

THE PROCESS OF USING REFLECTIVE JOURNALING  
IN NURSING EDUCATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

Nursing students are frequently given an assignment to use reflective journaling to record their thoughts about critical events, particularly in the clinical setting. There is a large amount of research available related to the use of reflective journaling and the outcome this pedagogical strategy has on student learning. However, research related to the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment is limited and not well defined. The specific aims of the study were to describe and develop a reflexive understanding of the process followed, understand how nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment, to describe nurse educators' experience with reflective journaling, and to identify insights nurse educators in this study have to share with other nurse educators concerning their use of reflective journaling in nursing education. The researcher used a qualitative methodology, constructivist grounded theory, to explore this phenomenon. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to collect data from nurse educators ( $n = 7$ ) who use reflective journaling with baccalaureate nursing students in nursing programs in the southeast.

The reflective journaling process used by nurse educators in this study proceeds through three phases: informing students, evaluating journals, and providing feedback. Factors influencing success of the process include: acknowledging time constraints, allowing student voice, committing to the process, emphasizing reflection, encouraging others, ensuring confidentiality, establishing student trust, knowing what is expected, knowing what students are doing, providing support, recognizing that all students do not embrace reflective journaling,

valuing journaling, and identifying evidence of student growth. The findings will contribute to nursing education by adding to the current body of knowledge related to reflective journaling. Specifically, findings will assist nurse educators who currently use reflective journaling and others who may be interested in using this pedagogical tool to create learning environments which foster the utility of its potential in nursing education.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my deceased father, Willie Jackson, who did not survive to see the fruition of my study.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow. Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the playtime.*

*W. E. B. Du Bois*

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Nursing students are frequently given an assignment to use a reflective journal to record their thoughts about critical events, particularly in the clinical setting (Chirema, 2007; Larson, Ott & Miles, 2010). Reflective journaling is defined as a written narrative or document of one's thoughts and ideas formed by an experience, a personal value, or belief expressed in a critical and analytical way and written within a given structure (Cooper & Stevens, 2006; O'Connell & Dymont, 2011). More commonly in the literature related to reflective journaling, the research focused on the use of reflective journaling in nursing education and the effect this pedagogical (teaching) strategy has on student learning (Callister, Luthy, & Memmott, 2009; Chirema, 2007; Conceicao & Taylor, 2007; Harrison, Fopma-Loy, 2010; Lasater & Nielsen, 2009; Wilson & Grams, 2007; Simpson & Courtney, 2007; van Leeuwen, Tiesinga, Jochemsen, & Post, 2009). However, research related to the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used, as an assignment is limited. Thus, the topic of interest related to the research study is the process that a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used in nursing education.

A process has been defined as evolving sequences of events that have clear beginnings and endings along with standards (Charmaz, 2006). A process in this study is conceptualized as the how, what, and when of reflective journaling. In more explicit terms, the process of reflective journaling is what is going on, what procedures or activities a nurse educator engages in when reflective journaling is used, and when and how this assignment is articulated to nursing students. For example, one nurse educator may provide nursing students with a detailed

explanation of reflective journaling (e.g., definition of reflection along with reflective levels), why it is being used for the class, journaling prompts and questions, and regular feedback; while another nurse educator provides nursing students with a blank journal and asks them to write without any further instructions. The former example has structure (e.g., purpose, explanation, guiding questions, and feedback) while the latter lacks structure and may potentially cause confusion among nursing students who are required to complete the assignment. However, the latter example raises concern about the reflective journaling process because its instructions are limited and leaves too much to the imagination.

These examples support the importance of nurse educators adhering to a process that includes a structure that will assist one in being successful when using reflective journaling. A successful reflective journaling process is one which has a clear purpose, adequate instructions, potential journal topics, required writing format, grading criteria, and assurance of confidentiality (Billings & Kowalski, 2006; Crème, 2005; Epp, 2008; Harris, 2008; Miller, 2007). A successful reflective journaling process will lead to positive outcomes for the educator and the learner. A positive outcome for the educator is the opportunity for teachable moments. Rich (2009) described teachable moments as opportunities for the educator to respond to students' unexpected inquiries at the moment they occur. Further, a positive outcome for the learner is to have a meaningful learning experience. Dewey (1933) indicated that an experience that is meaningful is one that allows the learner to make a connection between what one does and what happens to one as a consequence.

There are several reasons for investigating the process related to reflective journaling as a pedagogical strategy. The first reason is that the National League for Nurses (NLN) (2005) proposed that nurse educators should engage in more research regarding pedagogical strategies

that facilitate learners' self reflection and to create learning environments which will promote reflection. Researchers have documented that reflective journaling is one such pedagogical strategy which helps nursing students achieve the goal of reflection (Chirema, 2007; Dunlap, 2006; Jensen & Joy, 2005). Reflection is defined as a human activity that allows one to recapture experiences, think about them, and evaluate them for new understandings and perspectives (Chirema, 2007). Learning the skill of reflection is important in nursing education because nursing students are confronted with a complex healthcare environment; a complex healthcare environment that realizes constant change due to advances in technology, new treatment modalities, and patients with numerous co-morbid disease processes (AACN, 2008). As a result, nursing students are required to think critically and use clinical reasoning (Conceicao & Taylor, 2007). Simmons (2010) described clinical reasoning in nursing as a complex cognitive process that requires one to use formal and informal thinking strategies to compile and analyze information concerning patients, evaluate the significance of the information in question, and to make decisions regarding the information. The ability to think critically and reason requires the skill of reflection to help guide decision making because one is required to revisit previous experiences and apply those experiences to current situations (Colley, Bilics, & Lerch, 2012).

The second reason for investigating the process is researchers have indicated that issues have been identified when reflective journaling was used as a pedagogical strategy with nursing students (Callister et al., 2009; Donovan, 2007; Harris, 2005; Harris, 2008; Hong & Chew, 2008). Issues identified by these researchers included unclear and limited instructions related to the journal assignment, implicit assignment purpose, a delay in instructor feedback after students made journal entries, limited knowledge of reflection on behalf of preceptors, and lack of support and guidance from instructors related to the journaling assignment.

The third reason for investigating the process is the researcher was unable to find any empirical studies that examined nurse educators regarding the process followed when reflective journaling was used. Current nursing literature does not reveal how nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment and what influences one to use this particular pedagogical strategy. The researcher wonders what influences a nurse educator's decisions to use reflective journaling and how he or she constructs meaning of its use. Having an understanding of how a nurse educator understands reflective journaling in their curriculum will help one understand why this particular strategy is chosen for use as a pedagogical tool.

Further, knowing how a nurse educator understands reflective journaling will reveal the value and worth that he or she places on the assignment. Moyer and Wittman-Price (2008) indicated that an educator must view the reflective journaling process as worthwhile and must have a commitment to reading and responding to students' reflective journal entries in an insightful way. Hence, there is a gap in the literature in this area that must be addressed if pedagogical strategies such as reflective journaling will be beneficial in assisting nursing students in learning reflection. A better understanding of the reflective journaling process is needed. Having a better understanding of the process is important because the conditions under which the reflective journaling process is delineated by a nurse educator can have a powerful influence on whether nursing students will have a meaningful learning experience which will lead to lifelong learning (Hubbs & Brand, 2010; Yonge & Myrick, 2004).

### **Researcher's Positionality**

The researcher's interest in reflective journaling was triggered by a personal experience with a nurse educator who used reflective journaling. This experience made the researcher wonder about the process of using reflective journaling. This experience and interest led to a bias

toward the use of reflective journaling as an assignment when careful attention has not been given to aspects of the assignment such as clear instructions and prompt follow-up with feedback.

During a graduate class to fulfill a course assignment, the researcher was provided an opportunity to interview a nurse educator who used reflective journaling as an assignment. This particular nurse educator taught a group of junior level baccalaureate nursing students a nursing concepts class and accompanied students to clinical sites for clinical experiences. These baccalaureate-nursing students were required to use reflective journaling as part of their post clinical assignment. This assignment accounted for 10% of the students' clinical grade. According to this nurse educator, students were instructed to make journal entries after each clinical experience. Beyond these instructions, students were not given any other guidance regarding reflective journaling. In fact, this nurse educator stated, "I didn't know a lot about reflective journaling and really didn't know what would come out of the information from my students."

Information obtained in this interview resulted in greater curiosity as to what a nurse educator does or does not do when reflective journaling is utilized as a pedagogical tool for student learning. It made the researcher think, if reflective journaling is viewed as an effective learning strategy by nurse educators, are we using it to its full potential? Although, the researcher has an interest in reflective journaling, this study does not debate advocacy for or against its utility in nursing education.



## **Problem Statement**

The NLN's request to engage in more research regarding pedagogical strategies, previous issues identified when reflective journaling has been used, and limited research related to the process nurse educators follow when using reflective journaling is used as an assignment helped explicate the problem and the need for study exploration. Thus, there is a gap in the literature that requires attention to ensure that reflective journaling is being used to its full potential and to ensure that nurse educators who use reflective journaling have successful outcomes, such as teachable moments. A more in depth understanding of the process is needed.

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this grounded theory research study was to investigate and understand the process nurse educators' follow when reflective journaling is used as an assignment in the context of baccalaureate nursing students. The specific aims of the study were to describe and develop a reflexive understanding of the process followed, to understand how nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment, to describe nurse educators' experiences with reflective journaling, and to identify insights nurse educators in this study may have to share with other nurse educators concerning the use of reflective journaling in nursing education.

## **Research Questions**

Following the traditions of qualitative research, the overarching research question for this proposed study was broad and flexible (Pilot & Beck, 2008). The question was: what is the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment in nursing education? Secondary questions include the following:

1. How do nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment;

2. What challenges or successes have been identified when reflective journaling was used as assignment; and
3. What insights can nurse educators share with other nurse educators regarding the use of reflective journaling?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant to the nursing discipline because it met an NLN request to engage in research related to an educational pedagogy. Schell (2006) suggested that the use and evaluation of innovative teaching strategies helps meet demands of today's nursing students and society. The insights revealed through this study provide an in-depth understanding of the process nurse educators follow.

The study contributes to the body of knowledge in nursing education in three ways. First, the study helps explicate how nurse educators understand the use of reflective journaling as an assignment for nursing student learning. Having knowledge of how a nurse educator understands reflective journaling will help one understand why he or she chooses to use it as a pedagogical strategy in the classroom and/or clinical setting. Second, the study provides information about reflective journaling as a pedagogical tool in nursing education. By sharing a step-by-step description of how reflective journaling is implemented and used provides a detail analysis of the process. Last, findings of the study can help nurse educators make curriculum decisions related to the use of reflective journals as a pedagogical tool. Nurse educators in this study have shared past experiences of the use of reflective journaling, which includes challenges and successes of its use. Knowledge of these challenges and successes related to the utility of reflective journaling can assist other nurse educators who use reflective journaling or may be

interested in using this pedagogical tool create learning environments in which reflective journaling can be utilized to its potential.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A researcher's personal epistemology and theoretical perspective helps provide clarity for those who may read the study and fairness toward study participants whose voices will be characterized in the study (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Dickerson, 2010).

### **Epistemological Approach**

Epistemology is defined as the theory of knowledge and has been referred to as knowing what we know and thinking about what we think (Dickerson, 2010). Epistemology indicates how knowledge is acquired and informs the theoretical perspective while the theoretical perspective informs the methodological approach (Pilot & Beck, 2008). Moreover, epistemology can be viewed as an invitation to a researcher to assume a certain stance or position of thinking so that there is congruency and consistency between one's utilization of practices and the theories one follows when a research study is undertaken (Dickerson, 2010). Therefore, as the researcher endeavored to understand the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment, a constructivist epistemological approach was considered most appropriate for the research study.

A constructivist epistemological approach is situated within the interpretivist paradigm (Charmaz, 2006). An interpretivist paradigm means entering study participants' worlds and calls for understanding of the studied phenomenon (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2006). According to Charmaz, a constructivist epistemological approach prioritizes the phenomena of study and views data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with study participants. Constructivists are concerned with how and why study participants construct

meanings and actions in varied situations (Charmaz, 2006). Meaning is an idea that is communicated or intended to be communicated to the mind by language, symbol, or action (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2010). Further, Charmaz indicated that a constructivist approach means learning how, when, and to what extent an experience under study is embedded in larger hidden positions, networks, and relationships. The researcher chose a constructivist paradigm in order to understand the process nurse educators follow when using reflective journaling as an assignment. Having an understanding of the process a nurse educator uses can reveal how and why nurse educators construct and interpret meaning of reflective journaling and what factors influence the use of reflective journaling in their curricula.

In order to understand participants in the study, the researcher attended to the spoken word of participants through semi-structured interviews. The researcher along with participants constructed meaning from collected data that emerged during the research process; meaning was mutually constructed based on researcher and participants' interpretations (Charmaz, 2006).

Researchers have emphasized the importance of researchers attending to study participants' interpretations (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2006; Darlaston-Jones, 2007). The researcher maintained awareness of study participants' interpretations by using subjectivity (Darlaston-Jones, 2007) throughout the research process. In addition to having an awareness of study participants' interpretations, the researcher remained cognitive of personal interpretations by engaging in reflexivity. Reflexivity is the researcher's scrutiny of his or her research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that brought the researcher into the process and allowed the researcher to determine to what extent personal views were affecting the interpretations of the data (Charmaz, 2006; Darlaston-Jones, 2007). For example, reflexivity allowed the researcher to do an analysis of the research process and challenge how past

experiences and biases interacted with the participants' responses to create understanding and interpretation of those responses.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

In qualitative research, researchers use a theoretical perspective to guide their studies (Creswell, 2009). The perspective from which a researcher approaches a study is often called the lens and it influences the organization of the research study (Creswell, 2009). Thus, a theoretical perspective is an explanatory framework that defines a point of view within a discipline including basic assumptions that draw attention to particular aspects of phenomena (Eaves, 2001). The theoretical perspective for the study is symbolic interactionism informed by the works of Herbert Blumer (1969).

Symbolic interactionism is the theoretical base of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004). It is in the interpretivist paradigm and places importance on understanding as opposed to an explanation of a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006; Jeon, 2004). Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective is appropriate for the study because the focus of the study was to understand the process nurse educators follow when using reflective journaling as an assignment, how they understand reflective journaling as an assignment, and what influences them to use reflective journaling in their curricula. Jeon (2004) indicated that if a researcher wishes to understand human behavior, one must embrace the meanings that are experienced by participants within a given context.

Blumer coined the term symbolic interactionism based on the works of his former professor George Herbert Mead. Symbolic interactionism is an approach to the study of human group life and human conduct (Blumer, 1969). This perspective indicates that human beings are actors who are active and constantly adjusting behaviors; their actions are based on the meanings

they assign to people, things and actions, and meaning is interpreted and modified through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). The basic assumption of symbolic interaction, as delineated by Blumer, is that meaning is derived through social interaction (e.g., verbal and nonverbal actions and communications). Blumer indicated that interaction is symbolic which suggests that interaction exists in relation to the meanings that people construct. People do not make direct response to things, but they attach meanings to them and make responses based on that particular meaning (Blumer, 1969). In other words, understanding meaning is the beginning to understanding behavior.

According to Blumer, symbolic interactionism focuses on the connection between symbols (e.g., language; shared meanings), interactions (e.g., verbal and nonverbal actions and communications), and thought (an individual's interpretation of symbols). Because symbolic interactionism is an approach towards society and interaction, it provides a perspective for investigating how an individual interprets and relates to people as well as objects in their lives and how this then leads to behavior (Blumer, 1969). The main goal of symbolic interactionism is to understand the world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Blumer, 1969).

This perspective was applied to the study by understanding the perspectives of the participants from their points of view. The researcher focused on the process and determined the language nurse educators used to articulate the purpose and procedures of the journaling process and what participants' thoughts were regarding reflective journaling. In order to study the phenomenon of the nurse educator's process, it was important for the researcher to interpret the narratives, interactions, and experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

## CHAPTER II:

### LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature related to reflective journaling was conducted through Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health, Google Scholar, OVID, ProQuest, and PubMed databases using the following search terms: diaries, reflective journaling, reflection, clinical journals, clinical logs, journaling models, nurse educators, and nursing students. This literature review contains information from research studies and conceptual articles. Research findings of this literature review have been grouped into the following categories: Historical Background, Reflective Journaling in Education, Benefits, Challenges and/or Barriers, Ethical Considerations, Reflective Journaling in other Disciplines, and Reflective Journaling Models.

#### **Historical Background**

Reflective journals are defined as written documents created by a writer as this individual thinks and reflects on personal concepts, events, or interactions chronicled over a period of time with the ultimate goal of self-awareness and learning (O'Connell, 2006; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). Reflective journaling has a long history and has been used by individuals for many different reasons. The use of reflective journaling dates to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Cooper & Stevens, 2006; O'Connell & Dymont, 2006; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). People from all walks of life have used reflective journals for various purposes. Japanese women of the Royal Courts used journals to record their activities of daily living; Samuel Pepys a British diarist kept a journal over a ten-year period for the purpose of recording his financial progress and other vital concerns of daily life. The Puritans used journals to record their spiritual goals and growth. Women pioneers

wrote periodic letters to loved ones in their hometowns about life on the western frontier. In addition, American women used journals to record information about their families such as births, death, illnesses, visits, travel, marriages, work, and unusual occurrences in their lives.

### **Reflective Journaling in Education**

For 30 years or longer, educators have used reflective journaling as a pedagogical strategy to facilitate student learning and professional development (King & LaRocco, 2006). Historically, educators have used reflective journaling as a teaching strategy to help students improve their writing skills (King & LaRocco, 2006; O'Connell & Dymont, 2006; Stevens & Cooper, 2006). However, educators over numerous disciplines such as nursing education (Chirema, 2007; Lasater & Nielsen, 2009; Ruland & Ahern, 2007), medical education (Grant, Kinnersley, Metcalf, & Houston, 2006; Karnieli-Miller, Hollman, Clyman, & Lnui, 2010), teacher education (Dymont & O'Connell, 2010; Hubbs & Brand, 2007), and allied health fields (pharmacy, occupational health, physical therapy) (Plack, Driscoll, Blissett, McKenna & Plack, 2005; Wessel & Larin, 2006) have embraced the use of reflective journaling and have found that the benefits are numerous. According to King and LaRocco, the use of reflective journaling among these disciplines is related to the fact that constructivist-oriented educators have found journaling to be a worthwhile method for critiquing students' understanding of core concepts, promoting reflection on the connections between theory and practice, increasing awareness, and promoting critical thinking. Further, Dymont and O'Connell (2010) indicated that the use of reflective journaling as a pedagogical strategy serves as an avenue for reflection before, during, and after a learning experience.

One of the fundamental reasons for using reflective journaling in education is based on experiential learning theory (Hubbs & Brand, 2010; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). Experiential



learning is the process of understanding and making meaning from direct experience and is categorized by critical self-reflection on a person's experience (Kang, Brain, & Ricca, 2010; Sewchuk, 2005; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). Experiential learning is aligned with constructivism that suggests that learners construct meaning from their experiences (Kang, Brain, & Ricca, 2010; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). In the constructivist model learners assume an active role in the learning process and integrate their acquired knowledge with prior assimilated knowledge to construct new knowledge (Huang, Rauch, & Liaw, 2010; Kang, Brain, & Ricca, 2010).

The most accepted understanding of experiential learning is based on reflection (Dewey, 1933, 1938; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). Reflection is a human activity that allows one to recapture experiences, think about them, and evaluate them for new understandings and perspectives (Chirema, 2007). Lauterbach and Hentz (2005) described reflection as a dynamic human process, a "bending back of attention of self, experience, education, and care" (p. 31). Dewey emphasized that reflection was the core of learning experience that allowed one to act in a deliberate and intentional manner. Further, reflection is a developmental skill and it is learned over time (Benner et al., 2010; Epp, 2008; Schon, 1987). Epp indicated that reflection is a difficult skill to learn and it may take students several years to achieve this goal.

According to Hyams (2010), in order for student reflection to occur educators must ensure that the following conditions are present: 1) situations which are outside the learner's normal scope of experience; 2) learners must be willing to engage in reflection and prepared with sincerity; and 3) educators must create a climate of trust so that students will have a desire to disclose inadequacies in a confidential manner; an atmosphere to learn must be evident by the student and trust along with appropriate feedback are imperative of the educator. Hence, the use of reflective journaling requires the active role of the nursing student and a facilitative role of the

nurse educator. In an active role, the nursing student assumes responsibility for their learning by being involved in the teaching-learning process. As facilitator, a nurse educator uses guidance and support to assist students in the teaching-learning process to articulate an experience and relate it to theory (Chirema, 2007; Harris, 2005; Kang, Brian, & Ricca, 2010).

