (or your reading)? Why did you find it surprising?
- Looking back at your notes, what would you say was the most stimulating idea discussed in today's class (or the reading)? Why did you find it so stimulating?
- For you, what interesting questions remain unanswered about today's topic?

To reflect on relevance:

- In your opinion, what was the most useful idea discussed in today's class (or the reading)? How might you make use of it?
- During today's class (or reading), what idea(s) struck you as things you could or should put into practice? Why did you feel this way about the idea?
- What example or illustration cited in today's class (or the reading) could you relate to the most (or best helped you to understand)? Explain.

To express your attitude/opinion:

- Would you agree or disagree with this statement: . . .? Why?
- What was the most persuasive or convincing argument (or counterargument) that you heard expressed in today's discussion (or encountered in your reading)? Why did you find it so convincing?
- Was there a position taken in today's class/reading that you strongly disagreed with, or found to be disturbing and unsettling? What thoughts did you have regarding this position?
- What idea expressed in today's class/reading strongly affected or influenced your personal opinions, viewpoints, or values? In what way?

To practice analytical thinking:

- What did you perceive to be the major purpose or objective of today's class (or this section of the reading)?
- What do you think was the most important point or central concept communicated during today's presentation/reading assignment?

Making conceptual connections:

- What relationship did you see between today's topic and other topics previously covered in this course?
- What was discussed in class/reading today that seemed to connect with what you are learning or have learned in other course(s)?

In exploring, discovering, expanding, and/or developing your own worldview, you might want to try some of the "soul surveys" at Beliefnet.com: [Belief-o-matic](#), [Your Spiritual Type](#) These can give you some sense of where you stand in relation to others. You are encouraged to include the results in your journal and comment on them. You might take these surveys at the beginning and again at the end of the semester to see if/how you have changed over the course of several months through this deep exploration.

Some questions for personal reflection will be raised in class that you can explore in your journal. [Here are some specific questions to get you started](#)

Grading criteria: There are no "right" and "wrong" ideas if they are yours. I will not judge your ideas, but I will judge the way and depth to which you explore and express them.

- **Quantity/content (50%):**
 - Have you submitted journaling on time, as requested by mentor?
 - Are your entries long enough (as requested by mentor) to substantially reflect what you've been doing and thinking with regard to course content?
 - Have you addressed a representative *variety* of sources from which learning has taken place (reading, Website explorations, class discussions, videos, activities, etc.)?
- **Quality (50%):**

- Are you writing *your thoughts*, not just summarizing content or parroting back what others have said?
- Depth of thought: originality, insight, development of personal viewpoints/philosophical ideas, etc. Have you posed and responded to questions that are personally challenging?

Created by [Laura Ellen Shulman](#)

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Last updated: October 10, 2005

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Self reflection is identified as an important way of progressing our learning. New nurse practitioner residents are required to keep a journal recording their experiences from clinical practice.

“Reflection is an essential part of professional practice as reflecting on the past increases our expertise in the present and for the future by providing new insights and integrating theory into practice.” Preceptorship – The right start in your post- Central Manchester & Manchester Children’s University NHS trust

