

REFLECTIVE WRITING IN NURSING STUDENTS' CLINICAL INTERNSHIP AND LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Reflective writing is increasingly used in nursing education as a strategy to support learning during clinical internships, however its educational impact and optimal implementation are still being debated. This narrative literature review explores how reflective writing influences nursing students' learning processes and identifies conditions that enhance or limit its effectiveness. A structured search was conducted in MEDLINE, CINAHL and Google Scholar (August 2025 and January 2026), without time restrictions, including English- and Italian-language qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods studies focused on reflective writing in clinical education. Study selection followed title/abstract and full-text screening, supported by reference and citation tracking; methodological quality was appraised descriptively to support interpretation of findings. The synthesis highlights consistent evidence for the role of reflective writing in promoting metacognitive development, critical thinking and emotional awareness, while findings regarding direct improvements in clinical performance are more heterogeneous. Reflective writing appears most effective when guided by structured prompts, integrated into curricula, and supported by trained educators providing constructive feedback. Conversely, unstructured approaches and high perceived workload may reduce student engagement and learning value. Overall, reflective writing represents a meaningful educational strategy when embedded within supportive pedagogical frameworks. Educators are encouraged to adopt guided reflective models and create psychologically safe learning environments to facilitate deeper reflection and professional growth during clinical training.

Keywords: *Reflective writing, nursing students, nursing education, learning, clinical internship.*

1. Background and aim

Reflective writing has become an increasingly important pedagogical strategy in nursing education, particularly during clinical internships when students must integrate theoretical knowledge with complex practical situations. Based on adult learning theories, reflection facilitates the transformation of experience into meaningful learning by fostering awareness of assumptions, sense-making and informed professional action (Artioli et al., 2021; Bagnato, Dimonte & Garrino, 2013; Mann, Gordon & MacLeod, 2009). In healthcare education, the ability to reflect is closely associated with critical thinking, ethical reasoning and clinical judgement. Within nursing theory, Benner's model identifies reflection as a key element in progression from novice to expert, supporting continuous integration of experience and professional knowledge (Montagna, Benaglio & Zannini, 2010). Reflective writing facilitates this process by structuring cognitive and emotional reflection, making students' reasoning explicit and fostering self-awareness, professional identity formation and critical thinking (Croke, 2004; Haji Seyed Abolghasem, Othman & Ahmad Shah, 2020; Zannini, 2021). Recent evidence, including the mixed-methods systematic review by Chen et al. (2026), highlights the positive effects of reflective writing on critical thinking, clinical judgement, empathy, and communication skills, as well as its potential implications for patient safety and the quality of care. However, despite the growing body of evidence on outcomes, less attention has been paid to the educational processes and contextual conditions that influence the implementation of reflective writing during clinical placements. This narrative review therefore aims to explore the impact of reflective writing on nursing students' learning during clinical internships, examining the competencies it supports, students' perceptions of its educational value, the barriers to its implementation and the key conditions for its effective integration into nursing education programs.

2. Methods

A narrative literature review with a structured and transparent approach was conducted to address the research question: Does the use of reflective writing by nursing students during clinical internships improve learning outcomes? A narrative design was selected due to the exploratory nature of the topic and the heterogeneity of the available literature, which includes qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods studies, as well as variability in reflective tools and learning outcomes. This approach enabled an interpretative synthesis focused on educational processes rather than on the measurement of isolated effects. The literature search was conducted between August 2025 and January 2026 using MEDLINE, CINAHL and Google Scholar, without time restrictions. Searches combined keywords related to nursing education, clinical placements and reflective writing. A broad search strategy was adopted to capture terminological variability. Reference list screening and citation tracking were also performed. Full-text articles published in English or Italian were considered. Following duplicate removal, titles and abstracts were screened, and eligible studies underwent full-text review. Studies were excluded if they did not involve nursing students or comparable healthcare learners, did not focus on reflective writing, or lacked clearly stated objectives or methods. Studies involving other health professions were included when relevant to the educational context. A total of 29 studies were included in the final synthesis. Methodological quality was appraised descriptively to support interpretation of findings.

3. Results

This narrative review incorporated various publications, including literature reviews, qualitative studies, quantitative studies, mixed-methods studies, and pilot studies. The majority of the evidence came from qualitative studies and literature reviews, reflecting the exploratory nature of reflective writing in nursing education. Quantitative and experimental studies were limited. The results were organised into five thematic categories based on shared topics and recurring findings. This thematic structure enabled an in-depth exploration of the educational impact of reflective writing, as well as its limitations and the role of educators.