Moving forward, the use of reflective journaling as a pedagogical strategy has been supported by the works of several theorists such as John Dewey, David Kolb, Donald Schon, and Jack Mezirow (Brown, 2009; Cohen, 2005; Hanson & Alexander, 2010; Hubbs & Brand, 2005, 2010; Hyams, 2010; King & LaRocco, 2006; Plack et al., 2005; Robinson & Kelley, 2007). The work of these theorists, Dewey, Kolb, Schon, and Mezirow, is significant to reflective journaling because their work focused on experience and reflection. Dewey believed that curriculum was best served by taking the interests of students into consideration. He posited that students should assume an active role in their experiences and students' experiences should include real-world, task-oriented activities and challenges (Dewey, 1933; 1938).

According to Dewey, experience is an exchange between a person and the environment. An experience begins with participation in an activity (e.g., talking with another person) and becomes a continuous stream of knowledge from prior experiences that continues as an ongoing process throughout life and learning (Dewey, 1933, 1938). With regards to learning, Dewey delineated four modes of thinking: imagination, belief, stream of consciousness, and reflection; however, he only related reflection to learning. Dewey defined reflection as the active and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it ends (p. 9). When one reflects he or she examines their prior beliefs and assumptions along with their implications. Dewey emphasized that reflection is active and intentional and it begins with discomfort during an experience and

leads one to a state of equilibrium. Dewey stated that reflection “gives an individual an increased power of control” (p. 17).

Building upon Dewey’s work (Stevens & Cooper, 2009), David Kolb focused on knowledge through the transformation of experience in phases. Kolb’s experiential learning cycle is a four stage cyclical theory of learning which combines concrete experience (doing), reflective observation (observation), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (planning). A student having a real-world experience exemplifies the first phase in the Kolb cycle, concrete experience. This real-world experience is followed by reflective observation that requires the student to focus on what the experience means and its implications related to past knowledge. In the third phase, abstract conceptualization, students relate reflective observations to what they already know: theory, assumptions, and preconceptions. During the last phase, active experimentation, a student applies new concepts and theories to the experience. After the last phase is complete, the cycle begins again (Kolb, 1984).

Donald Schon (1987) associated reflection in the practice setting with dimensions of time. Schon identified reflection as a means required for the promotion of professional development. He suggested that professional practice could be improved when professionals are inspired to reflect on their actions as opposed to reliance on knowledge that has been acquired over the years. According to Schon, professionals encounter various situations in their everyday practice. Schon suggested that reflection should be used as a strategy to integrate theory and application that will lead to reflective practice. Reflective practice is thinking through one’s own experiences and using previously learned knowledge in everyday practice (Maarof, 2007).

Schon proposed a novel approach in which learning is expedited by reflection that is learned over time. He delineated two types of reflection, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-

action. Reflection-in-action occurs during an ongoing occurrence or experience and makes an immediate contribution to current practice, in addition to helping develop future practice. In contrast, reflection-on-action occurs after an experience has occurred. After an experience has occurred, the professional thinks about what has happened and may ask what could have been done in a different way. Schon indicated that reflection-on-action has the ability to take current practice and develop it for the future. Schon suggested that professionals should learn to become experienced in reflection-on-action, in order to become proficiently responsive to needs in clinical practice.

Jack Mezirow (1998) introduced transformative learning theory which he referred to as the process by which an individual transforms meaning, perspectives, habits of mind (automatic thinking), and mind sets in order to make them open and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that prove more true and justified. Hubbs and Brand emphasized that transformative learning is thoughtful learning assumed by students and it requires a student to query the basis and previous learning that may have formed a belief or value. Further, Hubbs and Brand suggested that reflective journaling and educator guidance has the potential to encourage automatic thinking and habits of mind that can lead students through a transformative process. Reflective journaling provides students an opportunity to practice reflection that is important in learning new course content and necessary for transformative learning (Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Mezirow, 1998).

Further, Hubbs and Brand suggested that when the reflective journaling assignment has a theoretical base such as Kolb's four stages, educators could create effective learning conditions that will result in a meaningful learning experience that was put forth by Dewey. Dewey stressed that a meaningful learning experience is one that is valuable and useful to the learner. One can

have an experience; however, all experiences may not be educative (Dewey, 1938). An experience that is meaningful and educative is one which allows the learner to make a connection between what one does and what happens to one as a consequence; the value of an experience is situated within one's perception of relationships among events (Dewey, 1938). According to Dewey, we learn from experience by doing and then reflecting on what happened.

In summary, reflective journaling has a long history of personal and pedagogical use. In educational disciplines, the rationale for using reflective journaling is based on experiential learning and supported by the works of Dewey, Kolb, Schon, and Mezirow. All four theorists used reflection as an avenue to support learning in their theories. Reflective journaling is a reflective activity that assists students in the teaching-learning process in the context of the classroom, clinical setting, and professional practice.

### **Benefits**

Researchers have reported that there are benefits for nurse educators and numerous learning benefits for nursing students when reflective journaling is used as a pedagogical tool. Reflective journaling provides nurse educators an opportunity to give formative and summative assessments and feedback to their students (O'Connell & Dymont, 2011). Journaling assignments have been beneficial in improving student-teacher relationships because there is a constant dialogue (Miller, 2011). Students are able to ask questions and educators have learned information about students that they may not have known. Most importantly, journal entries provide an educator with an example of a written document in a student's voice that is a representation of the student's cognitive processes (King & LaRocco, 2006).

Reflective journaling has been used to assist nursing students in learning self-awareness, caring, reflective learning, ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and reflective thinking (Callister,

Luthy, Thompson, & Memmott, 2009; Harrison & Fopma-Loy, 2010; Wilson & Grams, 2007; Chirema, 2007; Conceicao & Taylor, 2007; van Leeuwen, Tiesinga, Jochemsen, & Post, 2009; Simpson & Courtney, 2007). Approximately 16 students in a psychiatric nursing course participated in a pilot study conducted to determine if reflective journaling prompts such as empathy, service, and inspiration stimulated reflection on emotional intelligence (Harrison & Fopma-Loy, 2010). Results of this study indicated that the reflective journal prompts were useful in assisting students with reflection as it relates to self-awareness.

Another benefit of reflective journaling is learning to care for self and caring for patients in nursing practice. A phenomenological study was conducted by Wilson and Grams (2007) to discover the experience of graduate nursing students who participated in a reflective exercise designed to promote caring for one's self and to enhance the appreciation of self-care and caring in nursing practice. Through reflection these students were able to focus on the importance of self-care to engagement in caring relationships with patients.

The use of reflective journals to promote reflective learning has been embraced by nursing education (Chirema, 2007; Donovan, 2007; Horn & Freed, 2008; van Leeuwen, Tiesinga, Jochemsen, & Post, 2009). Authors define reflection in several different ways. Chirema (2007) defined reflection as a human activity in which a person is able to recapture an experience, think about it, and evaluate it. Stevens and Cooper (2009) define reflection as a complex and intentional intellectual activity that promotes learning from experience. According to Hyams (2010), in order for student reflection to occur educators must ensure that the following conditions are present: situations which are outside the student's normal scope of experience; students must be willing to engage in reflection and prepared with sincerity; educators must create a climate of trust so that students will have a desire to disclose

inadequacies in a confidential manner; an atmosphere to learn must be evident by the student and trust along with appropriate feedback are imperative of the educator.

Chirema conducted a qualitative study that focused on reflective learning in post-registration nursing students. Research data sources used were reflective journaling and focus group interviews. Students were evaluated at three levels: non-reflectors (no evidence of reflective elements); reflectors (demonstrate one or more of the three levels, attending to feelings, association, integration); critical reflectors (attained reflection at the level of validation, appropriation or reflection). Results of student journals revealed that students demonstrated reflectivity mainly at the level of attending to feelings and association; integration of knowledge was demonstrated less frequently. Only five students were able to demonstrate the ability to turn their experiences into another potential learning experience. Students in this study demonstrated reflection at the level of attending to feelings while association and integration were demonstrated less. These students were considered to reflect at a non-reflector level. Chirema was able to identify that journals are useful tools for promoting reflection; however, some students appeared to benefit more than others.

Using a constructivist grounded theory methodology; Donovan (2007) conducted a study to discover student mental health nurses' perceptions of reflection as a learning strategy during their clinical placement. Participants in the study were five third-year diploma students. Students were required to keep reflective journals during their clinical placements and all five students were interviewed individually in their clinical placements. Three major themes emerged from the interviews: understanding the process of reflection, using reflection in clinical practice, and needing support and guidance.

In another study, Horn and Freed (2008) focused their research on reflective learning with the use of reflective journaling in clinical education. Horn and Reed conducted their research to describe students' clinical reflective processes as they worked individually and in pairs of two solving problems while caring for patients in a clinical setting. There were significant differences found ( $p < 0.01$ ) between levels of reflection of students who worked in pairs and those that were unpaired. These researchers concluded that students who worked unpaired had difficulty connecting knowledge to solving problems. Students who worked in pairs of two were more successful because both students assisted and supported the other.

Van Leeuwen, Tiesinga, Jochemsen, and Post (2009) conducted a qualitative study to describe the learning effects of thematic peer-review discussion groups on developing nursing students' competence in providing spiritual care. The method of peer-review in this study was a form of reflective learning based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. Approximately 39 third-year students in two Christian nursing schools in the Netherlands participated in this study. Students provided reflective journals ( $n = 203$ ) throughout the peer-review process and researchers analyzed the journals qualitatively. Results of the study revealed that students in this study reflected on spirituality in the context of personal experiences in nursing practice. Results of the analysis showed that the first two phases in the experiential learning cycle, inclusion of actual experience and reflecting on this experience, were demonstrated more by students. The phases of abstraction of experience and experimenting with new behaviors were demonstrated less by students. Interestingly, result findings in this study were similar to those found in Chirema's (2007) study that indicated that students reflect on the level of attending and feelings in their journals.



Nurse educators have used reflective journaling as a learning tool to help nursing students learn ethical reasoning. According to Callister, Luthy, Thompson, and Memmott (2009) ethical reasoning is acknowledging what is real. It looks for truth, encourages ethical decision-making, and leads nursing students to ethical nursing practice. In a grounded theory study conducted by Callister et al. to describe ethical reasoning in nursing students enrolled in a nursing ethics class, researchers sought to reveal how nursing students deal with ethical dilemmas. A convenience sample of 70 baccalaureate nursing students was instructed to write about their clinical experiences using the ‘what’ (description of an experience), ‘so what’ (critical analysis of what the experience meant, lessons learned), and ‘now what’ (implications for future nursing practice) format for journal entries. Students’ reflective journals were submitted and analyzed using a model that evaluated the levels of reflection engaged in by each student. Levels of reflections included reflectivity (describes), affective (emotionally aware), discriminant (critically assesses), judgmental (evaluates), conceptual (identifies need for additional learning), and theoretical (demonstrates the need for change). The main theme to emerge from this study was ‘in the process of becoming’ which focused on practicing as a professional, lacking the confidence as a student nurse to take an ethical stand, advocating for patients, being just in the provision of care, identifying the spiritual dimensions of nursing practice, confronting the real world of health care, making a commitment to practice with integrity, and caring enough to care. Results of the study indicated that students demonstrated a high level of critical thinking (discriminant and judgmental levels of reflection) and a depth of commitment to ethical nursing practice.

Reflective thinking and critical thinking is important to the body of nursing because both have the potential for helping nursing students relate to aspects of their experiences that may help them in a given situation (Conceicao & Taylor, 2007; Simpson & Courtney, 2007; Kuiper,

2005). Reflective thinking and critical thinking are often used together (Kuiper, 2005).

Reflective thinking is concerned with the process of making judgments about what has happened in a situation; while critical thinking involves the engagement of many thinking skills which may lead to positive outcomes (Simpson & Courtney, 2007).

In a qualitative study, Conceicao and Taylor (2007) described an online course that used concept maps and self-reflective journals to assess nursing students' thinking processes. Information noted in Conceicao and Taylor's literature review indicated that concept mapping has been used effectively in nursing education to help students develop critical thinking skills in preparation for clinical (p. 269). Researchers used a convenience sample of 21 student reflective journals that were collected over two semesters. Students were instructed to complete required learning modules and were asked to create concept maps that depicted their understanding of theories and concepts learned in the readings and online postings. Student reflective journals were qualitatively examined and three major themes emerged from the use of concepts maps. Themes included factors influencing the map creation, developmental learning process, and validation of existing knowledge and construction of new knowledge. These researchers concluded that the use of concept maps with reflective journaling provided a learning experience that allowed students to engage in a developmental process of integration that was influenced by personal preferences, concept map design and content complexity. Researchers indicated that concept maps and reflective journaling could assist nurse educators in helping students learn to prioritize content, patient assessment data, and nursing interventions.

Simpson and Courtney (2007) focused their research on critical thinking through the use of reflective journaling using journal documentation. These researchers conducted a qualitative study using a convenience sample of 20 Middle Eastern nursing students who used reflective

journaling to enhance their practice through critical thinking skills and use of the English language in documentation over a 12-month period. Students used reflective journaling during their clinical practicum to develop critical thinking skills in order to analyze and evaluate their clinical experiences. To facilitate this project, a Middle Eastern nurse educator developed a framework to guide the journal documentation based on recommended literature by King that used guided questions such as, 1) what would happen if (prediction); 2) why is...important (analysis of significance); 3) what is the difference between...and...(comparison); and 4) what is another way to look at...(taking other perspectives) (p. 205)? Researchers utilized King's guided questions to interact and encourage critical thinking skills. Study participants were given clear guidelines on how to document in their journals. In addition, study participants were given timely feedback and coaching in the classroom and in the clinical field. These researchers provided an example of one student's journal documentation that demonstrated sound reflection, speculation, synthesis, and metacognition of events during a clinical experience. Researchers reported that this research project provided students an opportunity to transfer clinical thoughts onto paper in a subjective and objective manner. Nurse educators were able to further engage students in writing to help develop their English and the journals allowed opportunity for dialogue among nurse educators and students.

Kuiper (2005) used audiotapes as a method of recording reflections of senior baccalaureate nursing students in a clinical preceptorship. The aim of this researcher's qualitative study was to test the efficacy of audiotapes as a method to promote cognitive and metacognitive thinking processes with self-regulated learning strategies for problem solving in clinical situations. Kuiper defined self-regulated learning as an integrated learning process consisting of development of a set of constructive behaviors that affect one's learning process.

The Self-Regulated Learning Model (SRL) used in this study suggests that a self-regulated person must have a dependable experiential knowledge base, uses cognitive critical thinking strategies in a reflective manner, and is affected by social and cultural influences. Kuiper identified three phases of self-regulation: 1) forethought (setting a goal and deciding on strategies to accomplish it); 2) performance (employing goal-directed actions and monitoring performance); and 3) self-reflection (evaluating goal progress and adjusting strategies to ensure success). A descriptive comparative/correlative non-experimental design was used for this 14-week study. Audiotapes were used for the study because feedback from previous research projects revealed that students indicated journal writing was cumbersome and time consuming. A convenience sample of 40 nursing students participated in the study. Students were instructed to record their clinical experiences and clinical nursing staff were instructed and coached to maintain consistency of design methods with students. Students used a “think-aloud” (pg. 354) technique to tape their reflections after each clinical experience. Findings of the study indicated that 78% of students completed the audio taped journals and approximately 234 audio taped journals were collected with a word count of 114,900. This researcher reported that an identifiable change in cognitive and metacognitive processes was not noted over time.

According to the researcher, the audio taped reflections did reveal a consistent pattern of higher-order thinking statements and use of the SRL model with greater than 54 percent variation between SRL model concepts. The researcher used a verbal protocol technique to evaluate the journal narratives and found a consistent pattern among the following noun phrases: situations, reactions, and environmental issues. This researcher concluded that audiotapes were used successfully to identify the consistent use of all self-regulated learning strategies with each reflective exercise. Kuiper suggested that when nurse educators provide nursing students with

guidance to reflect, there is consideration for aspects of situations that are similar to the clinical reasoning activities nurses are required to engage in on a daily basis such as monitoring, thinking, reactions, and the environment, making judgments, and revising plans and approaches.

### **Challenges and Barriers**

For the numerous benefits of reflective journaling as an assignment there are challenges such as nurse educator's value of reflective journaling assignment, lack of clarity, time requirements, limited structure or too much structure, lack of confidentiality, grade or not to grade, creation of entries to satisfy a grade, and limited feedback. These challenges have the potential to impact the teaching-learning experience in negative ways (Harris, 2005; Harris, 2008; Callister et al. (2009); Donovan, 2007; Hong & Chew, 2008). Moreover, journal assignments can lead to students finding their voice, but on the other hand can lead to student silence, which can lead to distrust (Langley & Brown, 2010; Lepp, Zorn, Duffy, & Dickson, 2005).

Moyer and Wittman-Price (2008) indicated that a challenge related to the reflective journaling assignment is that the educator must "wholeheartedly value" (p. 259) the journaling process as being worthwhile. Epp conducted a literature review regarding the use of reflective journaling in undergraduate nursing education and found that there was limited research that reported nurse educators' as being supportive of the use of reflective journaling as a tool for engaging undergraduate nursing students in the reflective process. According to Moyer and Wittman-Price (2008), the educator must be supportive and committed to read student journal entries and provide thoughtful and insightful feedback.

Researchers have documented that when reflective journal assignments lack structure, clarity, and limited feedback students may become confused and display negative feelings

(Donovan, 2007; Harris, 2008). Using a qualitative study, Donovan (2007) examined five students who had used reflective journaling and identified several barriers that hindered students' learning of reflection. Students in this study agreed that reflection was difficult to understand, they expressed the need for more guidance in learning to reflect, introduction to reflection should occur sooner in the curriculum, and students commented that if journals were graded teachers would give more guidance. In addition, students indicated that time to reflect was a factor and several students commented that preceptors were reluctant to talk about reflection and suggested that there should be educational sessions on reflection for clinical staff. Donovan concluded that students expressed a need for better preparation and ongoing support to engage in reflection.

Harris (2005) examined 110 post basic nursing students who had completed reflective journals between the years of 2000 and 2003 in a qualitative study. This study focused on the students' perceptions of the use of reflective journaling. Although findings of this study revealed that students benefited positively with use of reflective journaling, difficulties associated with the process of journaling were identified. These students indicated that the journaling assignment was time-consuming (n=21), there was lack of insight about the assignment (n=7); it was difficult for students to begin the assignment because many did not have an understanding of what was required of the assignment (n=20), heavy study work load (n=18), and there was a delay in getting feedback when journal entries were submitted. Harris reported that many students felt that there was insufficient explanation of the journaling process and limited or delayed feedback adversely affected their ability to write in their journals.

Hong and Chew (2008) used a qualitative study to examine the perceptions of 31 baccalaureate-nursing students who used reflective journaling to learn reflective practice. These researchers used questionnaires and focus group interviews to examine these students'

perceptions. The questionnaire yielded a 77.42% response rate, while five students volunteered to participate in the focus group interviews. Students' responses related to the journaling process focused on lack of clarity on the concept of reflection, what content should be recorded in students' journals, and promptness of feedback. Some of the students indicated that the preceptors did not provide feedback on a regular basis. Hong and Chew concluded that students were motivated to learn when feedback and guidance were given from their preceptors.

Harris (2008) reported similar findings in a three-year qualitative study based on students' perceptions of scaffolding supporting reflective journal writing. Reflective journals were used as one of the teaching strategies to support and sustain deep transformatory learning. Students in this study were divided into three different groups (n = 45). Harris oriented two nurse educators to assist with the study and each served as facilitator for a student group. Harris introduced each group to reflective journaling; however, the facilitator for Group Three did not begin journal dialogue until two months into the study. Approximately thirty (n = 30) students volunteered to complete a questionnaire based on student journal entries. Although Harris documented that findings of the study suggested that open-ended reflective journals encouraged critical reflection, students indicated that journal writing was perceived to be a difficult, time consuming, and continuous exercise which required a great deal of effort. Harris indicated that students in Group Three gave negative comments because they did not have face-to-face contact with their facilitator. Although students accept the value of reflective journaling and are willing to engage in the process, they indicated the need for consistent critical response and follow up support from a facilitator. Harris acknowledged that findings in this study revealed that researcher and colleagues had been "assessed and wanting" (p. 325). Harris suggested that tools that were used in the study were appropriate but the teaching strategies and support systems

needed evaluation. Further, findings of this study suggested that there should be comprehensive orientation that ensures clarity of roles and expectations. Harris recommended that considerations should be given to encountered difficulties which were described by students such as providing sufficient time for students to write and providing timely feedback and supportive critique.

The assessment of reflective journals (grade or not grade) has been an ongoing debate among educators (Crème, 2005; Hubbs & Brand, 2010; O’Connell & Dymont, 2011; Plack et al., 2005). In a conceptual report, Hubbs and Brand (2010) indicated that it has been suggested by educators that there is a need for established methods to assess the nature and quality of students’ reflection as well as a way of critiquing the content of reflective journal entries. In comparison, Plack et al. (2005) documented that assessment of reflective journals is controversial, and indicated that reflective journals should not be evaluated because educators have contended that evaluation may impact the content of the reflection. Yonge and Myrick (2005) suggested that the application of a “strict teacher-generated marking scheme” (p. 335) might diminish the potential of the journaling assignment. Thus, nurse educators must consider whether or not student reflective journals should be graded.