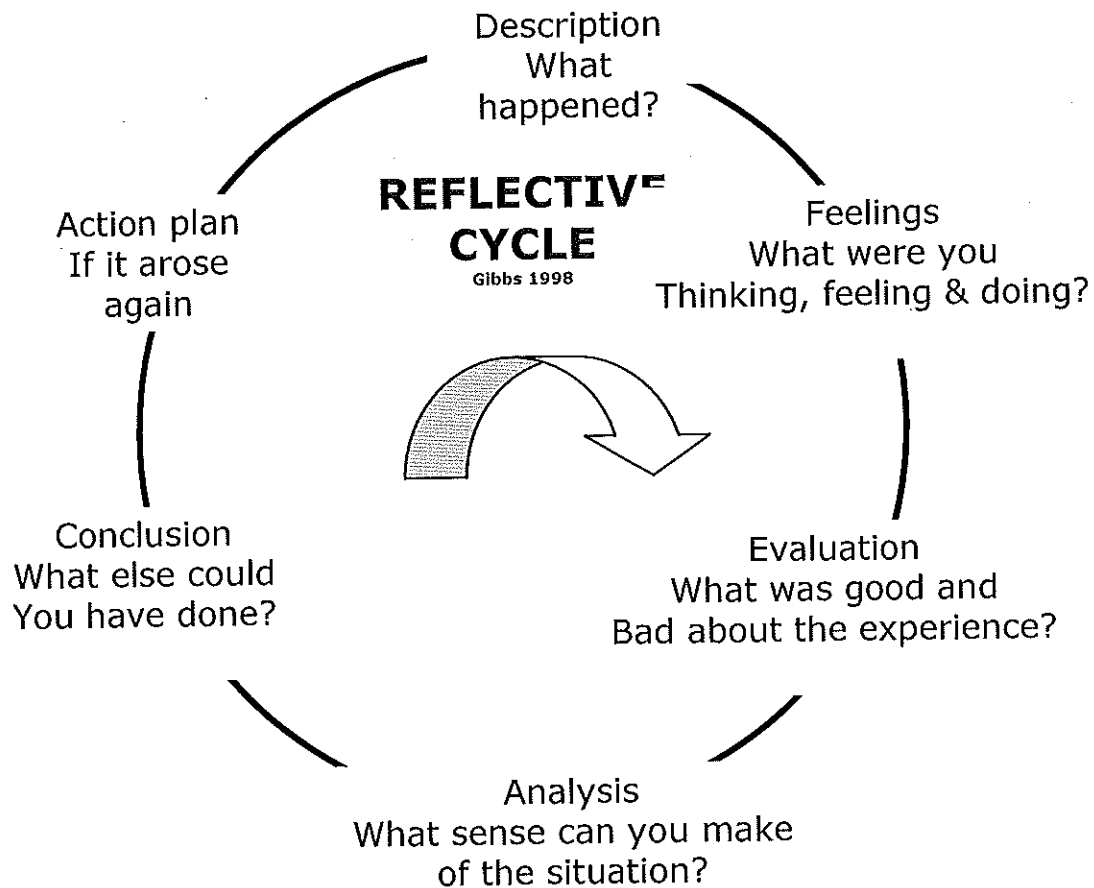
The impact of feelings on the learning process can not be over emphasized. We can all recall times when an incident left us feeling angry and frustrated that left us with negative feelings. On the other hand when we experience incidents we perceive positively such as getting recognition for quality care either from our patients or our peers validates our work as individuals and promotes learning.

Reflective practice requires you to draw upon your theoretical knowledge in a creative way too practically problem solve issues in everyday practice. Completing the cycle from theory to practice and practice to theory.

Reflective thinking can be a complex skill but writing in the form of journaling is a recognized way of developing thinking processes fundamental to reflective practice.

The **Gibbs Reflective Model**¹ can provide some structure, guidance and stimulation to your reflections.

¹ Gibbs, G. 1988. *Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods*. London: Further Education Unit. Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic



Questions regarding the Journal

How often am I required to write in the Journal?

You can diary entries as often as you want, however for it to be effective and to be of assistance to you as a reflective tool it is expected that you will do at least 30 minutes of entries each week. It is up to you if you do this over the week or do it at the end of the week. Using the incidents that you have journaled will help to clarify your feelings around an incident and using the Gibbs cycle identify, evaluate, analyse, draw conclusions from and create actions. You are required to meet with your preceptor at least fortnightly and discuss how the reflective process is progressing and get assistance and peer reflection from your preceptor on issues that you need assistance with.

What are the other benefits of the journal?

The journal is a prompt for you to discuss issues that have arisen and discuss your progress with your preceptor. It will be useful to draw on when wanting to write exemplars, case studies that are required as part of your assessment. You are also creating your own nursing history. With the progress of time as your clinical practice matures it is also personally interesting to look back from where you have come from and see your progress. It may make you cringe, feel proud and even make you smile!



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What is a reflective journal?

A reflective journal - often called a learning journal - is a steadily growing document that you (the learner) write, to record the progress of your learning. You can keep a learning journal for any course that you undertake, or even for your daily work.