3.1. The impact of reflective writing on learning process and knowledge consolidation

Reflective writing emerged as an effective tool to enhance clinical learning by encouraging students to critically analyse their experiences and consolidate professional knowledge (Bagnato, Dimonte & Garrino, 2013; Murillo-Llorente et al., 2021). It supports the integration of theory and practice, promotes problem-solving skills, and fosters reflective capacity. However, some students perceive reflective activities as burdensome or unclear in purpose, which may reduce engagement and effectiveness (Kok & Chabeli, 2002; Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009; Persson, Kvist & Ekelin, 2018). Structured guidance and adequate time allocation appear essential to address these issues. Several studies highlight the role of reflective writing in promoting metacognitive skills, enabling students to monitor and evaluate their learning processes. Reflective logs, in particular, have been reported as more effective than traditional care plans in supporting “thinking about thinking” and clinical judgement (Fonteyn & Cahill, 1998). Nevertheless, students often remain at a descriptive level of reflection, suggesting the need for structured models, rubrics, and guiding questions to promote deeper reflection (Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Cheng & Chan, 2019; Plack, Driscoll & McKenna, 2005; Park, Kim & Park, 2019). Reflective writing also contributes to the development of self-awareness, helping students recognise emotions, values, and learning needs, and supporting ethical and responsible clinical practice (Greenleaf Brown, Briscoe & Grabowsky, 2022; Mahlanze & Sibiyi, 2017; Naber & Markley, 2017). However, the complexity of reflective processes may limit their effectiveness without appropriate educational support (Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Lin et al., 2022).

3.2. The influence of reflective writing on clinical practice: critical thinking, clinical judgement and professional growth

Reflective writing plays a key role in fostering critical thinking by improving analytical reasoning and decision-making skills (Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Greenleaf Brown, Briscoe & Grabowsky, 2022). Through reflection on clinical experiences, students learn to identify patterns, justify clinical decisions, and integrate theoretical knowledge into practice (Kok & Chabeli, 2002; Fonteyn & Cahill, 1998). Evidence suggests that reflective journaling strengthens clinical judgement and increases confidence in managing complex situations (Croke, 2004; Greenleaf Brown, Briscoe & Grabowsky, 2022; Lasater & Nielsen, 2009). Beyond technical competence, reflective writing promotes personal and professional growth by reinforcing autonomy, ethical awareness, and emotional competence (Mahlanze & Sibiyi, 2017; Montagna, Benaglio & Zannini, 2010; Persson, Kvist & Ekelin, 2018). Techniques such as critical incident analysis enable

students to reflect on errors and modify ineffective behaviours (Montagna, Benaglio & Zannini, 2010). This process supports the development of both technical expertise and humanistic values, which are essential for professional nursing practice (Williams, 2009).

3.3. Psycho-emotional aspects and empathy

Reflective writing supports emotional awareness and empathy by enabling students to recognise and regulate emotions in clinical contexts (Artioli et al., 2021; Bagnato, Dimonte & Garrino, 2013; Greenleaf Brown, Briscoe & Grabowsky, 2022). Writing provides a safe space to process challenging experiences, enhancing emotional resilience and compassionate care (Haji Seyed Abolghasem, Othman & Ahmad Shah, 2020; Naber & Markley, 2017; Ruiz-López et al., 2015). Moreover, reflective practice may help reduce stress and mitigate the risk of burnout by allowing students to cope with emotionally demanding situations (Artioli et al., 2021; Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Greenleaf Brown, Briscoe & Grabowsky, 2022). In addition, reflective writing contributes to the development of communication skills by encouraging students to analyse interpersonal interactions with patients, peers, and educators, thereby improving therapeutic relationships and educational dialogue (Artioli et al., 2021; Lasater & Nielsen, 2009).

3.4. Limitations and resistance to reflective writing

Despite its benefits, reflective writing presents several limitations. Outcomes vary widely among students, and not all are able to achieve deep levels of critical reflection, likely due to individual predisposition and skills (Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Chirema, 2007; Plack, Driscoll & McKenna, 2005). Furthermore, evidence of a direct impact on nursing care quality remains limited, which may hinder broader adoption (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015). Reflective writing is often perceived as time-consuming by both students and educators, representing a potential barrier, especially in contexts of high workload (Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Kember et al., 1996). Resistance may also arise when reflection is viewed as an academic requirement rather than a meaningful learning opportunity (Epp, 2008). Additionally, emotional vulnerability when sharing personal reflections may discourage engagement in the absence of a trusting educational environment (Haji Seyed Abolghasem, Othman & Ahmad Shah, 2020).