With regards to student voice, a qualitative study done by Lepp et al. (2005) focused on 21 Swedish and American nursing students’ use of journaling for reflection. Students indicated that the journaling assignment allowed them to freely and openly express themselves in their documented entries. In comparison, Langley and Brown (2010) reported that 32 students in their quantitative study related to perceptions of the use of reflective learning journals, identified lack of trust and freedom of expression as barriers to reflective journal use. In order to provide students with a learning experience which will lead to reflection, it is important for nurse



educators to ensure that the reflective journal assignment is implemented cautiously and well thought through with a clear purpose.

Several researchers have advocated that in order for reflective journaling to be an effective medium in the teaching-learning process, students must receive adequate instructions and feedback (Crème, 2005; Epp, 2008; Harris, 2008). Researchers have indicated that educators should avoid giving students a blank journal and asking them to write (Dunlap, 2006; O'Connell & Dymont, 2011). O'Connell and Dymont referred to simply giving students a blank journal without instructions the blank journal syndrome.

Pursuing this point further, Miller suggested that when students are given reflective journaling as an assignment, the assignment should include potential journal topics, required writing formats, grading criteria, and assurance of confidentiality. In addition, Billings and Kowalski (2006) indicated that when reflective journaling is used there is a need for journal entries to have a specified purpose that may be linked to learning outcomes or specified competencies to be achieved. These researchers (Billings & Kowalski (2006); Miller, 2007) stressed that the aforementioned points should be included in the journaling process.

### **Journaling Evaluation/Models**

During the review of the literature, three studies were identified which indicated the use of a model to evaluate reflective journaling and reflection. Jensen and Joy (2005) used Mezirow's Model of Reflection to evaluate reflective levels among 20 baccalaureate nursing students. Mezirow's model delineates seven levels of reflection: reflectivity, affective, discriminant, judgmental, conceptual, psychic, and theoretical. Mezirow's model considers conceptual, psychic, and theoretical the higher levels of reflection because these levels involve complex personal work called critical consciousness or becoming aware of one's awareness and

the ability to critique that awareness (Jensen & Joy, 2005). Student journals were reviewed to identify and describe the extent and level of their reflection on practice and learning. These authors documented that 80% of students demonstrated a higher level of reflective thought and 20% demonstrated lower levels of reflection.

In a qualitative study to promote reflection using reflective journaling conducted by Chirema (2007), a model devised by Boud et al. (1985) and adapted by Wong et al. (1990) was used to determine the extent students were reflecting. Students in this study were examined to determine if they were critical reflectors, reflectors, or nonreflectors. Lasater and Nielsen (2009) evaluated outcomes of faculty and student perspectives of the Guide for Reflection based on Tanner's Clinical Judgment Model and Lasater Clinical Judgment Rubric in evaluating students' clinical thinking through journaling. Students' perspectives of using the Guide for Reflection included 1) providing a framework for evaluating their clinical judgments and learning from them; 2) seeing their progress; and 3) developing confidence. Faculty perceived the Guide for Reflection offered opportunities to view students' thinking and clinical judgment, understanding that each is socially embedded and context specific and students' development of rationale for interventions through use of the guide.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Concerns related to reflective journaling and ethical considerations have been documented by some authors (Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Kok & Chabeli, 2003; Yonge & Myrick, 2005). Many of these concerns focus on information disclosure, trustworthiness, clarity of instructions, and respect. Hubbs and Brand (2005) delineated three conditions that are needed when reflective journaling is used: perceived trustworthiness of the journal reader, clarity of the expectation, and quantity and quality of feedback. It is of utmost importance for a nurse

educator to communicate openly with students regarding the assignment. Assignment instructions should be clear and the importance of privacy should be communicated during the initial instructions.

Yonge and Myrick suggested that if students disclose personal information that may require intervention, the role of the educator is to provide prompt and appropriate referral for the identified student. Trustworthiness is required on behalf of the educator and student. Educators must trust that students are journaling for the purpose of learning and not simply to please the teacher. Students must trust that educators are respectful of students' writing and respectful of their voice. These are ethical considerations that all educators who use reflective journaling as an assignment should be aware of.

### **Reflective Journaling in Other Disciplines of Higher Education**

Just as nursing education has embraced the use of reflective journaling as an effective pedagogical tool, other disciplines of higher education have embraced its utility as well (Cashell, 2010; Cayley, Schilling, & Suechting, 2007; Chretien, Goldman, & Faselis, 2007; Dymont & O'Connell, 2010; Grant et al., 2006; Kamieli-Miller et al., (2010); Lew & Schmidt, 2007; Minott, 2008; O'Connell & Dymont, 2011; Plack et al., 2005; Plack, 2005; Walker, 2006; Watson, 2010). Researchers in disciplines such as teacher education, the education of medicine, physical/occupational therapy, and pharmacy have used reflective journaling and reported beneficial student learning outcomes.

In teacher education reflective journaling has been used to help teacher students with their writing skills (Watson, 2010). In a descriptive study, Watson examined 20 first and second year bachelor of education students, who were required to repeat an academic writing course, using reflective journaling as a teaching strategy to improve these students' understanding of the

different expository methods used as part of the writing process. The study was conducted over a six-week period and students were introduced to reflective journaling during the second week. Students were instructed to keep journals based on different teaching and learning activities centered around a given expository method.

Watson used semi-structured interviews individually and in groups to gather student comments on the journaling process. Findings of the study revealed that initial journal entries lacked depth and demonstrated limited understanding of the intended course content, there were gaps in students' knowledge of key concepts, and students seemed to have presented erroneous information. Students were given feedback before the last journal entries and 80% of the students indicated that there was a divide in what they thought they knew and what was really known, while 20% were pleased with their journal entries. Results of the study indicated the need for adapting a relationship between knowledge and application of taught processes. Watson was able to conclude that by incorporating reflective journaling as a teaching/learning tool in expository writing along with feedback was beneficial in revealing students' learning opportunities. Watson posited that data indicated an improvement in these students' understanding of the expository method.

Likewise, Lew and Schmidt (2011) conducted a study to investigate the extent to which students believed reflective journaling contributed to an improvement of their reflective learning skills. Findings of the study suggested that students mainly reflected on three general categories related to their learning. The levels of reflection were critical review of past learning experiences, cognitive learning strategies and summaries of what was meant. According to Lew and Schmidt, these findings indicated that students in this study did show improvement in reflective learning skills as they progressed through the academic year.

In the fifth phase of a mixed methods study, O'Connell and Dymont (2006) examined eight post-secondary recreation faculty members and instructors to explore their perceptions (feelings, attitudes, beliefs, experiences) of reflective journals in their classrooms, current practices that were used, and recommendations regarding further use of reflective journals. These researchers used a 32-item quantitative questionnaire based on a 7-point Likert scale and a focus group interview as data sources. Faculty in this study indicated that they assigned reflective journaling to encourage students to confront issues in a critical, evaluative, and connective manner. Findings of the study revealed that faculty was enthusiastic about the benefits (e.g., learning of reflection) of using reflective journals in their classes. In terms of the process, faculty indicated that they expected students to objectively record information for the future, use journals to respond to course readings, make observations about field activities, link experience to course material, and to include self-assessment and self-reflection in journals.

Faculty in this study reported that they provided detail of what they expected of reflective journals in their course syllabi. Results of the study indicated that while 40 to 60% of journal entries written by students met the expectations of faculty in this study, findings indicated that there is a discrepancy between what the faculty expects students to write in journals and what students are really writing. The faculty reported that a modest percentage of journals were of poor quality, meaning that they were "totally descriptive and even insulting to mark" (p. 680). Findings revealed a mean score of 3.5 (based on a 7-point scale) that represented students' ability to synthesize, evaluate, or make connections between/among theories and concepts. In addition, faculty in this study suggested that students were simply "writing for the teacher" (p. 683); meaning students were writing what they thought the faculty may have wanted them to say. Faculty reported that students were not focused on being creative, critical and reflexive in their

journal entries, but were more focused on attempting to meet the evaluative criteria. Faculty also voiced concerns about reflective journaling being overused and students becoming burnout with writing journals, especially if they may have already had negative experiences with journaling.

With regards to feedback and grading related to student journals, O'Connell and Dymont (2006) did not indicate a time frame as to when or if these faculty provided students with ongoing feedback regarding their journal entries. One participant reported concern with regard to the ability to give adequate feedback when one may have 60 journals to read and comment on. Study participants reported that they gave written comments in the journals when they were graded. In addition, study participants indicated that they expected feedback from students; however, feedback from students was in an informal manner. Several of the faculty in this study was concerned about grading journals and indicated that a pass/fail system may be more appropriate as opposed to the assignment of grading percentages because students may write more freely.

These researchers concluded that study participants were enthusiastic about the use of reflective journaling as a pedagogical strategy to encourage reflection and learning; however, issues such as grading concerns, journaling overuse, limiting of feedback, and writing for the teacher were identified. Participants in the study recommended the need for ongoing training and support in the journal writing technique, the use of alternative forms of journals (e.g., video journals), different grading schemes, and collaboration with other educators who are using journaling.

Similar to nursing students, medical students encounter ambiguous and undifferentiated clinical problems which require higher-order thinking and not just technical skills to solve problems (Plack et al., 2007). Thus, researchers in the discipline of medicine have used

reflective journaling for teaching and learning purposes (Cayley, Schilling & Suechting, 2007; Chretien, Goldman & Faselis, 2008; Hanson & Alexander, 2010; Plack et al., 2007). For instance, Chretien, Goldman, and Faselis (2008) used collaborative web-based technology that consisted of a web blog for reflective journal postings and feedback. During a four-week clerkship rotation, 91 medical students were asked to contribute two reflective postings to a class web Blog and read the reflective postings of other students and post feedback comments to their entries. The instructor in this study posted feedback comments as well. Of the 177 posts, eight were considered non-reflective. According to Chretien et al., the instructors' and students' feedback stimulated additional reflection that was evidenced by additional comments given by students and classmates. These researchers concluded that when Blogs are structured with theory driven faculty-facilitation, there is the potential for the promotion of reflection and opportunities for instructors to support student professional development.

A study by Hanson and Alexander (2010) incorporated two types of media: hard copy and electronic journals (blogging) in a qualitative study to investigate the reflective practice of 87 junior and senior level dental students who were assigned to complete journal writing entries about their clinical experiences. The study design was a non-experimental historical evaluation of archival journal entries. Study participants were given guidelines for the journals in the course syllabi. Data for this study was collected over two academic years. In the first year students (n = 38) used hand-held hard copy journals and the second year students (n = 49) used electronic blogs to write journal entries. Students were grouped into four groups: Hard Copy Juniors (Group 1), Hard Copy Seniors (Group 2), Electronic Juniors (Group 3), and Electronic Seniors (Group 4).

Student archival journal entries were evaluated using a coding scheme and rubric that was developed using a simplified version of Mezirow's work to determine students' level of reflective thinking. Four categories were created from Mezirow's seven elements of reflection: habitual action (only what happened), understanding (introspection and thoughtful action), reflection (incorporating content reflection, process reflection), and critical reflection (premise reflection). Findings of the study revealed that Group one functioned in at the habitual action level 31% of the time, understanding level 48%, reflection level 20%, and 0% at the level of critical reflection. Group two functioned in the habitual action level 27% of the time, understanding level 39%, reflection level 33%, and none in critical reflection. While using the electronic journals, Group three functioned 22% of the time at the habitual action level, 48% of the time at the understanding level, 22% of the time at the reflective level, and eight percent at the critical reflection level. Group four functioned at the habitual action level 10%, 44% at the understanding level, 30% at the level of reflection, and 17% in the critical reflection level. These findings indicated that all four groups scored highest in understanding, remaining in the non-reflective levels of thinking overall. When groups three and four used electronic journaling there was evidence of critical reflection. Researchers indicated that these findings may suggest that when students used hard copy journals, many may have waited until assignments were due to complete entries and the increase in reflection using the electronic journals was due to students' comfort with the use of electronic media.

In a quantitative study, Plack et al. (2007) examined 21 third-year medical students in a pediatric clerkship who used reflective journaling to determine the interrater reliability of a method of assessing reflective writing by using a modified Bloom's Taxonomy. Researchers in this study developed a coding schema based on Bloom's Taxonomy to assess the level of



cognitive processing evident in these medical students' journals. Three levels of Bloom's Taxonomy were identified as, knowledge/comprehension (level one), analysis (level two), and synthesis/analysis (level three). Three-hundred and eight entries from 21 journals were independently assessed by three raters. These raters used percent agreement, kappa statistics, and intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC [2, 1]) to assess interrater reliability. Percent agreement ranged from 78.2% to 100%.

Results of this study revealed kappa statistics for each level ranged from 0.57 +/- 0.04 to 0.73 +/- 0.04 and for the highest level of cognitive processing evident ranged from 0.52 +/- .04 to 0.58 +/- 0.04 for each level of cognitive processing ranged from 0.62 to 1.00, and for the highest level of cognitive processing evident was 0.79. According to Plack et al., these statistics demonstrated a strong relationship and a high level of reliability for this method of assessing reflective journal entries. These researchers concluded that reflective journaling allowed medical students in this study to revisit their experiences for critical analysis and deeper learning. Plack et al. recommended that further research is needed to determine the generalizability of this assessment schema to other groups of learners and other raters.

In another study Karnieli-Miller, Vu, Holtman, Clyman, and Lnui (2010) conducted a contextual descriptive analysis of 272 narratives of events recorded by 135 third-year medical students during a six-month period. The purpose of this study was to use medical students' critical incident narratives to deepen their understanding of the informed and hidden curricula. Data sources for this study included reflective journals and focus group interviews. Students were given simple instructions for recording professionalism narratives, no specific instructions were given regarding the recording of positive or negative incidents.

Results of the study revealed that 77% of the students described experiences in the inpatient setting of the hospital, 20% based their experiences in the outpatient setting, and three percent did not indicate a setting. Approximately 63.4% of journal entries in this study were identified as positive, 29.1% were negative, and 7.5% were negative and positive. Two main themes were identified: medical-clinical interaction (81.3%) and teaching/learning environment (18.6%). According to Karnieli-Miller et al. (2010), findings in this study suggested that the hidden and informal curricular contained experiences and events regarding professionalism and professional values which were teachable moments for medical student participants. These researchers concluded that reflective narratives reporting professional critical incidents served as a rich source of data about the content of the hidden and informal curricular and the learning environment in which these medical students learn to become physicians.

Wessel and Larin (2006) used a qualitative study to examine 15 physiotherapy students to describe the changes in reflections over time from their first year of clinical placement to the third year. Students were required to write and submit weekly reflective journals during their first and third clinical placements. Although journal writing was a new concept for this group of students, the instructors did not provide students with any feedback between the clinical placement of the first and third year. Students completed 68 journal entries during the first clinical placement and 82 during the third clinical placement. The mean level of reflection was 2.02 for of the first clinical placement entries and 2.21 for the entire third clinical placement entries. According to these researchers, the changes in frequencies of each level of reflection from the first to third clinical placements were: level one (description) 41% to 22%; level two (analyze event to prior knowledge) 20.5% to 49%; level three (relates event to prior knowledge) 32% to 21%; level four (new understanding) six percent to nine percent. These students did not

complete any journal entries at the level five (how new learning event will affect future behavior). Wessel and Larin (2006) concluded that physiotherapy students in this study had a minimal increase in their level of reflection from clinical placement one to clinical placement three. Students' highest level of reflection ranged descriptions of events to new understanding with a higher mean level of reflection during the third clinical placement. Wessel and Larin suggested that the nature of students' reflections changed and their selected topics became more complex from earlier to later placements. Wessel and Larin's findings related to students' non-reflective levels were similar to findings of Jensen and Joy and Chirema related to nursing students' reflective levels.

In summary, through this literature review the researcher has examined reflective journaling as a pedagogical strategy. Reflective journaling plays a role in student learning in the discipline of nursing, medicine, teacher education, and other allied health fields. While numerous researchers documented the use and benefits of reflective journaling, there are challenges and barriers to its use. Although, there are numerous studies depicting learning outcomes related to reflective journaling, little is known about the process nurse educators' use when reflective journaling is used as an assignment.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this qualitative study, the following definitions were used.

Experience: Observation or participation in events resulting in or tending toward knowledge.

Experiential learning: The process of making meaning from experiences.

Process: Evolving sequences of events that have clear beginnings and endings along with standards.

Reflection: The process of making meaning of past or present experience in terms of oneself. The outcome of the reflective process is new understanding of a perspective.

Reflective journaling: A written narrative of happenings, observations, events, or proceedings that include personal interpretations which link course content to personal experiences and beliefs.

Reflexivity: The researcher's scrutiny of his or her research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring the researcher into the process and allow the reader to assess how and to what extent the researcher's interests, positions, and assumptions influenced inquiry.

Students: Learners in a second semester junior level baccalaureate nursing program

Teaching – Learning Process: The interactions of the student and the teacher involving many transactions and experiences within the educational context.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to investigate and understand the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment in nursing education. The researcher believed that a better understanding of this phenomenon would assist nurse educators who currently use reflective journaling and others who may be interested in using the pedagogical tool with nursing students; especially novice nurse educators. With an endeavor to understand the phenomenon of interest, the study explored the following overarching research question: What is the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment in nursing education? The following secondary questions were addressed as well

1. How do nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment;
2. What challenges or successes have been identified when reflective journaling was used as an assignment; and
3. What insights can nurse educators share with other nurse educators regarding the use of reflective journaling?

Information in this chapter contains a description of the methodology and methods which were utilized in the study and includes discussions concerning the following topics: overview of research design, research sample and setting, methods of data collection, analysis of data, ethical considerations, and issues of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

## **Research Design**

A qualitative grounded theory methodological approach was utilized in order to best understand the process and experiences of nurse educators who use reflective journaling in their curriculum. A constructivist grounded theory design was used for this study. Qualitative inquiry is the investigation of phenomena, in an in-depth and holistic manner, and through the gathering of written artifacts using a flexible research design (Pilot & Beck, 2008). Qualitative researchers attempt to examine experiences of individuals in the natural setting, meaning that data collection strategies, like the interview are interactive (Creswell, 2007; Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

Qualitative inquiry is interpretative, as compared to using statistical methods of analysis distinctive of quantitative research (Creswell, 2007). The qualitative approach delineates a description of the setting, analyzing data for themes, establishes conclusions, and creates theoretical understanding about its meaning (Creswell, 2007; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Further, this methodology assumes an emic approach to inductive inquiry that is necessary in developing an understanding of a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006).

Qualitative inquiry is conducted when a problem or issue needs to be explored, when there is limited information, when there is a need for a complex and detailed understanding of an issue, and when one wants to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue (Creswell, 2007). Thus, qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this proposed study because the purpose is to understand the process a nurse educator uses when reflective journaling is used as a pedagogical strategy in nursing education.

### **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is a qualitative method that seeks to describe and conceptualize the social psychological and structural processes that occur in a social setting (Pilot & Beck, 2008).

Charmaz defined grounded theory research as comprising a systematic, inductive, and comparative approach for conducting inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory. According to Charmaz, a constructivist approach situates priority on the phenomena of study and views data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with study participants. For the study, the qualitative method constructivist grounded theory was appropriate because it endeavors to uncover the meanings one assign to their experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Moreover, constructivist grounded theory is prominent among the disciplines of education, nursing, and psychology and has been used frequently in their research studies (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006).

Constructivist grounded theory was introduced by Kathy Charmaz and is considered a revision of classic grounded theory and differs by its emphasis on how data, analysis, and methodological strategies are constructed and takes into account the research contexts and researchers' positions, perspectives, priorities, and interactions (Charmaz, 2006). The epistemology of constructivist is based on relativism, meaning knowledge is socially produced and constructed and acknowledges study participants and the researcher's ways of interpreting phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, the researcher and participants in a constructivist grounded theory study interprets their world and what is said about it. Charmaz indicated that the researcher and study participants are co-constructors of meaning in a study.

Constructivist grounded theorists view research data from the lens of construction as opposed to discovery. Charmaz emphasized that data is the interpretation and construction of the participants' interpretation and construction of the participants' view of their world and the researcher's interpretation and construction of the participants' interpretation and constructions.

This study accepts the assumptions of constructivist grounded theory in that it offers an interpretive description of the process a group of nurse educators follow.

To summarize constructivist grounded theory, the approach seeks to progress a reflexive and theoretical conceptualization of an inquired phenomenon while attending to the social context in which a research study is occurring (Charmaz, 2006). Hence, constructivist grounded theory is appropriate for this study because the ultimate goal is to explore the process and understand the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment and to determine how he or she constructs meaning of the use of reflective journaling. These meanings provide insight into understanding the process the nurse educator uses.

### **Role of Researcher**

Researchers have documented that the primary tool for conducting qualitative research is the researcher or principal investigator (Creswell, 2007; Pilot & Beck, 2008). The researcher or principal investigator is a necessary component in the process of gathering, analyzing, and theorizing in regards to the data collected (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Charmaz emphasized that a researcher who is conducting a qualitative study cannot remove oneself from the research process, because qualitative research posits that relationships to the participants and the phenomena being studied is essential.