This page is mainly about reflective journals for online courses, such as those run by Audience Dialogue. Students from other institutions (including the Open University) are also welcome to use these ideas, though the conditions for marking and submission may be different.

A reflective journal is not...

- simply a summary of the course material. Focus more on your reactions to what you've read, and what you've been reading.
- a learning log. On a learning log you might write down the times and days when you read something. A log is a record of events, but a journal is a record of your reflections and thoughts.

Who benefits from a reflective journal?

You, the learner. The fact that you are keeping a record of what you learn is an incentive to keep pushing ahead. There's an old saying "you don't know what you know till you've written it down" - and several research studies have found this to be true. By telling yourself what you've learned, you can track the progress you've made. You also begin to notice the gaps in your knowledge and skills.

How to write a reflective journal

A hundred years ago, distance education didn't exist, and textbooks were very expensive to buy. Therefore, students had to attend lectures and write notes while they listened. Most of those notes simply recorded the contents of the lecture. The act of writing the notes, and deciding what to write, was a major factor in students' learning.

These days, you don't need lecture notes for online courses, because (a) there are no lectures, (b) the notes are already on the web site, (c) books are relatively cheap, and (d) because you are doing an online course, you must also have access to the entire Web. So instead of lecture notes, we use reflective journals. The emphasis is different, but the purpose is similar: to help you make sense of what you've been learning.

Entries in a reflective journal can include:

- Points that you found specially interesting in your reading, and would like to follow up in more detail.
- Questions that came up in your mind, because of points made in material you read on this topic.
- After an online class (immediately after it, if possible) it's a good idea to reinforce your learning by trying to remember the main things you learned. Think "What were the three main points that were new to me, in the material I read today?" Write them down without looking at the course notes - then compare them with those notes, to make sure you remembered the points accurately.
- Notes from other material you read as a result of the course - whether this was

publications cited, or relevant material that you happened to read (such as newspaper articles).

- A record of everything you read in this subject area, while you're doing the course, with a sentence or two on the main points an article was making and how useful you found it.
- Your reflections on this course, and how well it is meeting your needs.
- How your learning in this course is related to what you're learning in other ways.
- Thoughts that aren't yet fully formed, but that you want to refine later. This could include your feelings about the course and your progress in it, and theories that are developing in your mind.

Each time you submit your reflective journal, think back over everything you've done since the last time. Which sources did you learn most from? Which did you learn least from, and why was that? (Did you know the material already?) Write a paragraph or two about the sources of your new learning.

What form should it take?

Some people prefer to write at a computer keyboard, while others prefer to write by hand. Depending on your preference, a reflective journal could take any of these forms:

- A pad with very small pages - about the size of a shirt pocket or mobile phone. Every time you have a thought about the course, write it on a separate sheet of paper. Later, you can tear the pages out of the pad and sort them so that similar notes go together - e.g. the main points you learned, what you need to learn more about, references that you need to read, questions to ask the instructor, and so on.
- Later, you can transcribe the relevant notes in to a hard-bound notebook, in which you write clearly by hand. This will last for years, and will be a reference book for you, long after you finish the course.
- If you find it easier to write directly at a keyboard, print out each page of the journal as you finish it. You can store the pages in a loose-leaf binder, as a permanent record of your learning progress.
- Even if you prefer to read from a computer screen, we suggest that you keep a printed copy as well. If you need to refer to your journal in a few years' time, the chances are that the computer file will no longer be readable - perhaps because the software is superseded, or the disk crashes, or the many other problems that occur with computer files over time.

Whichever form you first write the journal in, you'll need to submit each weekly section by email - see our [instructions for submitting assignments](#)

Private thoughts

You may also want to include private thoughts in your journal - something that you don't want the instructor to see, but might be useful for you later. That's fine - just keep your private thoughts on a second file, which you don't send in with the main journal.

How much time should I spend on this? How much should I write?

If you make notes whenever you think of something, the only extra time it will take for the journal is to type it out - maybe an hour a week. As a rough guide, we expect a learning journal to have about 2 pages for each weekly module, and about the same for your summary at the end of the course. At the end of a 10-week course, you'll have written about 20 pages.

