Incorporating Reflective Writing into the Clerkship

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I was a part of an incredibly trying, intimate, and real event in these people’s lives, and I was welcomed in even though I was a complete stranger… I feel guilty being invigorated by such experiences, but at the same time feel appropriate in allowing them to teach me a deeper appreciation of life.”

Much has been written about the clinical experiences that shape a student’s professional behavior (10). Reflections on this topic show how students work to blend the humanism that brought them into the medical field with the pressures of workload and acculturation. Reflections, such as this one about the housestaff—“Somewhere along the way, the pressure and incredible demands of their job replaced their ability to effectively care for their patients on a personal level”—provoked both worry for the educational system and hope for the future of the students who recognize these tensions.
Reflections on medical errors can be troubling: “In my time on service at least one, if not multiple, incident reports could have been written every day for things that needed to happen but didn’t or things that shouldn’t have happened but did.” Without reflective writing exercises, medical instructors may not know of the uncomfortable positions students are placed in and would not be given the chance to resolve the problem.

Two other common topics encountered through student reflection are the inability to help some patients and communication, or miscommunication, between doctors, patients, and other members of the health care team. Student insights into the workings of the health care system are very interesting as they tend to look with fresh, often skeptical eyes at what seasoned physicians accept as standard.

The degree to which programs offer feedback and evaluation to their students about their writing is also varied. While most institutions with reflective writing programs have faculty review the work, few give direct feedback to every student. Rather, group sessions during which reflections are read provide an opportunity for the writers to receive feedback and support from peers and faculty. Efforts at evaluating the writings have been difficult. The challenge is to find a mechanism that maintains the personal spirit of reflective writing while still being a valid and reliable evaluation tool.

Student opinions of reflective exercises have been overwhelmingly positive. At University of Florida College of Medicine, University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine, and University of Massachusetts Medical School, students rank the exercise high in end-of-clerkship evaluations and often say it is the most valuable aspect of portfolio assignments. “The most valuable part of the portfolio is having to reflect on the clerkship—not just about the patients that were seen, but on how this affected me. I did not realize how much this clerkship changed my views of medicine or myself.”

Implementing reflective writing assignments into clinical clerkships is straightforward with the major investment of faculty time related to reading and evaluating assignments. The opportunity for students to be creative and the benefits of an exercise that enhances professional growth and development far outweigh the cost of increased faculty time. The contents of the reflections may also guide faculty in structuring future curricula to better prepare students for clinical training or address frequent problem areas exposed by the contents of the reflections.

The purpose of developing a reflective writing program is to encourage students to consider some of the powerful experiences that occur during early clinical training. Although many students may engage in this type of reflection independently, formalizing the approach might persuade students to spend more time and energy on the practice as well as encourage students disinclined to this type of reflection to engage in it.

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REFERENCES


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Ten Tunes That Make You Think…. New Orleans

Way Down Yonder in New Orleans: Louis Armstrong
House of the Rising Sun: Bob Dylan
Walkin’ to New Orleans: Fats Domino
City of New Orleans: Arlo Guthrie
I Wish I Was In New Orleans: Tom Waits
New Orleans Blues/Joys: Jelly Roll Morton
New Orleans: Gary “U.S.” Bonds
Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans: Billie Holiday
King of New Orleans: Better Than Ezra
City by the Sea: Harry Connick, Jr.

—Compiled by Sheila T. Costa and Tod Ibrahim

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