According to Creswell, the primary researcher in a qualitative study should identify assumptions and biases early in the research process. Charmaz stated that, "Just as the methods we choose influence what we see, what we bring to the study also influences what we can see" (p. 15). Thus, researchers should not remove themselves from their own viewpoints, biases, and prejudices in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006). A researcher's background and bias should



be acknowledged because these are the reasons why a researcher embarks upon a specific topic to study (Pilot & Beck, 2008). Bias and curiosity concerning a specific topic leads to a greater desire and confidence to the information one seeks to collect (Pilot & Beck, 2008).

The researcher made every effort to carefully attend to thoughts and feelings that were manifestations of encountered subjective experience of reflective journaling throughout the research study. This goal was achieved by using reflexivity. Charmaz indicated that constructivist grounded theorists should assume a reflexive stance toward all aspects of the research process and consider how theories in the study unfold. Reflexivity involves critically analyzing oneself or the effect of the presence of the researcher on the topic that is being investigated (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, the researcher is a part of the phenomena being studied, and was considered throughout the study. The researcher attended to personal interpretations and the interpretations of nurse educators who served as participants in the research study.

### **Sample and Setting**

A purposive sampling approach was used for this research study. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants who will best benefit the study (Pilot & Beck, 2008). In other words, a purposive sample is appropriate when the researcher is studying a particular phenomenon which only individuals who have experienced the phenomenon can elicit information (Pilot & Beck, 2008). A purposive sample was chosen for this research study because the researcher endeavored to understand the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as a pedagogical tool in nursing assignment; only nurse educators who use reflective journaling with baccalaureate nursing students can elicit information regarding this phenomenon of interest. The inclusion criteria for participation in the research study was nurse educators with a master's degree in nursing, nurse educators who may have

attained a degree beyond the master's level in nursing or related field, who teach baccalaureate nursing students in a school of nursing accredited by either the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education or the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission in the southeastern region of the United States, and use reflective journaling as a pedagogical strategy in nursing education. For the purpose of this study, nurse educators are defined as licensed professional nurses who hold a master's degree or beyond in nursing or related field, who teach baccalaureate nursing students, and use reflective journaling as a pedagogical tool in nursing education.

A sample size of seven nurse educators who met the study criteria comprised the study (see Table 1). Participants ranged in ages from 36 to greater than 59 with a mean age of 52.1. Participants' years of teaching experience ranged from five years to 20 years with a mean of 15 years. All of the participants in the study were Caucasian and female. One of the participants used reflective journaling with nursing students in an online course; one participant used the strategy in the classroom, while five participants used reflective journaling in the clinical setting.

According to Creswell (2009), researchers who conduct qualitative research collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or problem under study. The setting for the study occurred in the natural setting; the researcher made face-to-face interactions with participants at locations designated by participants.

Table 1

*Demographics and Pseudonyms Assigned*

Pseudonym	Gender	Degree	Years of Experience	Teaching Responsibilities	Age
Jan	Female	PhD	>20	Psychiatric Nursing	>59
Sue	Female	PhD	16-20	Senior Practicum	>59
Pam	Female	PhD	>20	Nursing Research	>59
Lina	Female	DNP	11-15	Psychiatric Nursing	48-59
Bren	Female	PhD	5-10	Psychiatric Nursing	36-47
Kim	Female	MSN	5-10	Nursing Concepts	36-47
Kei	Female	PhD	16-20	Nursing Theory	48-59

Note: PhD: Doctor of Philosophy; DNP: Doctor of Nursing Practice; MSN: Master of Science nursing

Table 2

*Participants' Use of Reflection Journaling*

Participants	How Used	Mode of Communication	Format	Structure	Grading
Jan	Clinical	Syllabus	Blackboard	Guideline	P/F
Sue	Clinical	Syllabus Verbal	Blackboard	Students write Freely	50%
Pam	Online	Syllabus Verbal	Blackboard	Guiding Questions	Rubic 50%
Lina	Clinical	Syllabus Verbal	Blackboard	Students write Freely	P/F
Bren	Clinical	Syllabus Verbal	WebCT	Guiding Questions	Rubic 10%
Kim	Clinical	Syllabus Verbal Audio tape	WebCT	Guiding Questions	Rubic 10%
Kei	Classroom	Syllabus Verbal	Blackboard	Write three pages	S/U

Note: P/F: pass/fail; S/U: satisfactory/unsatisfactory

## **Recruitment of Participants**

Recruitment of participants for the study began after approval from the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board. Recruitment of participants in a research study involves identifying eligible participants and persuading them to participate (Pilot & Beck, 2008). The researcher recruited participants by contacting deans and directors of nursing programs accredited by either the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education or the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission in the southeastern states of Alabama and Georgia. These states were chosen because both were geographically accessible to the researcher. Deans and directors of nursing programs were contacted via electronic mail. The electronic mail included a recruitment letter describing the study, an invitation to take part in a semi-structured interview, an informed consent, and contact information for the researcher. To ensure that participation in the study was completely voluntary the researcher allowed participants to initiate contact. Although participation in the study was mainly altruistic, participants who agreed to a semi-structured interview were given a \$25 gift card to a local gas station at the end of the interview as an incentive for participation. Expenses to cover the gift cards were covered by the researcher's personal funds.

## **Data Collection Methods**

To add rigor, breadth, and depth to a study, researchers use multiple methods to collect data (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation is the use of multiple sources to draw conclusions about what constitutes truth (Pilot & Beck, 2008). According to Creswell (2007), triangulation provides corroborative evidence of data obtained by a researcher. The sources of data collection for the study included semi-structured interviews, demographic questionnaire, and a journal that was maintained by the researcher.

## **Interviews**

A semi-structured interview is a face-to-face interview that is flexible while allowing new questions to be introduced during the interview as a result of what a participant says (Dapeng & Weiwei, 2009). When a semi-structured interview is conducted, the researcher has a prepared framework of questions or themes to be explored (Pilot & Beck, 2008). The researcher used an interview guide with 10 guiding questions (see Appendix B). The purpose of the interviews was to gather a more in-depth understanding of the process a nurse educator uses to implement and evaluate reflective journaling as an assignment from the voices of the participants. The interviews lasted approximately 35-45 minutes and were conducted in private locations designated by participants.

Creswell (2007) recommended the use of pilot testing to improve and develop a researcher's data collection procedures and interview questions. The first interview conducted by the researcher served as the pilot interview. The pilot interview allowed the researcher an opportunity to improve the interview questions and to ascertain the accuracy of audio recording equipment. While information collected in the pilot interview was very insightful, the researcher felt the collected data would add further insight into the study findings; therefore, the pilot data was integrated with subsequent study data.

## **Demographic Questionnaire**

The researcher created a demographic questionnaire to obtain demographic information from participants. The purpose of the demographic information was to help the researcher in defining participants. The demographic questionnaire allowed the researcher to know participants' educational background, duration of teaching, and types of classes each were

teaching. Participants were asked to complete the demographic questionnaire after reading and signing the informed consent.

### **Researcher's Journal**

The researcher maintained a personal journal to record information during the data collection phase of the research study. Rudestam and Newton recommended keeping a journal to record impressions, reactions, and other significant events that may occur during the data collection phase of research. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher compiled written memos. After each interview the researcher made journal entries that included a description of the setting, expressions of the participants, and the researcher's thoughts regarding the interviews. The researcher used information from journal entries to write memos and this data was integrated with study data that assisted the researcher as the findings and discussion sections of the dissertation were written. The use of written memos serve to enrich interview data by helping the researcher capture ideas and thoughts which may lead to new ideas and directions to pursue during the research process (Charmaz, 2006).

### **Interview Process**

The researcher sent emails to deans and directors of accredited nursing programs describing the purpose of the study and a letter of invitation to nurse educators who may be interested in participating in the study. After initial contact from prospective participants, the researcher contacted prospective participants who met the study criteria to determine their interest in participating in the study and to request a convenient date, time, and place for an interview. The researcher communicated with seven prospective participants via telephone and email to confirm interviews. The interviews were conducted between July and September 2012. Before the start of the interview, participants were asked to read and sign an approved informed

consent required for participation in the study. After signing the informed consent, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and given an opportunity to ask any questions. All of the interviews were audio taped in their entirety. After each interview, the audiotape of the interview was transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. In addition, the researcher checked the transcripts against the recordings repeatedly to ensure accuracy and to become familiar with the data and possible emerging categories and themes.

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

Qualitative data analysis, within grounded theory, is inductive and involves three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion and/or verification (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). Transcribed text is coded to develop themes, categories, and relationships between variables. According to Charmaz, grounded theory coding requires us to stop and ask analytic questions about the data that has been gathered. The first step in moving from data statements to making analytic interpretations is coding (Charmaz, 2006). Coding is the process of categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarized and accounts for each piece of data. Further, coding creates a frame from which one builds an analysis.

Consistent with grounded theory methods, data collection and analysis of the data of this study occurred simultaneously, with the integration of interview data and journal information into one document. The researcher coded the first interview and other interviews as they were completed. Data was analyzed by using the constant comparative method delineated by Charmaz that involved a process of line-by-line initial, focused, and theoretical coding. Initial coding involved the study of fragments of data, words, lines, segments, and incidents for their analytical import. The researcher analyzed the interview transcripts as soon as possible after each interview. The researcher read the transcripts numerous times line-by-line and assigned codes to

the data. Sections of the transcripts that reflected categories or themes were identified. The researcher made notations on index cards that were color coded to record ideas while reading the data.

During focused coding the researcher selected the most useful initial codes and tested them against other data. Throughout the process, the researcher compared data with data and then data with codes to further establish categories to connect to research questions. The identified categories with the research questions served as a lens for data analysis. The categories were broken into subcategories to better address study questions. After completing focused coding, the researcher began theoretical coding.

Theoretical coding, according to Charmaz, is a sophisticated level of coding that follows codes a researcher selected during focused coding. Theoretical codes specify relationships between categories that were developed during focused coding. During theoretical coding the researcher further reviewed data to establish a theoretical understanding of each category and subcategory as each related to the research questions. The researcher selected quotes that best illustrated the meanings of each category and subcategory that led to a description of the reflective journaling process. In addition, once coding was completed, the researcher used NVivo 10 Qualitative Software to compare codes for similar findings.

Analysis and synthesis of research data allowed the researcher to identify implications of the study's findings. Moreover, the researcher was able to frame study conclusions and develop recommendations for future research.



## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations must be considered in any kind of research (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001; Rudestam & Newton, 2007). According to Pilot and Beck (2008), ethical issues are particularly prominent in nursing research because of the separation between what is considered the expected practice of nursing and the collection of research data becoming confused. Further, Pilot and Beck delineated three ethical principles that should be considered in qualitative research: autonomy, beneficence, and justice. Autonomy in qualitative research is recognized by informed consent, which means research participants are able to make an informed decision and exercise their rights as autonomous persons to accept or reject an invitation to participate in a study.

Beneficence means doing good for others and preventing harm. A researcher is exercising beneficence when potential participants who are unable to give consent or unable to participate in open-ended interviews are excluded from a research study (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Other ways researchers can exercise beneficence is by protecting the names of research participants, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring that study participants know that study results may appear in publications.

The last ethical principle considered was justice. In qualitative research justices means equal share and fairness to study participants. Justice can be shown by the recognition of vulnerability of the participants and any contributions to the study. Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden posited that the ethical principle of justice can be implemented in a research study by a researcher listening to the voices of the minority and disadvantaged groups.

To ensure that the aforementioned ethical principles were employed throughout this research study, the researcher engaged in activities that provided for the protection of human

subjects. To provide for the protection of human subjects this researcher did the following: 1) obtained approval to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Alabama; informed consents were utilized for all participants; 2) provided full disclosure of study procedures by informing participants how data would be used (e.g., in journals); 3) in-depth audio taped interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon private setting; 4) transcripts did not have any identifying data and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of participants, only the researcher has knowledge of pseudonym assignment; 5) the researcher kept research related records and data in a locked file cabinet and only the researcher had access; 6) and the researcher was willing to consult the IRB members for any concerns.

In summary, the researchers made every effort to ensure a safe environment so that nurse educators who participated in this study would have a sense of confidence and were willing to share information. This safe environment was achieved by using an informed consent that outlined the intent of the study and the importance of forming an ethical collaborative relationship with study participants through the duration of the research process. Moving forward, the researcher seized the opportunity and engaged with nurse educators who served as participants in this study using a constructivist grounded theory methodology.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure that an emerging idea has fit, relevance, and modifiability, trustworthiness of the data must be obtained through credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (Charmaz, 2006). Credibility was achieved by using the participants' language in the analysis and establishing an audit trail by keeping the raw data and using written memos. The researcher used constant comparative methods of data analysis and referred to the literature related to the social processes that emerged to ensure originality. Resonance and usefulness were attended to by

confirmation of the theoretical processes with the participants as often as possible (e.g., member checking) and by providing descriptions of the theory that may be embedded in the data (Charmaz, 2006). After transcription of interviews and after data analysis the researcher contacted participants individually via email. Each participant was sent a copy of his or her transcript for review for the purpose of member checking.

## CHAPTER IV: STUDY FINDINGS

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to investigate the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment in the context of baccalaureate nursing students. In addition, the researcher was interested in how a nurse educator understands reflective journaling as an assignment, what challenges or successes have been identified when reflective journaling is used, and what insights nurse educators in this study may share with other nurse educators regarding the use of reflective journaling. The researcher believed that a better understanding of the process will assist other nurse educators who currently use or may have interest in using this pedagogical strategy. This chapter presents the study's major findings obtained from seven semi-structured interviews.

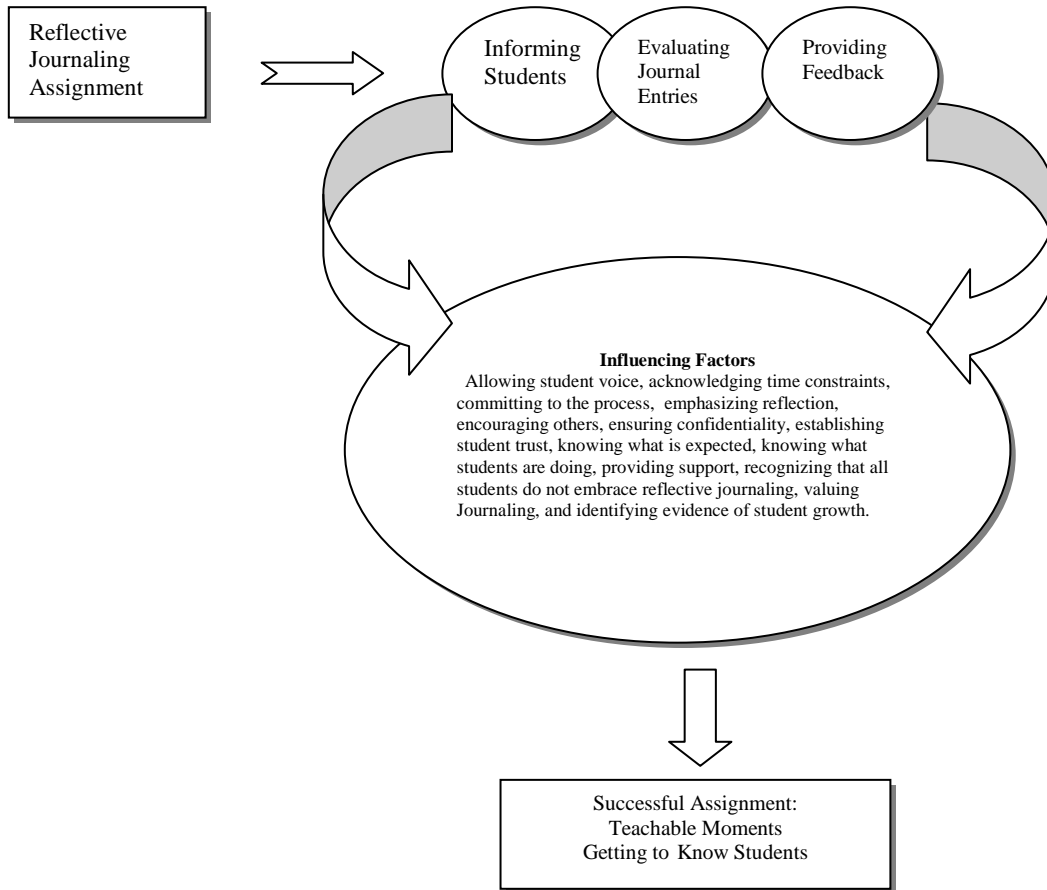
The seven semi-structured interviews were utilized to highlight the process and participants' experience with reflective journaling. Participants were interviewed by adhering to a semi-structured question protocol (see Appendix B). Interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes in length. The primary focus of the interviews was looking at the process and the participants' experience with the use of reflective journaling and to answer the overarching study question and secondary questions:

1. What is the process nurse educators follow when using reflective journaling as an assignment in nursing education;
2. How do nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment;
3. What challenges and successes have nurse educators in this study experienced in using reflective journaling; and

4. What insights can nurse educators share regarding reflective journaling?

To illuminate participants' experience and answers to study questions, the researcher generated a theoretical model (see Figure 1) of the findings that depict the reflective journaling process and factors related to the process. Based on study data collected from participants in this study, the reflective journaling process proceeds through three phases or major categories: 1) informing students; 2) evaluating journal entries; and 3) providing feedback. Factors or subcategories influencing the process include 1) acknowledging time constraints; 2) allowing student voice; 3) committing to the process; 4) emphasizing reflection; 5) ensuring confidentiality; 6) establishing student trust; 7) identifying evidence of student growth; 8) knowing what is expected; 9) knowing what students are doing; 10) providing support; 11) recognizing that all students do not embrace reflective journaling; and 12) valuing reflective journaling. The findings of this study are summarized by study questions to demonstrate the relationships among phases or major categories and influencing factors or subcategories. Statements made by the participants appear in italics and are used to illustrate the findings and demonstrate integrations to the data.

Figure 1. Reflective Journaling Process



**The Process**

What is the process nurse educators follow when using reflective journaling as an assignment in nursing education? Study data supported the occurrence of an authentic process and all of the particulars that provide coalescence to help explain the process. Providing nursing students with a learning tool to reflect and explore learning experiences was the overarching goal of the process. The reflective journaling process identified from the data includes the following three phases or major categories: informing students, evaluating journal entries, and providing feedback. Informing students in this study refers to nurse educators communicating knowledge to nursing students regarding the reflective journaling assignment. Evaluating is defined as a

summative assessment using careful appraisal of student journal entries by nurse educators. Providing feedback is nurse educators' thoughtful and prompt response to nursing students' journal entries. Although, the phases or major categories are consecutive, the process is dynamic and there are influencing factors or sub-categories that are interwoven throughout the process that are directly related to the teaching-learning experience. Influencing factors were seen in more than one of the phases or major categories of the process: informing students, evaluating journals, and providing feedback.

### **Informing Students**

Informing students of the assignment is the first phase of the process. Several subcategories emerged during this phase of the process: 1) knowing what to expect; 2) emphasizing reflection; 3) ensuring confidentiality; and 4) allowing student voice. These subcategories or influencing factors were considered important because informing nursing students was their introduction to the assignment.

Informing is defined as the communication of knowledge regarding reflective journaling. Communication means to convey knowledge of information. Communication in the informing students phase takes on multiple forms. Nurse educators in this study identified communication to nursing students as verbal, written, and audio taped. Verbal communication was in the form of language articulated directly to students in the classroom and/or clinical setting.