Marking

Because learning is such an individual thing, the marks for the learning journal will not vary much: mostly between 6 and 8 out of 10. You won't lose marks for poor spelling, or mentioning problems, or asking what might seem silly questions. You *will* get good marks by showing that you've been reading widely, and raising issues that flow from that reading, and making it clear that you have been thinking a lot about these issues.

How to use a reflective journal

The purpose of a reflective journal is that you should be the main one to benefit from it. Writing down your thoughts helps to clarify them in your own mind. So why are you given a mark for it? Two reasons: (a) to encourage you to get around to writing it, and (b) so the instructor can see any problems you're having, and help solve them.

It doesn't have to be all plain, linear text. Feel free to use varied forms of writing: quotations, tables, diagrams, and pictures (either sketched by you, or found elsewhere).

After you finish the course, you'll probably forget most of the details, but you may need to use that knowledge again, perhaps years afterwards. If you keep the finished journal, you can read through it later, to remind you of what you learned in the course. The more clearly and vividly you write it, the better you'll remember it.

More about reflective journals

There's an excellent book, *Learning Journals*, by Jenny A Moon (Kogan Page, London, 1999), but there's no need to read it unless you're really interested in the concept. On the Web, see www.maslibraries.org/infolit/samplers/spring/doub.html.

Any questions? [Please email us](#).

Suggested format for a reflective journal

This is one of many possibilities, but it will give you some idea of the types of question that you can usefully ask yourself. Feel free to modify this two-part format to suit your needs.

Part 1

A page (or two) for each session, completed by you in order of the sessions.

Complete this information after each time you do some work on the course. This includes the formal sessions, the related reading and any other preparation, such as work in groups. Answer only the questions that apply - but think carefully about whether each question applies or not.

Your name	
Session date	
Session number	
Session topic	
What did I read for this session (apart from the notes)?	
What was the most interesting thing I read for this session (mark it above with an asterisk) - why was that?	
What were three main things I learned from this session?	
What did I previously think was true, but now know to be wrong?	
What did we not cover that I expected we should?	
What was new or surprising to me?	
What have I changed my mind about, as a result of this session?	
One thing I learned in this session that I may be able to use in future is...	
I am still unsure about...	

Issues that interested me a lot, and that I would like to study in more detail	
Ideas for action, based on this session...	
What I most liked about this session was...	
What I most disliked about this session was...	
Miscellaneous interesting facts I learned in this session...	

Part 2

This part will be more useful after you've finished the course. It's a mixture of all sorts of thoughts you have about the course that don't fit into any specific session. These items can include:

- Special terms used in this subject (build yourself a glossary).
- The main books and other writings on this subject, for possible later reference.
- Names and contact details of other students, and their special interests.
-

This Part 2 stuff can be messy, because there's no fixed order to it. Four ways to reduce the messiness are:

1. Use a pad with very small pages, and write each note on a separate page. At the end of the course, remove all the pages, sort them into some logical sequence, then copy them into a permanent notebook. All that copying isn't a waste of time: it will help you recall the course material.
2. Use a notebook, starting every new topic on a new page. Number the pages (if they're not already numbered), and at the start the notebook create a contents page as you go. At the end of the course (when you're not going to start any new pages), copy each page heading from the contents page onto a little scrap of paper, and sort the scraps into alphabetical order. Then you can create an index, and put it on the last page of the notebook.
3. One big computer file, normally created with a word processing program such as MS Word, and lots of subheadings. If you use outlining, hyperlinking, highlighting new topics in different colours, and/or sorting paragraphs into alphabetical order, it's easier to find an entry later.
4. Lots of little computer files. Excellent software for this includes:
 - for Windows: [Notelens](#) and [InfoSelect](#)
 - for Mac OS X: [Notetaker](#) and [Circus Ponies Notebook](#).
 All of these can be used to organize lots of little notes. Another alternative is to write each note as an email, and send it to yourself. More ideas can be found in our page on [software for qualitative research](#).

One suggestion: if you decide to keep your reflective journal on a computer, try out the software first on a small scale. If you don't feel confident using it, or find it too restrictive, it's best to write your journal by hand. After all, you're meant to be learning about the subject you're studying, not how to overcome software problems.

updated 2 April 2007 by Dennis List

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