3.5. The role of educators

The literature consistently highlights the central role of educators in supporting effective reflective writing. Clear objectives, structured mentoring, constructive feedback, and a supportive learning environment are essential to promote meaningful reflection and critical thinking (Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019; Kember et al., 1996; Ruiz-López et al., 2015). Guided reflectivity through structured prompts, guiding questions, reflection checklists, and peer discussion supports deeper cognitive, ethical, and emotional reflection (Lasater, 2009; Naber & Markley, 2017; Croke, 2004; Cheng & Chan, 2019; Bjerkvik & Hilli, 2019). Educators are also key in fostering balanced reflection on both successful and challenging clinical experiences, promoting professional growth, self-efficacy, and resilience (Artioli et al., 2021; Mahlanze & Sibiyi, 2017; Greenleaf Brown et al., 2022). Flexible reflective formats, such as narrative writing, concept maps, and thematic reflections, help accommodate different learning styles and enhance engagement (Chen et al., 2026; Kember et al., 1996; Levett-Jones, 2007; Montagna, Benaglio & Zannini, 2010). The use of digital platforms facilitates real-time reflection, asynchronous feedback, and longitudinal monitoring, enabling continuous support and early identification of learning difficulties (Chen et al., 2026; Epp, 2008; Montagna et al., 2010; Ruiz-López et al., 2015; Persson et al., 2015; Bagnato et al., 2013). Conversely, unclear expectations, insufficient guidance, and inconsistent feedback may reduce the perceived value of reflective writing (Kok & Chabeli, 2002; Persson, Kvist & Ekelin, 2018). Effective curricular integration therefore requires sustained educator commitment, adequate training, and attention to students' workload and emotional safety to support long-term professional growth (Epp, 2008; Mann et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2026; Murillo-Llorente et al., 2021).

4. Discussion

This narrative review provides a coherent synthesis of the role of reflective writing in nursing education, highlighting its contribution to students' learning and professional development, alongside key challenges related to its implementation. Overall, the findings confirm the theoretical assumptions underlying reflective practice: reflective writing supports experiential learning by facilitating the integration of theoretical knowledge with clinical experience and by fostering metacognitive and critical thinking skills essential for managing complex clinical situations. These results are consistent with previous evidence, including the systematic review by Chen et al. (2026), while the narrative approach adopted in the present review allows a deeper exploration of the educational and contextual conditions influencing effectiveness. In particular, reflective writing appears to promote personal and professional growth through

enhanced self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and empathy, which are crucial for stress management, burnout prevention, and the development of effective therapeutic and interprofessional relationships. Improvements in communication skills further strengthen the relational dimension of nursing practice.

At the same time, several critical issues emerge. The effectiveness of reflective writing varies among students and may be limited by the perception of increased workload and difficulties in achieving deeper levels of reflection. In this context, the role of educators is central. Clear objectives, structured guidance, constructive feedback, and a psychologically safe learning environment are necessary to ensure that reflective writing moves beyond descriptive accounts and supports meaningful critical analysis. Therefore, effective integration into nursing curricula requires careful planning and specific training for educators. Methodological limitations were also identified in the reviewed studies, particularly the scarcity of robust quantitative evidence and the high variability in students' experiences. These factors limit the generalisability of findings and reflect the challenges inherent in measuring learning outcomes and isolating the effects of educational interventions. Future research should prioritise quantitative and longitudinal designs to explore the long-term impact of reflective writing on clinical competence and psychological well-being. Additionally, examining its integration with complementary educational strategies, such as peer feedback and group discussion, may further enhance reflective depth and learning outcomes.

5. Conclusions

This narrative review suggests that reflective writing represents a valuable educational strategy in nursing clinical education, particularly within complex and emotionally demanding care contexts. When systematically integrated into curricula and supported by appropriate pedagogical guidance, reflective writing may contribute to meaningful learning and professional development by fostering critical reflection, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the integration of theory with clinical practice. Despite some resistance and variability in students' engagement, the findings indicate that the effectiveness of reflective writing largely depends on the conditions under which it is implemented. Structured guidance, timely and constructive feedback, and the presence of trained educators who can facilitate reflection within a safe learning environment appear to be essential in enabling students to move beyond descriptive accounts towards deeper levels of critical and conscious reflection. These elements are crucial to fully realize the educational potential of reflective writing and to support students in managing the emotional and cognitive demands of clinical practice. At the same time, current evidence highlights the need for greater methodological consistency and more robust evaluation of learning outcomes, particularly regarding long-term effects on clinical competence, professional development, and psychological well-being. Future research should therefore aim to strengthen the empirical evidence base, clarify the contextual and individual factors influencing the impact of reflective writing, and explore its integration with other educational strategies. Providing clearer, practice-oriented guidance for educators may further support the sustainable and effective use of reflective writing within nursing education programs.

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