A majority of the participants (6 of 7 or 85%) gave nursing students verbal instructions. Some of the participants (5 of 7 or 75%) in this study used written communication such as a printed guideline, information included in the class syllabus, or information on a nurse educator's class computer webpage (e.g., Blackboard, WebCT). Most of the participants (6 of 7 or 85%) used both verbal and written communication to inform students of the reflective

journaling process. Only one (1 of 7 or 13%) of the participants in this study used audio taped communication which nursing students were able to view on the nurse educator's class computer webpage:

It is in the syllabus. They learn early on in the nursing program that this is part of the process that learning takes place often through reflection and reconsidering events; so it is written down, it is discussed. They have to submit a journal every week, they may be in clinical at least two days a week maybe three days a week and we ask for a thorough report, all parameters, you know. (Lina)

It is on the syllabus and it is listed in the course documents section where the web platform is for the students to use. So, at the end of the two-week period, that is when they complete their journal. That is specified in each module and in the syllabus that the journal should be the last thing that they complete for each module. (Pam)

I use a guideline. Students are given the guideline. I have the expectation that students will use the guideline. The guideline informs them that the journal must be more than just a written record of events. (Jan)

At the beginning of the semester and then we also go over it when they meet with their clinical faculty. Then also the clinical faculty will do it again when they actually start their clinical. They may start early in the semester or later in the semester, depending on what group they are in; then it is posted in the tools and resources section. (Sue)

It is written and verbal. And then I also have an audio-recorded orientation that they will get. The written part comes in their syllabus whereas the activity is explained and the definition of their entry is. There is an outline of how many there will be and then their grading rubric that is attached to that. That comes in the syllabus. Each part is broken out individually in a folder for our learning management system for the course and reflective journaling is dropped into that (*pause*) then every time the student enters their journal they can see the grading rubric and the instructions. Then, I verbally go over it at class orientation. (Kim)

Nurse educators in this study informed students early in the semester and in multiple ways. In most cases, communication in the informing students phase was reinforced by clinical faculty. Students know early on what is expected regarding the reflective journaling assignment. Nurse educators indicated that they have the expectation that nursing students will adhere to information which is given verbally, printed in the syllabus, printed in guidelines, and in web pages:



I have the expectation that students' will use the guideline (*pause*) very student gets a copy of this. (Jan)

So the students have all that up front, to know what is expected on each journal entry. (Lina)

They know it is an essential part of the process; usually they have already been told: your syllabus says you will be doing a journal for each clinical day and it is an expected part of the process you are in. (Kim)

Informing students was considered an important aspect of the reflective journaling process because in order for students to begin the assignment, knowing what to do and knowing what is expected was necessary. Moreover, informing students was seen as important because students unfamiliar with reflective journaling have many questions regarding the assignment:

When the students first come in, this is usually the first course, and which they are required to do journaling. There are subsequent courses beyond that. They usually do not know what to do (*pause*) put in a journal (*pause*)”What am I suppose to say?” “What am I supposed to do?” So I not only explain this to them on the first day that we meet in their clinical orientation, but I also give them examples of a document. I obtained information from a student when I was early on in my teaching career to be able to save that as a model, because she did an excellent job of fulfilling the requirements of the journals. So I send them an example of an actual journal where of course the student's name has been removed so that they have an example of what is expected of me. (Lina)

Providing nursing students with guidelines and examples was considered helpful to students in this phase, especially, beginning nursing students. The use of guidelines and examples gave students a starting point to begin writing their journal entries.

Although participants did not use a reflective journaling model, some participants (4 of 7 or 57%) gave students questions and/or topics to use with the reflective journaling assignment:

The student is given a topic for each week; how they feel that they met that particular competency. Then at the end what was their original goals, their learning outcomes for the semester, their goals (*pause*) not ours, and then they use their clinical experience throughout the semester to accomplish the QSEN and curriculum outcome. (Kim)

At the end of each module they need to answer two questions. The questions are always the same but their answers are very different depending on what is going on with them. The first question is for them to pick out an evidence-based practice event, whether it is a

flyer that they saw in a clinical, whether it is another class that a faculty member or professor mentioned (*pause*) evidence-based practice or something that they used evidence based practice in. The second question asks them to review the content that they have learned and to reflect on it. (Pam)

They have a rubric for the journal questions looking at the depth of each answer, the structure, the writing format, whether it's correct grammar, spelling, punctuation and that kind of thing as well as the content. So the students have all that up front, to know how they will be evaluated on each journal entry. (Kim)

Providing questions for students to use during the reflective journaling assignment was interpreted as a starting point for the nursing students to begin writing and as a way to help guide the learner through the process.

Participants in this study gave nursing students information regarding reflection during the informing phase. An overwhelming number of participants (7 of 7 or 100%) in this study emphasized the use of reflection and its importance in the journaling process. The reflective part was considered more important than the writing of journal entries as evidenced by participants' responses:

One is the reflection and in taking the time to think about what just happened. The reflective part made me really think about what it was that was going on (*pause*). When I became an educator I felt like it was important to emphasize the reflection part of it. Everybody was always doing journals (*pause*) the journals often would be a recitation of what they did. I really wanted to focus more on the reflective process and getting them to look at their own (*pause*) as well as what they observed. Sometimes you will observe something in a client and it does not make any sense to you until you are able to begin to see how that might fit in the big picture. (Jan)

We talk to them about reflection, we comment on all of that. It is like another clinical scenario gets discussed, case studies, one on one specific and then after they do that, I ask them to tell me about more globally how they feel about their ability, how they feel about, you know (*pause*) the system, about working on teams, and of the psychosocial, economic, and their professional growth through the process (*pause*) how they see that they have changed (*pause*) or they may be seeing things different. But for me, reflection is after a period of time for them to reconsider that in a new place, with them in a new place and with new tools to be able to see it in a more mature and professional manner than they may have been when they walked in. (Sue)

I make the students aware that reflection is a personal process of going in and thinking about the situation, it's an interpersonal process, I guess, of going about (*pause*) of sitting down and actually thinking about what happened, how did that make me feel, or how did that make me react, or did I respond well or did I not respond well, or what did I see other people do and how did that make me feel? Did I like what I saw, is it something I want to model or is it not something I want to model? So it is an internal process of evaluating the situation and reflecting on how (*pause*) it is something I want to continue doing or not doing? (Bren)

Well, I push people to be as analytical as they can and I think we all can up to some extent. I don't get embedded in level 1, level 2, level 3, but I do try to talk about, you know, there is description and then there is analysis and evaluation. And we need to talk about that. You know reflection is (*pause*) you have to start with a description in order to reflect, you have to have something to reflect upon. Then the reflection should involve some analysis of how it affects you, then what are you going to do with it. So how does that impact you, how is it going to change your life now that you've kind of figured out what you think about it or whether you like it or don't like it, who what are you going to do with that information, how does it change your knowledge base, how does it change your practice, how does it change you as a person? (Kei)

Reflection was considered important to the participants and each wanted to convey their definition of reflection to their students. Not all participants placed emphasis on reflective levels. When asked about the levels of reflection (experience, description, thinking, planning) (Kolb, 1984) one participant made the following comment:

No, I'm really not, not with this course. I have used more of that approach in other courses, such as a roles course or particularly with graduate students that have a deeper meaning and understanding of the pedagogy involved with multiple levels. I have used that, but with this course, this is an undergraduate course; it is the first semester, they barely know how to spell nursing (laughter). So, it is not sophisticated at that level but simply an opportunity for them to explore what they have learned and to look for ways to apply advanced nursing practice. (Pam)

The researcher interpreted this statement to mean that using levels of reflection was more appropriate to use with different courses and the level of the nursing student. The focus of the reflective journaling assignment for this group of nursing students was the opportunity to explore experiences and write about them.

Although, participants in this study placed emphasis on reflection, only one participant

(1 of 7 or 14%) used the work of a theorist for the reflective journaling assignment, Patricia Benner (1984):

I have a reference to Benner (*pause*) that is sort of the background. It is that people learn from telling their stories. (Jan)

This participant used the works of Patricia Benner, nursing theorist, to assist nursing students engaging in the reflective journaling assignment to tell their stories about their daily experiences.

Another participant (1 of 7 or 14%) reported using a book entitled *The Artist's Way* to support the journaling assignment. From the voice of the participant *The Artist's Way* is a book based on a woman who had struggled with alcoholism and used reflective journaling as a way to release her feelings. The participant offered the following comment:

What she argues is that the best way to use journaling if you are interested in the process, is to write three pages and she argues that it has to be three pages, at least write three pages and she would argue that it should be done the first thing in the morning. And it is more a stream of consciousness for her. It is that sort of loss of sense of self through writing for her that nurtures the creative spirit and energy. (Kei)

This participant indicated that instructions to the nursing students in the class were to write three pages about whatever was bothering or concerning them about their learning experiences.

A couple of the participants (2 of 7 or 28%) reported that their nursing program's philosophy is based on Transformational Learning and the work of Mezirow; however, their reflective journaling assignment is not necessarily based on this. A participant made the following comment:

I do give them tips on how to reflect and transform their thinking. On my syllabus there are specific steps listed for how to reflect. I give them some questions to kind of guide their thinking when they are writing their journals. (Bren)

This participant was interested in helping nursing students reflect in addition to changing the way they may think about learning experiences.

One participant indicated not having prior knowledge of Schon, Dewey, and Kolb. The participant made the following comment:

I don't even know that I know who those theorists are. So I, perhaps that's because I have a post masters teaching certificate, but education was not (*pause*) I've been an educator since '85, but it's you know, you do it the way you were taught to do it, then I went back and got the theory and after my PhD. So there are things like that that I am not aware of that could influence my practice and my belief. I do know because I am holistic and am really clinically focused that I do, I am very detailed in assessing the clinical data that they submit to me, where somebody else may not be. There are just differences in people, I guess. (Sue)

This participant linked not knowing about theorists who are associated with reflective journaling to not having a background in education. The participant expressed the need to focus on the clinical aspect because this is what has been learned and this is a continuation of what has been observed in the past. However, the participant acknowledged that information about the mentioned theorists could influence personal practice and beliefs.

Most of the participants (5 of 7 or 71%) indicated that the reflective journaling assignment was not based on a theorist or other source. The researcher interpreted these responses to mean that the focus of reflection that was conveyed to nursing students was not necessarily on levels of reflection but on descriptions, feelings, and how these concepts changed one after an experience. Based on the aforementioned comments by participants in the study their use of reflective journaling is aligned with the learning theory constructivism. Participants provided nursing students with instructions and examples to work on the assignment independently. Allowing nursing students to write their experiences independently with the participant serving as a guide or facilitator is consistent with constructivism. Constructivist learning is an active process and the learner constructs their subjective representation of objective reality (Huang, Rauch, & Liaw, 2010; Kang, Brain, & Ricca, 2010).

Allowing student voice and ensuring confidentiality emerged as subcategories or influencing factors during the informing phase. Several participants (5 of 7 or 71%) indicated that allowing students to speak freely in their journals was important because when students feel free to express what they were thinking and feeling about their experiences, they are more apt to participate in the journaling process:

So, I have found that journaling allows them a voice that they may not otherwise have and it allows them to explore areas that they are concerned about or worried about or how to connect to nursing. Many of them have family tales or something that influenced them to get into nursing and generally gives them a voice to that experience in ways that other assignments do not. (Pam)

It is an opportunity for them to be able to share their thoughts and feelings and not be punished for it, and have somebody who cares enough to listen (*pause*); they feel like they can talk. (Sue)

You have to give them enough freedom to feel they write without being (*pause*) without big brother sort of looking over their shoulder and that they will be penalized for it. The challenge is how do you give them a real voice? (Kei)

It is a safe place for them. So it is a safe way for them to verbalize things. (Bren)

I encourage them to tell their stories. (Jan)

Participants in this study used the reflective journal as a forum for students to write openly about their experiences without feeling threatened. The researcher interpreted allowing student voice as a positive influencing factor to help nursing students remain engaged in the reflective journaling process.

Ensuring confidentiality was the assurance of participants that nursing students' reflective journal entries were private and only shared with team teachers. Participants made the following comments:

The only other person who reads it is my team teacher. The journals are not read by clinical preceptors at the hospital. (Kim)

Because we have 102 students, some may have 8 or 9 instructors, maybe 10 instructors, so the actual clinical instructor reads the students' reflective journals. (Lina)

Unless we perceive a problem no one other than me reads the journals. Unless they want to share them, you know, we do not restrict them (the student) from sharing them. There are times when for accrediting bodies that when the students do exceptional work, we can pull their work and file it away, if they (the student) give us permission. (Sue)

Thus, nursing students' reflective journal entries remained private, unless students' gave participants permission for others to use. The researcher interpreted ensuring confidentiality as being a positive influencing factor for nursing students to participate in the reflective journaling assignment.

### **Evaluating Journals**

Evaluating journals is the second phase of the reflective journaling process. Evaluating is defined as a summative assessment using careful appraisal of the students' journal entries by participants. Evaluation of students' journal entries occurred after nursing students' submission. According to participants in this study, the purpose of evaluating journal entries is to identify nursing students' ability to reflect on experiences and to assess their progress; determine learning needs or assess that need for improvement and to make judgments regarding achievement of a satisfactory level of performance. Participants in the study gave the following responses:

The professor has to have some way to evaluate whether the degree of reflection that the students are doing is occurring. (Kei)

Yes, you have to evaluate (*pause*) I think a lot goes on when they write their journals or something happens, the journals are not cumulative; they are just for one week. I think there is a lot of reflection over events and patient encounters and situations. (Sue)

Yes, what we do, just a little aside, is if we see a student that is not progressing (*pause*) address their goals aside and if we see that they are not progressing to fully really participate in the journaling process and give me what is necessary. (Lina)

I'm looking for (*pause*) because their experiences are so varied, I'm looking for did they get out of the experiences anything valuable for the student. Does the student maybe need to be counseled because they may have something that is blocking their ability to

learn from these experiences (*pause*) things like that. It helps me to identify how the student is progressing in their learning, are they able to seek out those learning experiences and share them. (Bren)

I go by the rubric and the answers that they pose to the question for that week. And I'm not looking for a specific answer every single time I am looking at it. It's sort of like patient centered care at the student center; individually how did that student respond and sometimes it's just that they did not understand the concept of teamwork collaboration, so that means whenever I give them feedback, I ask are you truly understanding what it means to be a team player to collaborate with other people. (Pam)

Participants in this study viewed evaluating reflective journal entries as a way to help determine nursing students' progress of the reflective process and to ascertain if these students were following instructions related to the reflective journaling assignment. In addition, by evaluating students' journal entries, participants were able to identify students who may need additional assistance in achieving greater benefit from their learning experiences.

Some participants (6 of 7 or 85%) in the study used some form of criteria for evaluating journal entries, while one participant (1 of 7 or 14 %) in this study did not have clear evaluation criteria:

I do not really have an evaluation criteria other than that the faculty members are seeing that their reflection in their ability to connect with clients is appropriate for the level at which they are at. It becomes sort of an ongoing way to not only observe them in the clinical areas but to see how they are processing information. That's a pass or fail (*pause*) you are either appropriate or inappropriate. Sometimes students will say "I was truly upset or angry" or "I don't really believe this stuff about such and such, addiction, or whatever" and then something that can get processed then because they revealed it. So that is the criteria.

This participant relied strictly on evaluating nursing students' reflection in their ability to connect with clients in the clinical setting as to whether the reflection and connection is appropriate or inappropriate. However, this participant did require nursing students to complete a narrative at the end of each clinical experience and the narrative was evaluated using a grading



rubric. In addition, one participant was only interested in nursing students participating in the reflective journaling assignment:

I give them guidelines (*pause*) if you feel comfortable giving examples, excerpts from the journaling to support your point, and then please do that (*pause*) so every paper included some excerpts. So I could see the degree of description and analysis of evaluation (*pause*) I would scan some of the excerpts, but I tried to tell them that I was not grading them on content, but I was really more interested in them participating in the activity, so it is a way to keep them accountable to the participation. (Kei)

This participant provided nursing students with examples and was more interested in student participation as opposed to the content of reflective journal entries.

As it relates to grading reflective journal entries many of the participants (5 of 7 or 71%) used a pass or fail (appropriate or inappropriate) grading scale. Although, one participant indicated that an inappropriate journal in the clinical setting could lead to a nursing student failing; while another participant reported that the reflective journal entries were non-punitive and simply a forum for nursing students to explore their learning experiences:

This is an undergraduate course, for the nursing students this is the first semester; they barely know how to spell nursing (laughter), so it is not sophisticated at that level but simply an opportunity for them to explore what they have learned and to look for ways to apply advanced practice nursing. (Pam)

They do not get a letter grade. It's pass or fail. It is part of the clinical experience. It goes into (*pause*), now on those rare students that just refuse to change, usually their communication is not therapeutic and they do not have the growth. Sometimes the student will fail a clinical experience simply because they did not achieve the goal; one of the clinical goals is being able to conduct a therapeutic conversation, they have not learned the skills that they need and they will not pass. (Lina)

It is not punitive, it is not graded.

A few participants (2 of 7 or 28%) assigned a numerical grade for reflective journaling entries.

They get a numerical grade on their paper and I think it counts like 50% (*pause*) the grade I give them counts 50% of their final grade, in this particular class, but it varies from class to class. So, yes, they do start out real weak in their presentation and not as thorough, I (*pause*) I think maybe once I asked somebody to go back and explain something to me, but I have told them, I said, this is what I'm looking for in your next

journals, I said, this is what I'm looking for in your next journals, you know (*pause*) a little explanation of this, a little more consideration of what is going on here, and what the issues are and the reflection (*pause*) how are you feeling about it, you know (*pause*) where do you think you are in this thing? (Sue)

I go by the rubric and the answers that they pose to the question for that week. And I'm not looking for a specific answer every single time I am looking at it. It's sort of like patient centered care, it is student centered; individually how did that student respond and sometimes it's just that they did not understand the concept of teamwork collaboration, so that means whenever I give them feedback are you truly understanding what it means to be a team player and to collaborate with other people. (Kim)

These responses from participants indicate that there is not one accepted or standard criteria for nurse educators to follow regarding how nursing students' journal entries are evaluated and graded. Participants used their chosen methods.

### **Providing Feedback**

Providing feedback is the third and final phase or major category of the action-oriented reflective journaling process. Feedback is the nurse educator's thoughtful response to nursing students' journal entries. Feedback can also be a change in the situation based on a student's comment. An overwhelming majority (7 of 7 or 100%) of the participants in this study gave nursing students response to their journal entries. Participants' feedback in this study provided information about the correctness or appropriateness of a student's response. It was evident that feedback was important to participants in this study, because providing feedback gave participants an opportunity to teach and engage nursing students in the process, give negative and positive comments, and provide support. Participants indicated that students needed to adhere to a given timeframe to submit journals in order for feedback to occur in a timely fashion:

Well, the students have to turn them in within two days of their clinical; it says it in the guideline. The response is usually within a day or two and certainly within the week, because the faculty wants to be able to respond to them so it can get incorporated into their next week's clinical assignments. I can remember students at a time doing reflective journals and they would hand them in. Then you would already be a week

behind by the time they handed them in. So the ability to respond in the reflective journals right away is really good. (Jan)

Every week, their journals are due to me. Usually they have (*pause*) like this semester they have clinical on Thursday, so I will have their journals due to me by Sunday at midnight. Then that gives me Monday and Tuesday, sometimes Wednesday to respond. I can usually get a response to them pretty quickly, usually by Monday. Every single journal that I reply back to, I always have something instructional in my reply. (Lina)

They are to submit them by Saturday evening and I try to have them read by no later than Tuesday. (Sue)

Well, I review them every two weeks, and I try very hard not to get behind because then I am looking at a mountain of assignments. (Pam)

And you know, I would say that you need to be timely. If they have a deadline to turn it in on you need to have a deadline to give them feedback. If they are just doing it and they do not think it is for (*pause*) they already think it is not for a purpose and then you do not give them feedback, then that just validates to them that it is not useful. (Bren)

The timely submissions of nursing students' journals lead to prompt responses by participants in this study. Participants stressed the importance of promptness on their behalf and being committed to providing feedback. In addition, if the educator fails to provide feedback, nursing students may not view the reflective journaling assignment as being important and purposeful. In addition, not only is promptness of the feedback important to the success of the reflective journaling assignment, the quality of the feedback is just as important. Providing feedback gave participants an opportunity to give thoughtful comments that would help the learner. A participant made the following comment:

Well, when I give them feedback, the feedback is individual and goes directly to the student. I frequently do respond to statements they make. A lot of times they think I do not read them, so I make a statement in there that is personal and they often do, then I will respond to that either in an email directly to them or in the grading. In the rubric there is an opportunity to put comments or notes back to the students, so I respond in that way. (Pam)

Providing feedback was considered a valuable phase of the process because feedback helped nursing students prepare for the next learning experience. Participants made the following responses:

Submitting the journals so the faculty members can give them feedback and it becomes more of a learning process rather than event. (Jan)

I personally try to have them back in time for them to read and review before the next clinical. I try to give (*pause*) I try to give them back in two days. We have a week to get them back, because if I feel like I, you know (*pause*) look at them and say the patient was bleeding and why don't you check your H/H; red blood cells? Have you ordered transfusions, and you think about this and that, that's a piece of clinical data I would like for them to have if they encounter it the next week, and for them to reflect and get feedback on their thoughts and feelings, whether they are right or they are wrong, or on target. I think it is most beneficial to them to get that soon and incorporate it for the next week. (Sue)

These students are so busy and so stressed out, to wait a month to give them a needed comment, I think is not feasible, I think it needs to be correct. (Bren)

Since each module takes two weeks, I always try to get their assignments done in the first week of the next module so that they have feedback before the next module is due. (Pam)

Based on participants comments if students had concerns in their journals regarding a particular patient or situation this gave the participant an opportunity to provide comments that would assist the student during the next clinical experience. It was evident that feedback related to journal entries was beneficial to nursing students' subsequent learning experiences. Further, reading students' journal entries and giving feedback required commitment on the part of participants in this study.

