

Journal of GANDAKI MEDICAL COLLEGE- NEPAL (JGMC-N)

JGMC-N | Volume 19 | Issue 01
| January-June 2026

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Submitted: November 20, 2025

Accepted: March 20, 2026

To cite: Kaur E. Reflective practice in
nursing students: The undervalued
cognitive skill that needs to be consol-
idated. JGMC-Nepal. 2026;19(1):3-5.

DOI: 10.3126/jgmc-n.v19i1.86646

Reflective practice in nursing students: The undervalued cognitive skill that needs to be consolidated

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Reflection is recognized as an intellectual skill or competence which needs a conscious action to learn from the experiences, based on one's own beliefs, practices and values. In nursing, reflection enables the nurses to improve the quality and outcome of patient care, by incorporating the various learning experiences from clinical or other settings.¹ Reflection has been recognized, during the recent years as a vital skill to improve the clinical and professional performances of nurses. It involves the precise analysis of a clinical situation or condition, through careful and detailed review of feelings, actions, thoughts and behaviors. Reflection should be recognized and introduced as a technique for learning and evaluation method in various nursing courses or programmes.²

Several models have been developed over the years, to support and guide the process of reflection to be logical, systematic and cyclic. Despite the developments and proven effectiveness of reflection for the nursing students, it has not been consolidated with the practice due to reported constraints of time, difficulties faced by the beginners in writing and understanding the steps, anxiety, and lack of supervision by instructors or educators and unsupportive learning environment. To address these challenges, there should be programs and strategies to introduce changes in the education system and extending support to foster the culture and practice of using reflection as an essential tool for professional as well as personal growth.³

Areas of Reflective practice

There are three areas or types of reflective practice: reflection on action, reflection on action and reflection for action. Reflection on action is a retrospective phenomenon, where the data collected and actions which have been already done are analyzed to strengthen new learning and professional development. Reflection of action is an ongoing analysis or evaluation of measures and practices while performing a task. It facilitates any modifications or improvements for better outcome of care. Reflection for practice or action is based on designing and developing the plan of care and course of actions to achieve the desired outcome.²

Need to strengthen Reflective Practice to foster critical thinking and support lifelong learning

The present healthcare environment is complex, elaborate and dynamic. Therefore, it needs a workforce who is skilled to deliver a diverse range of functions. Several educators and research reports reinforce that to work in the current clinical context; nursing students should be prepared for reflection on different clinical encounters. It is a significantly useful skill to strengthen professional nursing and can be applied to both classroom and clinical contexts.⁴

It has been supported by various research studies that reflection can improve teacher learner relationship, bridge the classroom -practice gap, reinforce learning and boost metacognitive skills or abilities. The results of study conducted to assess the

perspectives of nursing students on promoting reflection showed that mutual cooperation among the clinicians, nursing educators, instructors and clinicians creates a positive environment for the nursing students so that they can reflect on their experiences and use it to improve the professional and personal outcome.⁴

In the current complex settings of healthcare, nursing students frequently experience the challenges during their journey of transition from a student to a practicing nurse. The literature underlines a marked gap between theory and clinical practice. This gap is contributing to delays in patient care, difficulties in decision making and skepticism in clinical tasks or responsibilities.⁵

Reflective practice can be a helpful tool to address theory practice gap and enhance clinical practice by strengthening reasoning skills. Structured reflective methods or modules should be incorporated in nursing curriculum. Using these modules along with providing protected time to encourage reflection can empower nursing education and improve client outcomes. Students can engage in self discovery and awareness through guided reflection which will facilitate better higher cognitive skills and clinical competency.⁶

Reflective practice for nurse educators

There should be programs to develop competence in reflection for nursing educators as well. Shin S et al(2023) conducted a pilot study to assess the effectiveness of critical reflection competency program for clinical nurse educators and found that critical thinking disposition and efficacy of the intervention group was improved significantly after the competency program. Therefore, it is required to develop and incorporate the reflection programs for nurse educators as well so that they can effectively utilize critical reflection during nursing education. These programs should be expanded to nurse educators along with nursing students. The leaders and managers in hospitals and other healthcare settings should identify the importance of using reflection and strengthen efforts to support these programs.⁷

Reflective exercise is not only limited to the nursing students, but can be adopted by educators and preceptors as well. It can create immersive learning setting and stimulate the students with the help of challenging feedback. To start with the practice, Gibb's reflective cycle can be used because of its comprehensibility. Reflection is very useful in personal and professional development of nurses. Personally it can contribute to a trained mindset for new experiences, open mindedness, emotional training, self evaluation and motivation. Professionally, it helps to inculcate abilities

and skills, improved communication, fostering cooperation among the team of nurses and enhanced professionalism.⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Different nursing programmes should encourage the development and use of reflective practices among the students. Administrators should consider constructing and designing the curriculum which enhances this skill among the students, thus improving their self directed learning and efficacy. Writing and practice of reflective exercises should be integrated with the development of other competencies. The instructors should address the gaps and encourage the students to work on the areas that need improvement. Mentorship can be planned for the students with weaker reflective capacity. Students should be encouraged to identify and make note of their strengths and areas requiring improvement. This approach will enable them to improve their performance, self efficacy and handle difficult situations.⁹

Reflective journaling can act as a powerful technique or tool to improve the overall performance of nursing students. It facilitates critical thinking, and better decision making among the nurses. Educators should encourage regular reflective practices and journaling among the students to better prepare them for future healthcare environment. It has been found that the regular practice of maintaining a reflective exercise can significantly improve the decision making ability among the student nurses.¹⁰

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