During the feedback phase participants indicated that there was opportunity to provide encouragement and support to nursing students regarding the reflective journaling process:

So, I try to give a little instruction and try to be in a supportive role, not in the instructor role. Yes, it is to give them the opportunity to make a change without being punitive or being tough or something. (Sue)

And they just, you know, they are passing but continue to add information and be supportive, be guiding, but you can detect a problem and you have to scale it back. (Bren)

I encourage students through the journaling process to look at how their own personal feelings about their experience with addiction could be interfering with patient/client interactions. I offer resources to them and encourage them to look at it but of course, we cannot actually require it unless we feel like this is going to be an issue for this student for the remainder of the semester. (Lina)

So, you have to, you know, make sure that you give them feedback. I always try to give positive feedback, positive feedback and support. (Kei)

I have done research with students and I interview them a year after they graduate from college, and not all of them, but those who consent to do so, and they are overwhelmed, but journaling is a way for them to reflect themselves. It is sort of like one of those transition tools that they can take with them. The one of the other things I encourage them and sometimes they will write me about it. (Jan)

I think the reflective part (*pause*); it took me really a while to really be more encouraging to students to get the reflective part. (Kim)

Providing support and encouragement was interpreted as a way to help students remain engaged in the reflective journaling assignment so that they would write about their experiences.

Also, providing feedback was a way for participants to establish students' trust and was seen as a way for students to participate willingly in the process. Participants made the following comments:

It does take them a little while to develop some comfort and trust with what they are telling me and how I'm going to respond to it. Usually, by the last couple of modules their thoughts and expressions are flowing much more freely than they did at the beginning of the semester because they trust me and they know that I do read their responses and I am interested in what is going on in their lives that affects their responses to the individual modules (*pause*) if they do not learn to trust the professor within the context of the semester, then their responses will be very limited and they won't open up. They may respond from a perspective of answering or completing an assignment but they want reach that voice that is so important in reflective journaling. (Pam)

Providing feedback was a way for participants to help prepare students for the next clinical experience, provide support and encouragement, and establish trust (positive influencing factors). Providing timely and thoughtful feedback and showing interest in the students were

techniques to empower students to remain engaged in the activity. Overall, in providing feedback, participants were able to keep nursing students involved in the reflective journaling assignment.

### **Research Question Two**

How do nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment? To answer this question the researcher used participants' responses related to how they defined reflective journaling and how this teaching strategy was used. Participants understand reflective journaling as a learning tool for nursing students to explore and reflect upon their experiences. Participants made the following comments:

Reflective journaling for me in the course of similar type usage involves posing a question or questions for students on a regular basis that they will respond to, not just in a sense of learning but in an opportunity to explore that learning against their feelings about that learning. (Pam)

Reflective journaling is a method where students are able to reflect on a situation and learn from that. So, I view reflective journaling as a learning process for the student. (Kim)

I see it as an exercise initiated by the student that demonstrates to me pieces of knowledge that they acquire, factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge that they have acquired through their life and through their education, how well they put all of these pieces together, how they apply it to specific situation and their thinking, their feelings, their understanding and consideration, not only of the pieces but being able to step back and see the bigger picture. In our curriculum it is typically a metric to evaluate their ability, their understanding and a tool for them to reflect their self-assessment of their knowledge, their deficits, and their growth and through self-reflection, what they need to do to enhance that. (Sue)

So, it is actually a tool that helps them grow with therapeutic communication as well as examining their thoughts and feelings about working with addictive clients. (Lina)

I define it as a process. One is the reflection and in taking time to think about what has just happened. And the other part of it is being able to write that down in a way that is meaningful for the study at that particular time (*pause*) they can kind of connect up in various ways that they interact with clients and situations and whatever. (Jan)

Regardless to how participants defined reflective journaling, the researcher interpreted participants' understanding as being a tool for nursing students to explore and learn from their experiences. Nursing students are able to use the reflective journal to learn from their experiences, incorporate their values and beliefs, and learn to identify their deficits and areas for improvement.

Knowing what students are doing and valuing journaling emerged as influencing factors or subcategories related to how participants in this study understand and used reflective journaling as an assignment with baccalaureate nursing students. A few participants (4 of 7 or 57%) indicated that reflective journaling as an assignment allowed them to know what students are doing; particularly, when they were not present with the student. Participants made the following comments:

I wanted a better understanding of the students' learning and what they were learning and what they were actually seeing out there when I could not be there with them, because I can't be everywhere with all students. It also gives me a picture and understanding of the facilities they are going to (*pause*) are those good experiences, are they meeting good people, you know; are those good places for them to go. (Bren)

So this is taking into consideration they are in clinical; I am not in clinical with them; they have preceptors at different large facilities here in (*pause*) and their clinical experience they write them up and send it to me via email in Blackboard. (Sue)

I have had students that have reflected on things that happened in the hospital that really provided me, as an instructor, to know about the clinical faculty that they have some things that were actually occurring in the hospital that students having a fresh set of eyes see about administrators. No names were ever given, no specific situation to identify the student in any way was ever given but they have been used to, for quality improvement. (Kim)

If you have 8, sometimes 10 students in a clinical area, you are not with all of them every minute. So that gives you an idea of what was going on. (Lina)

Statements in nursing students' reflective journaling allowed participants to become aware of information that they would not have been privileged to because they were not with these students.

Valuing reflective journaling was interpreted as an influencing factor in the process because participants viewed the teaching strategy as being valuable and placed importance on its use in their curriculum. An overwhelming majority (7 of 7 or 100%) of participants have used reflective journaling at some point in their lives; whether it was academic or personal. These participants felt that the strategy had been valuable in their use. Participants gave the following responses:

I do think (*pause*) you know, I think it can be a very valuable teaching approach. Forces you to stop life for a bit and spend time with yourself; helps to better understand things happening in your life (*pause*) impacting your life and those around you (*pause*) often find clarity in what is a good new direction to head in, or identify top priorities. Offers you the opportunity to gain some perspective on where you are in relation to those around you (*pause*) if you are open gain a sense of humility (*pause*) sense of place; recognizing both your gifts and your limitations. My reflection usually ends with gratitude. Unfortunately, I am not consistent in journaling as I should be (*pause*) it is when I feel particularly out of control that I, once again, reach for the journal. So that is how I first got started, from doing it myself and realizing that it was a very valuable for me. (Kei)

It is a very valuable part of the learning process. I think if students just go through their nursing career and don't stop and think about how I am going to apply this, in my life, in my career in providing better care for patients, I think they stay too task-oriented if they do not use the journal process. (Jan)

I learned to value reflective journaling when I went through a really personal experience and for a year I kept a journal just because I needed to be able to put that voice down, that very painful negative energy had to go somewhere and the best way I could channel it was on paper. (Pam)

In all honesty, probably from the beginning it was a part of what I did as a student, so I was accepting of that it is just part of the process. I do it more, I have to do it (*pause*) but it is because I see the benefit in it. It is a teachable moment, multiple teachable moments, and it is also validation for me that they are making progress in these particular areas and it would be hard for me to pass somebody because I'm not sure what the rest of there is on. (Sue)



The researcher interpreted participants' statements regarding reflective journaling as having personal value because they had used journaling themselves academically and this encouraged and influenced their use of this teaching strategy. Reflective journaling provides perspective for nurse educators and allows for teachable moments that may not be available at other times. For instance, one participant reflected on an opportunity to teach a student about the importance of identifying a critical lab value. This participant noticed in a journal entry that a student had indicated that a patient's hemoglobin and hematocrit (H/H) was critically low; however, the student had not identified it as being critical and had not included an action plan. The participant indicated that this prompted an immediate face to face interaction with the student to ascertain that the student could indeed identify the normal and critical values of an H/H. According to the participant, this interaction provided an opportunity to reinforce previously taught course content.

Some participants (2 of 7 or 28%) valued reflective journaling because it served as a method of communication between students and instructors and the journal helps instructors learn their students. Participants made the following comments:

So it becomes sort of a communication vehicle for us and students. (Jan)

Not only does it allow one to build a relationship with their students, but the students get the benefit of it. But they have to understand what reflective journaling means to them as an educator before they can really use it effectively. This is how I build trust. And I don't just read through the first line and the last line, I read through it and sometimes with my feedback, I am looking for the little minute statements that they made, or maybe that silent statement that was in there and I will pick up on that. One should use it not only so that the student can reflect back and learn but so that they can learn their student and where their needs are. (Kim)

Reflective journaling was valued by these participants as a medium to engage in dialogue with nursing students with the end result of getting to know those students. As an ongoing medium for communication, participants were able to learn their students and identify specific learning

needs. One participant shared a story about an experience using reflective journaling some years ago. The participant used reflective journaling to allow students to document their caring moments with patients. This participant related how different pieces of personal information were revealed by students as they wrote their entries. For instance, one of the students indicated that their grandfather had expired the week before and at that time did not want to work with sick people; the participant did not have any idea. Since the student had not been forthcoming, without the journal entry the participant may not have known this information about this student.

In summary, participants understand reflective journaling as a learning tool for nursing students to explore and reflect upon their learning experiences. Participants used reflective journaling as a way to know what students were doing when they were not physically with them, for teachable moments, and as a mechanism for communication with nursing students, and as a means to get to know students.

### **Research Question Three**

What challenges and successes have nurse educators experienced in using reflective journaling as an assignment? Participants in this study identified challenges in this study as anything that limited their efforts in the use of reflective journaling. The following influencing factors or subcategories emerged from this question: acknowledging time constraints, recognizing that not all students embrace reflective journaling, and identifying student growth. An overwhelming majority (7 of 7 or 100%) of participants acknowledged that time constraints was the greatest challenge for them as educators and for their nursing students when using reflective journaling. Participants indicated that time involved with reading and providing feedback to all students was time consuming. The following comments were made:

A challenge for me as an educator is to; especially, when you have a class of 50 or more, trying to give each student what they need in feedback. I wanted to give everyone feedback each week but it was really a time consuming event. (Kim)

Well, I review them every two weeks and I try very hard not to get behind because then I am looking at a mountain of assignments. (Pam)

I think a lot goes on that is not captured in the weekly journals. So, a lot of that goes on but in that little weekly snapshot, how much reflection, how much reflection (*pause*) now, they are really busy, they are writing papers, doing assessments, about to graduate, looking for jobs, so some reflection goes on (*pause*) but, the next week they start with a whole new group of patients, so they are reflecting on this. (Sue)

It is the amount of time that students put into that. Some students take it as an opportunity, as a learning opportunity and some people do it more as a task to be done. I don't have any crystal ball that says this will make you a better nurse. So that's a barrier. And how much emphasis do you want to put on it. You know, certainly you may have spent a lot of time with students in the clinical area and they get very active in their pros and cons of discussions but their journal entry is kind of quick. But when you put it all together you can see that was a tough week for them; because you cannot put all of your evaluative or understanding into that one thing. (Jan)

Acknowledging time constraints were indicative that nursing students may not always write reflections from all of their experiences because they are so busy with other curricular activities.

Another influencing factor related to challenges was recognizing that not all nursing students embrace reflective journaling. Participants in this study indicated that some nursing students enjoyed reflective journaling and viewed in as an excellent learning experience, whereas others did not. Participants said the following:

Some students really do not like writing, especially writing that involves their personal self, and their responses tend to be very brief and concise. So sometimes with those students, I have to pull them out a little more and urge them to expand on whatever they are talking about so the journals progress. Most of them are very open and fluid, but some of them are resistant and they require a little more effort to break them out of their shell. (Pam)

It really kind of depends on the student. Some of them really enjoy it (*pause*) it is almost cathartic for them as they review what they have learned and what they feel about what they have learned. Some of them don't really enjoy it (*pause*) if they do not enjoy writing then they tend toward brevity in their responses. But most of the students, they feel it provides them an opportunity to explore what they have learned and what they

haven't. Sometimes I will get a student who just refuses to really fully engage in the process, who is very much in this course only because it is required, they hate it from the word go and to be honest (*pause*), I encourage that student through the journaling process to look at their own experiences. (Lina)

That is variable with the student, and I think it varies on the student's personality, I guess, is a better way. If I have a student who is a very concrete thinker, they may only answer the specific questions that I have posted. And not really put any emotion or reflection...what I would consider reflection into that question. It would be a concrete answer to my question. Then I have some students that will elaborate and bring out the emotion, the effective learning as well as the cognitive and psychomotor issues that we are trying to reach. So it is going to vary from student to student. Some of them embrace it very much and see it as an outlet to be able to verbalize. (Bren)

Not every student, but the majority of the students' use it as the learning tool that reflective journaling was created for. (Kim)

And I think to some degree it depends on the maturity level of the student. (Kei)

You are always going to have that one student or few students that are just going to do the bare minimum. It is just the nature of the beast. Getting them to really do what you intend for them to do, to really reflect on their activities and what has happened and what they have seen or witnessed. To see each opportunity as a learning opportunity and that is not just a thing to check off the box, you know, including their reflective journaling; so that has been a challenge. Challenges, students are sometimes (*pause*) "I don't like it"; they hate it. (Sue)

Then again, it depends on your relationship with students. Sometimes I would just sort of make a comment. And then there are some students who need more of a paragraph. And it depends on your relationship with students you have as to how good your response can be. Then human nature being what it is, too, you tend to focus in sometimes on the ones that are struggling the most and the other ones you give them fewer comments sometimes just because you are going to have to put a lot of time into this one. (Jan)

From the voices of participants some students really liked reflective journaling and others did not. Some students embraced reflective journaling as a learning tool and others complained of their dislike of the assignment. Not all students have the same learning style and this may account for the unwillingness of some to embrace reflective journaling as a written assignment.

An overwhelming majority (7 of 7 or 100%) indicated that the success of reflective journaling is identifying evidence of student growth because the majority of students,

particularly beginning nursing students, begin the process with limited knowledge and have many questions about the assignment. Participants showed enthusiasm when talking about how they see the difference in the journal entries from the beginning of the semester to the end.

Participants said the following:

The success of it is when the students say, “Boy, I never knew I would be where I am” and that is where they start and where their goals are and how they change. And when they look back and see that, you know, all of them want to start an IV or want to be able to do a skill but by the end of the semester whenever you get them to thinking about the true concept of nursing, it is not a skill, it is taking care of someone and understanding what it means to take care of someone, when they reflect back on that; that is a success. (Kim)

The good news about it is that you do get a chance to get this little place in time picture of what’s happening with this student and how they are seeing themselves in that clinical area. So, I think that is the good news about it. (Sue)

You can see growth in their ability to express their thoughts and feelings; and their ability to synthesize what they are learning and the ability to communicate in a therapeutic manner. (Lina)

But you are going to have those students that put everything into it and those are the ones who you see the growth in them, and I enjoy reading them and I enjoy responding back to them and I think as the semester goes, they begin enjoying it too. And they get to report exciting things, like I started my IV for the first time, or I saw this cool patient, I got to see open heart surgery and you know the doctor let me stand right there in their face, you know, they get to (pause) if they get excited, you can see their excitement and their growth and it is very enjoyable for me as the faculty, to get to see what they see and not be able to be there and so you get to feel as though you are part of their experiences. (Kim)

You know, it is really awesome when a student says, “you know I really was able to see it from a different perspective”. So I can see how they are growing and what we are doing is effective in learning. Some of them really embrace it.

When the student says, “I see it, I see it; you are right; it would take me a year to do all of that.” (Sue)

It was the participants’ joy to hear students comment about what they had learned and how their thinking may have changed as a result of what they had learned. For example, one participant reported that a former student came for a visit and talked about how reflective journaling had

helped with her graduate studies. According to this participant, this former student used reflective journaling as a transitional tool from undergraduate to graduate school and use throughout her personal life.

The researcher interpreted challenges and successes as being important to the reflective journaling process. Pursuing the point, participants in the study recognized the challenges and considered them as they used the teaching strategy. Participants were enthused about seeing evidence of growth in students' journals and can use these successes to improve their efforts.

In summary, participants identified time constraints and the fact that not all students embrace the use of reflective journaling as challenges to the use of reflective journaling. The main success in the use of reflective journaling identified by participants in the study was seeing growth in nursing students as identified in the journal entries.

#### **Research Question Four**

What insights regarding reflective journaling can nurse educators in this study share with other nurse educators? Participants in the study offered insights for other nurse educators who use are may be interested in using reflective journaling. The following influencing factors or subcategories emerged: committing to the process and encouraging others to use reflective journaling. Committing to the process was interpreted to mean that one must commit to providing purpose for the assignment and following through with assignment's evaluation and feedback. Some participants (5 of 7 or 71%) in the study expressed that nurse educators interested in using reflective journaling in their curriculum must be committed to the process.

Participants provided the following responses:

I think it is guided by the professor. I think part of the ownership (*pause*) if the students do their part, then the ownership is on the professors, that they want clear instructions in their expectations in what should be part of the activity; as a professor you are accountable for the quality of the work and the evaluation of that work. (Kei)

Educators must be committed. This is not something that you can just throw out there for a percentage of the grade or tell them you have to do this without putting in the time to read them, to get those things that need to be addressed; addressing those things and following through them and actually using it for the purpose that it is. It is not just another activity to throw out there to the students. It is a learning opportunity. (Kim)

I personally put a lot of work into the journals. I read every word (*pause*) you know, it is an opportunity to teach and I know this is really beyond the bounds of the journals, but I put a lot into it, I really do work. (Sue)

Being committed will require educators to provide purpose and follow through with all aspects the assignment.

A majority of participants (7 of 7 or 100%) wholeheartedly encouraged other nurse educators to use reflective journaling in their curriculum and to use the teaching strategy in their personal lives. Participants made the following comments:

I think they should seriously consider it. There are teachable moments that are unique to the individual and their clinical experience (*pause*) we have 600 students right now in clinical and if you say something broad and general in class, you know, it doesn't hit the meat of what might be troubling one individual. And it gives you the opportunity to assess one-on-one right now because there are such big rooms and they are so far removed, it gives you the opportunity to connect with an individual, hopefully, in a real good way. (Sue)

I would encourage it. I am now mentoring my second new faculty that we have and I have encouraged them to use it in their courses because not only does it allow them to build a relationship with their students, but the students benefit from it. But they have to understand what reflective journaling means to them as an educator before they can really use it effectively. So, as I am mentoring them I always tell them that this is how I build trust. And I don't just read through the first line and the last line, I read through it and sometimes with my feedback, I am looking for the little minute statements that they made, or maybe that silent statement that was in there and I will pick up on that. So I would encourage them to do it, not only so that the student can reflect back and forth but so that they can learn their students and where their needs are. (Kim)

I think it would be a good idea to experience it yourself. In fact, one of the things that I ask of (*pause*) when I get students to talk about their stories and when they meet in their sharing and caring groups, and they tell their stories; they realize how much they learn from that. (Jan)

From the voices of participants reflective journaling allows for teachable moments that one may not otherwise have. Using reflective journaling as an assignment allows the educator to recognize teaching needs and to address those needs at the moment they occur. The reflective journal allows for one on one contact with students. Reflective journaling is a medium for nursing students to tell their stories and to learn from telling those stories. Further, participants' responses suggested that nurse educators who are interested in using reflective journaling should be committed to the process and they encouraged the use of reflective journaling in nursing curricula and personally.

### **Chapter Summary**

Nurse educators who use reflective journaling as an assignment were interviewed to answer questions regarding the process that was followed. Using the research questions as a framework, the researcher generated a theoretical model of the reflective journaling process as experienced by nurse educators (see Figure 1). Major categories and subcategories emerged from the overarching question and secondary questions. Subcategories were associated with major categories and were interwoven throughout the process and provided coalescence. The major categories or phases and subcategories or influencing factors helped provide a reflexive understanding of the reflective journaling process followed by nurse educators in the context of teaching baccalaureate nursing students.

Findings related to the overarching question of “What is the process a nurse educator follows when using reflective in nursing curriculum?” revealed that the process proceeds through three phases: informing students, evaluating journal entries, and providing feedback. Informing students was defined as the communication of instructions to students regarding the reflective journaling assignment. Evaluating journal entries was the summative assessment of nursing



students' journal entries that involved reading and appraisal by participants after nursing students' submission. Providing feedback was the timely response of participants to nursing students after reading and appraising their journal entries.

Twelve subcategories or factors which influence the success of the process emerged from the findings: knowing what to expect, emphasizing reflection, allowing student voice, committing to the process, ensuring confidentiality, establishing trust, and providing support. The subcategory, knowing what to expect, was related to the student knowing up front and early in the semester what the journaling assignment entailed. Emphasizing reflection was the strong emphasis that was placed on reflection by participants; nursing students were introduced to reflection early in the semester.

Allowing student voice was seen as a forum for nursing students to write freely about their experiences. Committing to the process was the commitment of participants to read journal entries and provide feedback in a timely manner. Ensuring confidentiality was participants keeping nursing students' journal entries private. Only the participants and nursing instructors who are involved with the reflective journaling process have access to journal entries. Establishing trust was seen as reading and responding in a timely manner and creating a climate so that the student felt free to write and engage in the reflective journaling process. Although participants in the study did not use reflective journaling models and theory based assignments, participants in the study created a nonjudgmental space for nursing students to explore and reflect upon their learning experiences.

From the voices of participants, participants in the study understand reflective journaling as being a learning tool for the nursing student to explore and learn from their experiences. In using reflective journaling as a learning tool, the following subcategories emerged: knowing

what students are doing, and valuing journaling. Knowing what students are doing was important participants indicated that they could not be with all students at all times; participants used information in students' journals to know what was going on in their absence. The last subcategories related to participants' meaning of reflective journaling was valuing journaling. Participants indicated that they valued journaling because it is a valuable teaching and learning tool. Reflective journaling was considered valuable because it provided participants with teachable moments, a mechanism to communicate and get to know students, and it provided a safe space for students to explore. A safe space is a forum which allows for student voice and educator's trust. In addition, an overwhelming majority of participants have used reflective journaling academically, professionally, and personally.

With regard to challenges and successes, the following subcategories emerged: acknowledging time constraints, committing to the process, identifying evidence of student growth, and recognizing that all students do not embrace reflective journaling. Acknowledging time constraints was considered as anything that limited opportunities to engage in reflective journaling. Committing to the process was explained earlier. Identifying evidence of student growth was participants being able to see that students were benefiting from the reflective journaling process. For example, participants stating that they were able to see a difference in nursing students' journal entries at the end of the semester. Participants were able to recognize that all students do not embrace reflective journaling; some students just do not like the journaling process and participants indicated that these students required more assistance and support related to the journaling assignment.

Participants in the study offered the following insights to other nurse educators: committing to the process and encouraging others to use journaling. Participants suggested that

it is important for nurse educators to commit to providing a purpose for the journaling assignment, give instructions, read journal entries and provide timely feedback. Participants encouraged others to use journaling because it is valuable to the student and the educator.

Thus, the major categories and subcategories coalesce to lead to successful outcomes such as teachable moments and positive learning experiences for nurse educators and nursing students. The researcher's hope is that the findings presented in this study will serve as a framework for other nurse educators interested in using a learner-centered pedagogy such as reflective journaling.

## CHAPTER V:

### DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter includes an introduction, a discussion based on the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations related to practice, education, and research, and ends with a conclusion. In the discussions and conclusions section the researcher addresses the phases or major categories of the reflective journaling process, the factors or sub-categories that influenced the success of the reflective journaling process, how nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment, challenges and successes of using reflective journaling, and insights nurse educators in this study had to share with other nurse educators. Indeed, investigating the process a nurse educator follows when using reflective journaling was insightful. The major categories and subcategories that developed from the researcher's investigation did illuminate how participants in this study used reflective journaling and the findings are comparable to current literature. The study was based on the following four research questions:

1. What is the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment in nursing education;
2. How do nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment;
3. What challenges or successes have been identified when reflective journaling was used as an assignment; and
4. What insights can nurse educators share with other nurse educators regarding the use of reflective journaling?

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to investigate and understand the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment in the context of baccalaureate nursing students. The researcher commenced the study with a review of literature that chronicled the history of reflective journaling to its use in nursing education and other related disciplines. Data obtained in the review of literature was instrumental in guiding the study design, was used to formulate interview questions, and was used for comparison with study findings.

The details of the process nurse educators follow, within the investigation, were explored and described. There were a total of seven participants in the study. All of the participants were female, Caucasian, and resided in the southeastern region of the United States. Each of the participants was teaching courses within a baccalaureate school of nursing. The researcher used a qualitative methodology, constructivist grounded theory, informed by the works of Kathy Charmaz. The researcher used a constructivist epistemology to make meaning of the reflective journaling process as presented by participants. The theoretical perspective for this study originated from the works of Herbert Blumer (1969). A symbolic interactionism theoretical perspective was used to present the voices of participants. Data collection consisted of one semi-structured interview and the researcher maintained a journal throughout the research process. The researcher used notes from the journal to frame descriptive data of participants and to verify their responses. All contacts with the participants occurred during the summer of 2012. After completion of data collection, the researcher began data analysis.

To achieve analysis, the researcher became immersed in the data through multiple readings of transcripts, careful selection of pertinent statements which detailed participants' experience with reflective journaling, and classifying these statements into major and sub-categories which helped produce not only a description but a model (see Figure 1) of the reflective journaling process as used by participants in this study. The major categories and subcategories coalesced to lead to positive outcomes such as teachable moments and opportunities to get to know students.

### **Discussion**

Nursing students are confronted with a complex healthcare environment. A complex healthcare environment that is constantly changing due to advanced technology, new treatment modalities, and patients with numerous co-morbid disease processes (AACN, 2008). Therefore, to prepare nursing students for a complex healthcare environment, it has been suggested that nurse educators should create learning environments which facilitate learners' self-reflection (NLN, 2005). Reflection is important in nursing education to help nursing students think critically and to use clinical reasoning (Conceicao & Taylor, 2007). Learning environments that facilitate learners' self-reflection are those which incorporate pedagogies that are learner centered as opposed to those that are teacher centered. Reflective journaling is a learner centered pedagogy that assists learners in learning the skill of reflection (Chirema, 2007; Dunlap, 2006). Moreover, reflective journaling as a pedagogical tool is used by a nurse educator to engage nursing students in the learning process by assuming a facilitative role and the student assuming an active role in the process (Hyams, 2010).

Although, the use of reflective journaling has demonstrated numerous benefits for nursing students and students at large, issues have been identified related to its use. Issues such

as, students' complaints regarding limited assignment instructions, implicit assignment purpose, and delays in instructor feedback have been identified. It was noted that nursing research is limited related to the process nurse educators follow when reflective journaling is used as an assignment.

Moving forward, a desire to understand the process a nurse educator follows when using reflective journaling as an assignment in nursing education motivated the researcher to conduct this study. The researcher was able to interpret the views of participants as they were shared. The major categories and subcategories that emerged during the researcher's investigation did illuminate how participants in the study used reflective journaling and the findings are comparable to current literature.

This chapter analyzes, interprets, and synthesis the findings. The remainder of the discussion section is organized by the following categories: 1) the process nurse educators follow; 2) how nurse educators understand; 3) challenges and successes; and 4) insights for others.

### **The Process Nurse Educators Follow**

The first research question, what is the process a nurse educator follow when using reflective journaling as an assignment in nursing education, sought to describe the process nurse educators follow when reflective journaling as an assignment. From the voices of participants it was determined that the reflective journaling process proceeds through three phases or major categories: informing, evaluating, and providing feedback. The findings revealed that there were factors or sub-categories which influenced the success of the process: acknowledging time constraints, allowing student voice, committing to the process, emphasizing reflection, ensuring confidentiality, establishing student trust, know what is expected, knowing what students are

doing, providing support, recognizing that all students do not embrace reflective journaling, identifying evidence of student growth, and valuing journaling. The influencing factors are interwoven throughout the process and occur in more than one phase of the process: informing, evaluating, and providing feedback.

Informing students was defined as the communication of instructions to nursing students regarding the journaling assignment. Based on the researcher's data, the instructions included purpose of the assignment, what information should be included in the journal, when the journal should be submitted, and who would read the journal entries. Participants in the study gave instructions regarding the assignment early in the semester and in multiple ways. For instance, instructions were given verbally on the first day of the semester and instructions were included in writing in the course syllabi, computer webpage, and by audiotape. From the perspectives of the participants, many students are not familiar with reflective journaling and have questions about what is expected regarding the assignment. The researcher interpreted these findings to imply that complete and early instructions regarding the reflective journaling assignment were essential to the success of the assignment's outcome.

Current literature has identified that in order for learners to have a positive learning experience when using reflective journaling the educator must provide instructions related to the assignment (Donovan, 2007; Harris, 2008; Hubbs & Brand, 2005, 2010; Yonge & Myrick, 2004). For example, Hubbs and Brand suggested that educators should have dialogue with learners about the purpose of the reflective journaling assignment and to clarify the specifics of the assignment in the syllabus. Donovan indicated that students should be advised early in the curriculum regarding the reflective journaling assignment. Likewise, to combat the consequence



of students having unanswered questions, Yonge and Myrick suggested that educators should be consistent in their application of the assignment and clearly communicate assignment objectives.

During the informing phase three sub-categories or influencing factors emerged: knowing what is expected, emphasizing reflection, and ensuring confidentiality. The researcher interpreted knowing what to expect as students knowing what the assignment entailed and that students have all of the information needed regarding the reflective journaling assignment. One participant stated, “So, the students have all of that up front to know what is expected on each journal entry.” Donovan (2007) determined in a study with mental health nursing students that expectations of the reflective journaling assignment were needed for students to be successful in reflection. Harris (2008) suggested that there should be comprehensive orientation of the journaling process, which clarifies expectations of the assignment. Harris proceeded to say that when students are provided comprehensive orientation of the journaling process, students accept the value of reflective journaling and are more willing to engage in the process. Thus, when participants in the study provided nursing students with instructions regarding the journaling assignment early in the semester, nursing students knew what to expect.

Emphasizing reflection was another subcategory or influencing factor that emerged during the informing phase of the reflective journaling process. Emphasizing reflection was defined as introducing students to reflection and its importance in the process. Participants in the study recited varying thoughts of reflection in their curricula as interpreted in their definitions. For example, one participant defined reflection as “a personal process of going in and thinking about the situation, it is an interpersonal process;” while another participant stated “one is the reflection and in taking the time to think about what just happened.” The researcher interpreted the importance of this finding as being essential to the process in order for participants to convey

the concept of reflection to nursing students because the skill of reflection allows one to think about what was going on, how they were feeling about a situation or event, and consider those experiences for future practice. While writing a journal entry was a part of the process, understanding and engaging in reflection was an essential aspect.

The importance of reflection in the reflective journaling process is consistent with the literature as evidenced by the works of Dewey, Schon, Kolb, and Mezirow. The works of these theorists placed importance of reflection in education and the practice setting. Dewey outlined four modes of thinking: imagination, belief, stream of consciousness, and reflection; however, Dewey only related reflection to the learning process. Dewey suggested that reflection requires one to examine their prior beliefs and assumptions along with their implications. Schon delineated two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action occurs during an experience, while reflection-on-action occurs after an experience. Schon suggested that learning is expedited by reflection that is learned over time. Schon recommended that professionals should learn to become experienced in reflection-on-action in order to become proficiently responsive to needs in clinical practice. Kolb's work focused on reflection in phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The cycle is continuous and starts over at the active experimentation phase. Mezirow's work is related to transformative learning which he preferred to as the process by which one transforms meaning, perspectives, habits of mind and mind sets in order to make them open and reflective so that they may generate new opinions. Overall, the findings suggest that participants viewed reflection as being important in the reflective journaling process because the skill of reflection allows one to think and revisit experiences for use in future practice.

Although participants emphasized the use of reflection in the reflective journaling assignment, only one participant based the reflective journaling assignment on a theorist. Patricia Benner's work was used by one participant as a framework to support the assignment. Benner's work suggests that clinicians learn to reflect on clinical experiences over time. Two participants indicated that their nursing program used transformative learning based on the work of Mezirow; however, their reflective journaling assignment was not based on transformative learning. Another participant reported using a book entitled *The Artist's Way* to support the journaling assignment; while the other five participants did not use a theoretical framework. However, to assist nursing students with the reflective journaling assignment, the majority of participants indicated that questions were posed for students to reflect upon during each journal entry. These findings imply that there are different ways to approach a reflective journaling assignment and that there is not an established criterion for nurse educators to follow when applying this pedagogical tool in the classroom and clinical setting.

The creative work of several researchers supports these findings (Conceicao & Taylor, 2007; Kuiper, 2005; Simpson & Courtney, 2007). For example, Conceicao and Taylor used concepts maps with reflective journaling to assist nursing students to learn and enhance critical thinking skills; Kuiper used audiotapes to record nursing students reflections to assist them with clinical reasoning and decision making in the clinical setting, and Simpson and Courtney developed a framework to guide nursing students in the journaling process by documenting in their journals based on guided questions such as What would happen if? Thus, there are numerous ways one can successfully use reflective journaling for positive outcomes.

Another interesting aspect of reflection related to these participants was that it was not clear from the responses if reflective levels were taught. For example, one participant indicated,

“I don’t get embedded in level one, level two, and level three, but I do try to talk about, you know, there is description and then there is analysis and evaluation.” Another participant stated the following:

I don’t name it as reflective levels but the student will know from day one, like the very first journal entry that what they will do is looking at your learning outcomes for the course what you want to accomplish as you enter this clinical course. And then the following week, depending on where they were or what they were doing, it may be a question that says in reviewing your clinical experience this week, how would you feel that you incorporated team and collaborations into your experience. It has to through, okay, reflecting from where your goals were at the beginning of the course, have you changed your goals for the remainder of the course? Then at the end, it’s looking back from the goals you originally set for yourself using QSEN and our outcome competencies as your basis. (Kim)

These findings implied that participants viewed reflection as important to the reflective journaling assignment, but less importance on using a theoretical framework and reflective levels. In addition to placing less importance on a theoretical framework and reflective levels, one participant reported not having any prior knowledge of theorists who have completed work related to reflection. When asked about the use of using a framework based on different theorists for the reflective journaling assignment, the participant made the following comment:

I don’t even know if I know who those theorists are. So, perhaps that’s because I have a post masters teaching certificate, but education was not (*pause*) I’ve been an educator since ’85 but it’s you know, you do it the way you were taught to do it, then I went back and got the theory and after my PhD. So there are things like that I am not aware of that could influence my practice and my belief. I understand that and I use it very differently to replay scenarios from all across all of my years of work unto them and understand them in a different light based on whatever tools I have at the time and hopefully the students will do that. (Sue)

This finding was interpreted to mean that the participant linked not knowing about theorists who are associated with reflective journaling to not having a background in education. The participant expressed the need to focus on the clinical aspect because this is what has been learned and this is a continuation of what has been observed in the past. In turn, this participant used information

and tools available to transfer knowledge to nursing students. However, the participant acknowledged that information about the mentioned theorists could influence personal practice and beliefs. This speaks to a broader topic concerning nurse educators and how one proceeds to teach in the classroom and clinical setting. People do tend to do what has been observed and learned over time. This participant was concerned with making sure nursing students were obtaining what was needed clinically. The researcher believes that this finding is related to NLN's request for nurse educators to conduct more research related to pedagogies that promote learners' self-reflection and illuminates the need for educators to have the basis of pedagogies that are being used with students. Without the foundation of various pedagogies are we prepared to use them with students? Perhaps, these findings suggest that limited use of a theoretical framework and limited use of reflective levels is an aspect of the reflective journaling process that is worthy of additional investigation as reflection is an important part of the process.

Further, it is essential to note that knowledge of theoretical principles associated with reflective journaling is important because reflection is developmental (Benner et al., 2010; Epp, 2008; Schon, 1987) and difficult to learn (Benner et al., 2010; Epp, 2008). As a result, Hubbs and Brand recommended the use of a theoretical framework when reflective journaling is used as an assignment. According to Hubbs and Brand, a theoretical framework such as Kolb's four stages, can assist educators in creating effective learning conditions that will result in a meaningful learning experience that was described by Dewey. Dewey stressed that a meaningful learning experience is one that is valuable and useful to the learner. One can have an experience; however, all experiences may not be educative (Dewey, 1938). An experience that is meaningful and educative is one which allows the learner to make a connection between what one does and what happens to one as a consequence; the value of an experience is situated within one's

perception of relationships among events (Dewey, 1938). According to Dewey, we learn from experience by doing and then reflecting on what happened. As stated earlier, perhaps using a theoretical framework for reflective journaling assignments is a consideration for nurse educators and others who use this pedagogical tool in order to give nursing students and students at large the greatest advantage of achieving a positive learning experience.

Ensuring confidentiality emerged as an influencing factor during the informing phase. Ensuring confidentiality was the effort of participants to keep nursing students' journal entries private. All of the participants kept nursing students' journal entries private and journal entries were only discussed with other instructors who were involved with students' learning. For example, clinical instructors and team instructors were allowed to read entries because many were responsible for evaluating journals. One participant did indicate that sometimes students who have done exemplary work may be asked to allow their reflective journal used for display during accrediting reviews. The researcher interpreted ensuring confidentiality as an ethical way for the participants to encourage students to engage in the process by writing without worrying about an unknown audience reading their personal thoughts. These findings are consistent with current literature. Yonge and Myrick indicated that confidentiality of students' journal entries is an ethical consideration that should be considered by educators and suggested that if an educator wishes to publish information from a student's journal, he or she must obtain approval from the student. Hubbs and Brand asserted that students should be informed early in the assignment if the information contained in the journals is written for a private audience, such as a private dialogue which will remain between the educator and the student or if information will be used for a larger audience. Further, Hubbs and Brand indicated that it is important for students who

make reflective journal entries to be confident of the trustworthiness of the educator who is the reader.

Evaluating journal entries is the second phase of the reflective journaling process. Evaluating journals was defined as the summative assessment and grade assignment of nursing students' journal entries after submission. From participants' perspective, reflective journal entries were evaluated to identify nursing students' ability to reflect on experiences and to assess students' progress, determine learning needs and to assess those needs for improvement, and to make judgments regarding achievement of a satisfactory level of performance. Having an established method to critique the content of reflective journal entries is needed to know how students are progressing (Hubbs & Brand, 2010).

A majority of participants in the study used evaluative criteria for evaluating journals. For example, one participant used a grading rubric and the reflective journaling assignment accounted for 50 percent of nursing students' grades. Some of the participants in this study used a pass/fail grading scale, while a few participants assigned a numerical grade to the reflective journaling assignment. These findings may be further understood by information found in the literature. The literature related to evaluating students' journal entries is evident that there are differing viewpoints on whether and how reflective journals should be graded (Donovan, 2007; O'Connell & Dymont, 2007; Plack et al., 2005). O'Connell and Dymont reported that participants in their study indicated that a pass/fail system may be appropriate as opposed to the assignment of grading percentages because students may write more freely. In contrast, Plack et al. indicated that reflective journaling should not be evaluated because educators have contended that evaluation may impact the content of students' reflection. Interestingly, mental health nursing students in Donovan's study indicated that if reflective journal entries were graded,

instructors would have to give more guidance. Thus, the researcher interpreted evaluating journal entries as a way for participants in this study to appraise nursing students' progress and to determine future learning needs; the method of evaluation must be decided by the nurse educator.

The researcher would like to point out that there are available reflective journaling models that nurse educators may use as resources to assist with the evaluation of students' journal entries. Authors have used reflective journaling models to evaluate nursing students' reflective journals to determine students' level of reflection (Chirema, 2007; Jensen & Joy, 2005). Chirema used a model devised by Boud et al. 1985 and adapted by Wong et al. 1990 to determine the extent students were reflecting. Chirema examined students in the study to determine if they were critical reflectors, reflectors, or nonreflectors. Jensen and Joy used Mezirow's Model of Reflection to evaluate reflective levels among baccalaureate nursing students. Student journals were reviewed to identify and describe the extent and level of their reflection on practice and learning. Hence, there are available evaluative models for nurse educators to use if he or she chooses to do so.

The subcategory or influencing factor committing to the process emerged during the evaluating journals phase. Committing to the process was defined as the pledge to read journal entries on a regular and timely basis. The researcher interpreted committing to the process to read students' journal entries as willingness on the part of participants. This finding is consistent with current research. Moyer and Wittman-Price (2008) documented that educators must be committed to reading student journal entries in order to give students feedback.

The third major category or phase is providing feedback. Providing feedback was defined as participants' response with specific information to nursing students regarding the reflective



journaling assignment. The researcher interpreted providing feedback as a way for participants to appraise nursing students of their current performance and to identify ways that he or she may need to improve. Providing feedback was interpreted as being important to the reflective journaling process because participants indicated that nursing students needed feedback related to a current assignment in order to prepare for the next clinical experience or writing assignment. Pursuing the point, providing feedback was considered important from the participants' perspective because without prompt feedback nursing students may not view the reflective journaling assignment as being important and purposeful. The finding revealed that without feedback nursing students did not know if they understood the course content and if the reflective journal entries met the required expectations; in addition to thoughts about the sincerity of the assignment.

Authors have stressed the importance of feedback when reflective journaling is used as an assignment. Moyer and Wittman-Price suggested that educators must be committed to providing thoughtful and insightful feedback. Jensen and Joy (2005) emphasized that the processes and skills required by nursing students to function at higher levels of reflection requires guidance, critique, feedback and reinforcement by the educator. Further, Harris reported that nursing students needed timely feedback; students should not have to wait for a response from the educator. Hong and Chew (2008) reported that students complained about the lack and promptness of feedback when reflective journal entries were submitted and concluded that students were motivated to learn when prompt feedback and guidance were given. From the perspective of participants, feedback was integral to the achievement of success in the reflective journaling process to assist students in preparing for the next assignment, to ensure that they

correctly understood course content, to help them identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to help students understand the importance of the assignment.

During the providing feedback phase several subcategories or influencing factors emerged: allowing student voice, committing to the process, establishing student trust, ensuring confidentiality, and providing support. Allowing student voice in this study was defined as permitting nursing students to write freely in their reflective journals. A majority of participants in the study were enthusiastic about nursing students being able to explore and write about their thoughts and feelings. One participant was adamant about nursing students having a real voice in the reflective journaling process and stated the following:

I have found that journaling allows them a voice that they may not have otherwise and it allows them to explore areas that they are concerned about or worried about or how to connect to nursing. (Pam)

When nursing students are given a voice to write freely, they are more engaged in the process. Lepp et al. (2005) determined that when students are allowed to write freely they are able to openly express themselves. However, Langley and Brown (2010) found that when students' voices were limited, there was mistrust because students were not able to fully express their thoughts, values, and beliefs. This leads to the next subcategory or influencing factor: establishing trust.

Establishing student trust in this study was defined as efforts of participants to encourage students to have confidence in them so that they would write freely and participate in the assignment. To establish student trust participants responded to nursing students' journal entries and ensured confidentiality. One participant reflected the following view regarding students' trust and her responses:

It does take them a little while to develop some comfort and trust with what they are telling me and how I'm going to respond to it. Usually, by the last couple of modules

their thoughts and expressions are flowing much more freely than they did at the beginning of the semester because they trust me and they know that I do read their responses and I am interested in what is going on in their lives that affects their responses to the individual modules. (Pam)

Responding to nursing students' reflective journals and letting students know that the educator is concerned with what has been written was one way to establish trust. In addition, making sure that nursing students' reflective journal entries were private helped with trust because if students know who are reading their journal entries they are more apt to participate freely in the assignment. The majority of participants in the study indicated that they have a mechanism in place to deal with a nursing student who makes a sensitive comment in a journal entry. Yonge and Myrick emphasized that in order to establish trust, students' journal entries must be handled confidently and there must be respect and trust among students and educators.

Committing to the process in the providing feedback phase was the participants being committed to taking the time to thoroughly read and provide a thoughtful response to nursing students in a timely manner. One participant stated, "It is like spanking a child, if you wait a month, they can't remember; to wait a month to give them a needed comment, I think it is not feasible." Another participant made the following comment:

I personally put a lot of work into the journals. I read every word, I follow the patients, sometimes we have a patient from this week to next week, and as a geriatric nurse practitioner, I'm kind of really into it (pause) and having been a nurse practitioner for 15 years and read up on wounds and it's like I'm on it". You know, it is an opportunity to teach and I know this is really beyond the bounds of the journalists, but I put a lot into it, I really work. (Sue)

Committing to the process was interpreted as participants staying attentive to the reflective journaling process and using this commitment as an opportunity to provide nursing students with positive and negative feedback which would be beneficial to their learning experience. In addition, participants used commitment as an opportunity to teach. Crème (2005) and Epp (2008)

suggested that in order for reflective journaling to be an effective medium in the teaching learning process, educators must have a willingness to provide students with feedback. Hence, giving feedback required commitment on the part of participants.

Another influencing factor that emerged during the providing feedback phase of reflective journaling process was providing support. Providing support was defined as an opportunity to provide encouragement and support to nursing students regarding the reflective journaling assignment. Participants provided support by giving positive feedback and critical feedback, if necessary. Kuiper (2005) used guidance and support with nursing students who used reflective journaling and suggested that both were helpful in assisting students consider aspects of situations which are similar in clinical reasoning activities nurses engage in on a day to day basis such as monitoring, thinking, reactions, the environment, making judgments, and revising plans and approaches. One participant stated “So, you have to, you know, make sure that you give them feedback and guidance. I always try to give positive feedback; positive feedback and support.” Another participant indicated, “So, I try to give a little instruction and try to be in a supportive role, not in the instructor role.” Joyfully, another participant made the following comment about reflective journaling and being supportive of the process:

Part of my unspoken goal is to make those people want to move with the flow, to be more positive, more welcoming, a good place where there are supportive people, so I try to do it, always do it with that in mind, you know, that if they should, you know, you and I both have had negative experiences, and that happens, but I think we have to make it a place where people won't be afraid and provide support. (Sue)

This finding was interpreted as a way for participants to provide support, guidance, and encouragement to nursing students to empower them to remain engaged and willing to participate in the process.

In summary, the major categories or phases, informing students, evaluating journal entries, and providing feedback represent the reflective journaling process. The phases or major categories are consecutive; the process is dynamic and there are influencing factors or sub-categories that are interwoven throughout the process that are directly related to the teaching-learning experience. Influencing factors were seen in more than one of the phases or major categories of the process and coalesce to provide successful outcomes for nurse educators and nursing students. Although, reflective journaling is a learner-centered pedagogy, to ensure that nursing students will become and remain engaged in the process and have a successful experience much is required of the nurse educator. For example, the educator must be committed to the process to inform students of the assignment, read and evaluate journal entries, and provide prompt and insightful feedback.

### **How Nurse Educators Understand**

The purpose of the second research question was to determine how nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment. Charmaz suggested that if a researcher attends to the language of participants one can learn about their meanings rather than make assumptions. To find out how participants in the study understand reflective journaling as an assignment, the researcher asked a direct question: “How do you define reflective journaling?” Although participants gave varying definitions, the overwhelming majority of participants viewed reflective journaling as a learning tool for nursing students to explore and reflect upon their experiences. King and LaRocco (2006) described reflective journaling as an excellent learning tool for students to learn reflection, to promote reflection on the connections between theory and practice, to increase students’ awareness, and to promote critical thinking. Further,

Dyment and O'Connell (2010) suggested that the use of reflective journaling as a pedagogical strategy serves as an avenue for reflection before, during, and after a learning experience.

From the participants' perspectives, reflective journaling serves as an evaluative tool for the educator and the student. One participant offered the following definition:

I see it as an exercise initiated by the student that demonstrates to me pieces of knowledge that they acquire, factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge that they have acquired through their life and through their education, how well they put all of these pieces together, how they apply it to a specific situation and their thinking, their feelings, their understanding and consideration, not only of the pieces but being able to step back and see the bigger picture. In our curriculum, it is typically a metric to evaluate their ability, their understanding and a tool for them to reflect their self-assessment of their knowledge, their deficits, and their growth and through self-reflection, what they need to do to enhance that. (Sue)

The findings indicate meaning for participants focused on nursing students' learning, self assessment, and educator evaluation. O'Connell and Dyment (2006) indicated that educators in their study assigned reflective journaling for similar reasons, so that students could confront issues in a critical, evaluative, and connective manner.

Knowing what students are doing and valuing journaling emerged as subcategories or influencing factors related to how participants in this study made meaning and used reflective journaling as an assignment. Allowing student voice, ensuring confidentiality, and establishing student trust were considered important to how participants construct meaning of reflective journaling as an assignment (these factors have already been discussed). Knowing what students are doing was common among several participants. Knowing what students are doing was defined as reading the nursing students journals to know what students are doing because the educator was not always present with students. For instance, one participant remarked:

I wanted a better understanding of the students' learning and what they were learning and what they were actually seeing out there when I could not be there with them, because I can't be everywhere with all students. It also gives me a picture and understanding of the

facilities they are going to; are those good experiences, are they meeting good people, you know, are those good places for them to go? (Bren)

This finding was interpreted as nursing students' reflective journal entries allowed these participants to become aware of information that they would not have been privileged to because the participant was not physically present with the student. This finding was considered unique to these participants as the researcher did not identify knowing what students are doing in the literature review as a use for reflective journaling.

Valuing journaling was related to the worth and importance of reflective journaling as an assignment in participants' curriculum. Participants placed value on the use and outcomes of reflective journaling as a teaching strategy and learning tool. For instance, one participant indicated that reflective journaling had served as a vehicle of communication between the educator and student. Likewise, another participant indicated that reflective journaling had provided an opportunity to learn more about individual students. Reflective journaling has been known to facilitate learning and professional development (King & LaRocco, 2006; O'Connell & Dymont, 2006; Stevens & Cooper, 2006).

An overwhelming majority of participants in the study have used reflective journaling at some point in their lives; whether it was academic, professional, or personal. A participant stated, "In all honesty, probably from the beginning it was part of what I did as a student, so I was accepting of it just as part of the process." Based on the researcher's data, participants in this study understand reflective journaling as being a valuable pedagogical strategy and their prior use was a determining factor in their current use of reflective journaling. The researcher's findings are consistent with those of Yonge and Myrick, who indicated that it is likely that educators who use reflective journaling used this assignment in their own education.

## Challenges and Successes

Challenges and successes further reflect the participants' experience with reflective journaling. A challenge in this study was identified that limited efforts in the reflective journaling process. The following subcategories or influencing factors emerged related to challenges: acknowledging time constraints and recognizing that not all students embrace reflective journaling. A majority of participants acknowledged that time constraints was the greatest challenge for them as educators and for their nursing students when reflective journaling is used as an assignment. One participant expressed the following concern:

A challenge for me as an educator is to, especially when you have a class of 50 or more is trying to give each student what they need in feedback. I wanted to give everyone feedback each week but it was really a time consuming event. (Kim)

This finding is consistent with the literature with regard to time constraints when reflective journaling was used (O'Connell & Dymont, 2006). O'Connell & Dymont found that educators were unable to give adequate feedback when one had 60 journals or more to read and comment on.

The researcher viewed it positively that participants in the study acknowledged that nursing students were busy with curricula activities, writing papers, and other activities and not always able to put a lot of effort into writing and reflecting on their learning experiences. With this in mind, so much of the literature is replete with complaints from nursing students' related to reflective journaling being time consuming and cumbersome to write (Chirema, 2007; Donovan, 2007; Harris, 2008; Hong & Chew, 2008). The researcher interpreted participants acknowledging time constraints related to nursing students as being understanding of students' circumstances.

Another subcategory or influencing factor related to challenges was recognizing that not all nursing students embrace reflective journaling. The researcher's data indicated that some



nursing students enjoyed reflective journaling and used the assignment as a learning opportunity while others simply “hate it.” One participant offered the following comment:

Some students really do not like writing, especially writing that involves their personal self, and their responses tend to be very brief and concise. So sometimes with those students I have to pull them out a little more and urge them to expand on whatever they are talking about so the journals progress. Most of them are very open and fluid, but some of them are resistant and they require a little more effort to break them out of their shell.  
(Pam)

Participants provided several reasons why some students do not embrace reflective journaling, such as the maturity level of the student, the student’s personality, and some students do not like to write; especially about themselves. In addition, participants indicated that it was sometimes necessary to provide nursing students who seemed to struggle with the reflective journaling assignment more support and encouragement in order to keep them engaged in the process. These findings were supported by Chirema’s study. Chirema reported in a study with a group of nursing students that some students may benefit more than others. According to Chirema, some students found writing difficult and preferred to talk about their experiences instead of writing about them. In addition, some of the students in Chirema’s study did not see the need for journal writing.

Success in the study was defined as an achievement of an objective. A subcategory or influencing factor identified in related to success was identifying evidence of student growth. A majority of participants displayed enthusiasm when talking about how they are able to see the difference in the reflective journal entries from the beginning of the semester to the end. Participants indicated that success is when nursing students write or verbalize how they understand course content or clinical experiences. One participant stated, “You can see growth in their ability to express their thoughts and feelings; their ability to synthesize what they are learning and the ability to communicate in a therapeutic way.” These findings are consistent

with Wessel and Larin's (2006) findings that physiotherapy students in their study showed improvement over time in their use of reflective journaling. In addition, Watson (2010) reported results of a study conducted with teacher education students and concluded that students' initial journal entries lacked depth and demonstrated limited understanding; however over time students' reflective journal entries showed improvement.

### **Insights to Others**

Participants in the study offered insights to other nurse educators, especially novice nurse educators, who may be interested in using reflective journaling in their curricula. Committing to the process and encouraging others to use reflective journaling emerged as subcategories or influencing factors. Committing to the process was interpreted to mean that the educator must commit to providing a clear purpose for the assignment and consistently following through with evaluation and feedback. The researcher's data revealed that participants believed that much of the success or failure of the reflective journaling assignment belonged to the educator. One participant offered the following comment:

I think it is guided by the professor. I think part of the ownership (*pause*) if the students do their part, then the ownership is on the professors, that they want clear instructions in their expectations in what should be part of the activity, as a professor you are accountable for the quality of the work and the evaluation of that work. (Kei)

These findings are consistent with the literature (Moyer-Wittman-Price, 2008). Moyer-Wittman documented that educators must view the reflective journaling assignment as important and must be committed to reading and responding to reflective journaling. Committing to the process was considered essential to the success of the process.

Participants in the study encouraged others to use reflective journaling in their classrooms clinical settings, and personally. Participants indicated that others should consider using reflective journaling because its use provides for teachable moments that are unique to the

individual and their clinical experiences; reflective journaling allows one to build relationships with their students; student's benefit greatly from the assignment and reflective journaling allows educators and students to tell their stories.

### **Limitations**

This research study contributes to the understanding of the process a nurse educator follows when using reflective journaling as an assignment within the context of baccalaureate nursing students' learning experiences. This study has several limitations. First, this grounded theory investigation has generated a theoretical model that can be used in similar contexts; however, these findings may not be generalized to all contexts. Second, purposeful sampling was used in this grounded theory study. Although, the small number ( $n=7$ ) of participants provided rich data, it is not a representative sample of the population of nurse educators. For instance, all of the participants in this study were Caucasian, female, and taught baccalaureate nursing students in institutions of higher learning in two states in the southeast. Perhaps, a larger sample size and a more diverse group of participants (e.g., males, other ethnicities) will provide different perspectives which were not revealed in this small sample size and be more representative of nurse educators across the country. Third, the researcher believed a limitation existed in not having an opportunity to read samples of nursing students' journal entries. Having read samples of nursing students' journal entries may have offered additional insights regarding the reflective journaling process.

### **Recommendations**

Given that reflective journaling is used across numerous disciplines to encourage students' learning, the recommendations offered here may already exist. However, based on the researcher's data, the following recommendations are offered: nurse educators who use or are

interested in using reflective journaling in their curricula should consider researching the background of the this pedagogical tool and to explore how the teaching strategy is currently being utilized in nursing education and across other disciplines. The researcher would encourage nurse educators to initiate literature reviews related to reflective journaling. The purpose of the literature review is to help the nurse educator become familiar with the theoretical background of this pedagogical tool. The literature review should focus on the background and theoretical basis for the use of reflective journaling. Specially, the researcher recommends that it would be helpful to focus on the works of Dewey, Schon, Kolb, and Mezirow; as the work of these theorists has been pivotal in the use of reflective journaling. It is important to research the works of these theorists because their work supported the use of reflection in education and practice. Further, the researcher believes that it would be helpful for literature reviews undertaken by interested nurse educators to include information from disciplines other than nursing education. Researchers from disciplines such as medicine, education, law, and other allied health fields frequently use reflective journaling as a teaching pedagogy and have reported outcomes of its use.

Another recommendation is that nurse educators could explore methods other than writing for students to engage in learning the skill of reflection. For example, nurse educators could assemble small group discussions after clinical experiences for nursing students to tell their stories. Perhaps, nurse educators may consider allowing nursing students to digitally record their experiences at times that are convenient for the student.

In addition, the researcher would like to recommend that nurse educators work with nursing students to negotiate adequate times for students to write in their journal entries. There should be ongoing assessments of nursing students' status related to the reflective journaling

assignment to determine if there are problems, issues, or challenges that may be hindering students' progress.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The researcher recommends that further studies should focus on gathering a greater amount of information to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the reflective journaling process as utilized by the nurse educator. With this in mind, the following suggestions are offered. (1) Based on the limitations of the current study, an investigation using a larger and more diverse (e.g., males, other ethnicities) sample of nurse educators from throughout the U.S. should be conducted to assess the extent to which the same or similar findings would be discovered. (2) A quantitative survey using the same criteria should be conducted to determine the number of nurse educators who actually use reflective journaling in nursing education. Knowing the number of nurse educators who use reflective journaling would help reveal the interest and popularity of the pedagogical tool among this group of educators. (3) Research should be conducted to focus on students who do not benefit or embrace the use of reflective journaling. To obtain a deeper understanding of why some students benefit more from reflective journaling than others, research should target which teaching strategies are most appropriate to assist all students in learning how to reflect on their experiences. (4) A research study using the theoretical model presented in this study should be undertaken among nurse educators who use reflective journaling in other contexts such as with nursing students in graduate study, associate degree, and diploma programs to compare and contrast the experiences of nurse educators with those in this study.

## Conclusion

Four questions guided this study: What is the process a nurse educator follows when reflective journaling is used as an assignment in nursing education? How do nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment? What challenges and successes have nurse educators experienced when using reflective journaling as an assignment? What insights can nurse educators share with others? Completing the initial, focused, and theoretical coding procedures generated the following conclusions that answer these questions. First, the reflective journaling process as used by a nurse educator is dynamic and proceeds through three consecutive phases: informing students, evaluating journal entries, and providing feedback. The success of the process is impacted by influencing factors that are interwoven throughout the process and occur in more than one of the phases. The influencing factors are as follows: acknowledging time constraints, allowing student voice, committing to the process, emphasizing reflection, encouraging others, ensuring confidentiality, establishing student trust, identifying evidence of student growth, knowing what is expected, knowing what students are doing, providing support, recognizing that all students do not embrace reflective journaling, and valuing reflective journaling .

The data supports the fact that when this dynamic process coalesces with influencing factors identified in the study, a positive teaching-learning experience occurs. The theoretical model (see Figure 1) substantially represents a social process of the phenomenon that was studied by the researcher. The researcher believes the theoretical model presented in this study is a beginning framework for other nurse educators interested in using a learner-centered pedagogy such as reflective journaling. The theoretical model presented is only a representation of the researcher's data and will require additional research to ensure its validity.

Second, nurse educators understand reflective journaling as a learning tool for the nursing students to explore and reflect upon learning experiences. Some participants used the reflective journaling assignment as a way to know what students were doing when they were not physically present with them. Participants deemed reflective journaling as being a valuable and worthwhile pedagogical strategy because its use led to positive outcomes.

Third, participants in the study identified challenges and successes related to the reflective journaling assignment. Challenges were time constraints and recognizing that all students do not embrace the use of reflective journaling. The success that overwhelmed resonated among participants was identifying student growth in the reflective journaling assignment.

Lastly, participants in the study encouraged other educators to use reflective journaling academically, professionally, and personally. However, participants cautioned that using reflective journaling required commitment on the part of educators interested in using this pedagogical strategy. Educators must be committed and dedicated to reading reflective journal entries and providing appropriate and timely feedback.

Therefore; what the researcher knows to be true is although reflective journaling as a pedagogical tool is learner-centered much is required of the educator. Not only did participants in the study attend to the educational aspects of the reflective journaling assignment, participants approached the assignment in an ethical, supportive, and understanding manner. In reflection of the study data from these participants, reflective journaling models and the works of theorists were not always used; however, these participants allowed a safe space for nursing students to explore and reflect upon their learning experiences.

Using reflective journaling to its potential with nursing students and students at large requires commitment and dedication of the educator. From the words of Dewey, “A primary responsibility of educators is that they not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth” (p. 40). The knowledge gained from this study will perhaps assist nurse educators who currently use reflective journaling and others who may be interested in using this pedagogical tool to create learning environments which foster the utility of its potential in nursing education.



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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

### Research Questions and Findings

Research Question	Phases or Major Categories	Influencing Factors or Subcategories
What is the process nurse educators follow when using reflective journaling as an assignment in nursing education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informing students</li>   <li>• Evaluating journal entries</li>   <li>• Providing Feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowing what to expect</li> <li>• Ensuring confidentiality</li> <li>• Emphasizing reflection</li> <li>• Committing to the process</li> <li>• Allowing student voice</li> <li>• Establishing student trust</li> <li>• Allowing student voice</li> <li>• Establishing student trust</li> <li>• Providing support</li> </ul>
How do nurse educators understand reflective journaling as an assignment?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowing what students are doing</li> <li>• Reflective journaling as a learning tool</li> <li>• Valuing reflective journaling</li> </ul>
What challenges and successes have nurse educators experienced with the use of reflective journaling?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging time constraints</li> <li>• Committing to the process</li> <li>• Recognizing that all students do not embrace reflective journaling</li> <li>• Identifying evidence of student growth</li> </ul>
What insights can nurse educators in this study share with other nurse educators concerning their use of reflective journaling?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging others</li> <li>• Committing to the process</li> <li>• Valuing reflective journaling</li> </ul>

## Appendix B

### Guiding Questions for Nurse Educator Interview

- 1) How do you define reflective journaling and what are the objectives for using reflective journaling in your course?
- 2) Can you tell me about your first experience with reflective journaling?
- 3) Do you use a reflective journaling model? If so, tell me about it. If not, what is your format?
- 4) Can you tell me about how students are informed regarding the use of reflective journaling?
- 5) Can you tell me about your evaluation criteria when reflective journaling is used?
- 6) What are your thoughts about having a mechanism in place to deal with a situation in the event a student discloses sensitive information?
- 7) How often do you review and read journal entries; how prompt is your feedback?
- 8) What have you found in your use of reflective journaling to be a challenge or success of its use?
- 9) What has inspired you to use reflective journal as an assignment?
- 10) What would you say to nurse educators who may be interested in using reflective journaling in their curricula?

## Appendix C

### IRB Approval



July 13, 2012

Cynthia Dianne Aaron  
College of Education  
The University of Alabama  
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 12-OR-248, "The Process of Using Reflective Journaling in Nursing Education"

Dear Ms. Aaron:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Your application will expire on July 12, 2013. If the study continues beyond that date, you must complete the IRB Renewal Application. If you modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this application, please include the IRB application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



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