# Journaling at an Interprofessional Aphasia Retreat: Experience Grows Reflection

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**Abstract**
Evidence has shown that reflective journaling can have positive impacts on clinical skill development and student growth. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the benefits of reflective journaling, suggestions for implementation, and the results of a pilot study using reflective journals at an interprofessional camp clinical setting. A pilot study was developed to explore the use of reflective journaling at a clinical camp setting. Students attended the Aphasia Couples Retreat, a therapeutic weekend camp focused on helping reconnect couples following a stroke or brain injury. A total of 20 students from both the speech pathology and occupational therapy programs completed journal entries at three time points surrounding the camp experience. Each journal entry was coded for its depth of reflection using a four-point scale. Results indicated that students could demonstrate reflective writing, even with minimal training. Furthermore, with more practice and experience in reflection as well as clinical exposure, students were able to deepen their level of reflection.

## Introduction

One of the primary roles of clinical education is to not only develop tangible technical skills of future clinicians but to also develop critical thinking. The development of critical thinking and decision making, as well as professional independence, are imperative for the development of

competent and independent clinicians (McAllister & Lincoln, 2004; McVey & Jones, 2012; Tillard et al., 2018). One way educators have attempted to foster these two skills is through the inclusion of reflective practice activities. By reflecting and analyzing clinical practice experiences, students can improve learning (Caty et al., 2015; Hill et al., 2012; Lepianka, 2014).

Boyd and Fales (1983) describe reflective practice as a process of internal examination and exploration to investigate issues of concern. These explorations would be triggered by an experience and create an opportunity to clarify meaning, thus resulting in a changed perspective and subsequent learning. McAllister and Lincoln (2004) define reflective practice as, " . . . means by which learners can make sense of and integrate new learning into existing knowledge" (p. 125). This practice can help students integrate knowledge they have often received in the classroom into their new clinical experiences (Caty et al., 2015; Dunfee et al., 2008).

A myriad of health professions have begun to recognize the value in training reflective practice for increasing the clinical learning and integration of their students (Dunfee et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2012; Jacobs, 2016). However, within the field of speech-language pathology, a meta-analysis conducted by Caty and colleagues (2015) discovered there was considerable disagreement and variety in the way reflection was being defined and utilized.
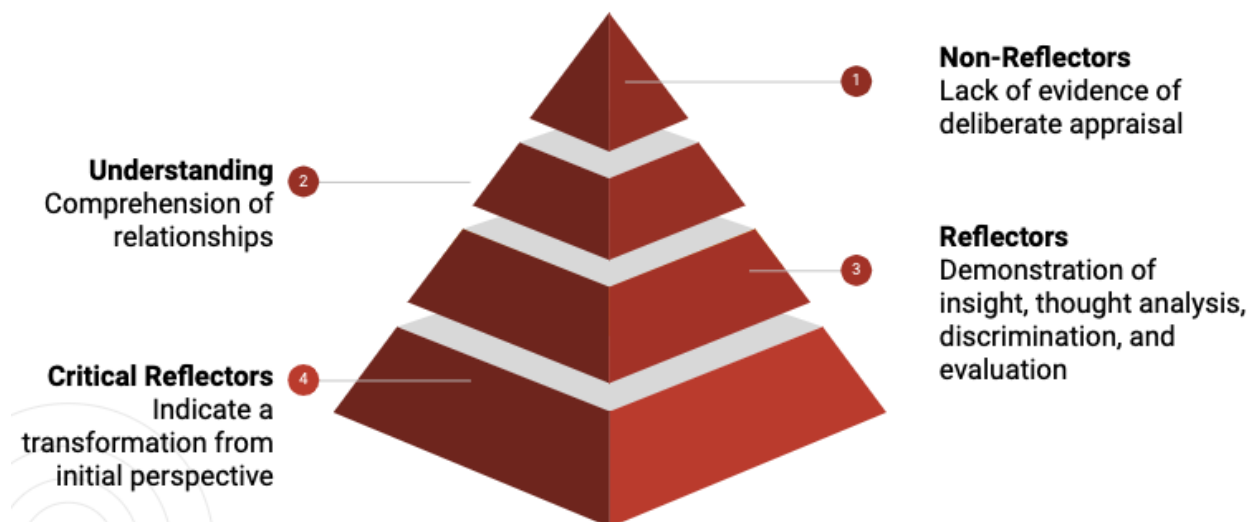
## Reflective Journals

A wide variety of methodologies have been used to assess and develop reflection in learners. The most commonly used approach, by far, is that of the journal or other written forms (Freeman, 2001; Hill et al., 2012; Jong et al., 2008). Reflective journaling has been commonly used as a learning activity to explore and share ideas as well as to assist faculty to better understand their students' thought processes. Journaling also provides an incentive to observe or measure personal progress. (Thomas et al., 2012). Reflective journaling as central to students' self-evaluation is described as a means of fostering metacognition (Liuolienė & Metiūnienė, 2011).

Lepianka (2014) contends reflective journaling promotes critical reasoning skills and allows graduate nurses to reflect on their clinical experiences. The benefits of reflective journals are numerous including decreased level of stress, increased workplace retention, increased competence in clinical skills, and a deeper understanding of individual strengths and areas in need of improvement (Lepianka, 2014). Additional research on reflective writing has found that with continued practice, students improved at reflection and writing skills over time (Epp, 2008). Reflective journals promote learning for both students and faculty, aid the development of interpersonal relationships, support the integration of theory into practice, and provide cathartic benefits (Ruiz-López, 2015). Furthermore, Silvia and colleagues (2013) stressed that this form of writing can achieve giving voice to emotion.

In order for reflection to be truly beneficial it must be of sufficient depth, and a writer's capacity for reflection will be influenced by their personal style. Kember and Colleagues (2008) found despite the coaching and training received on how to keep a diary, students completed their reflections in different ways. In order to quantify the depth of reflection, Kember and colleagues developed a protocol for a four-category scheme that can be used to analyze the written work of students for critical reflection. Written work lacking interpretation or concept and/or is plagiarized

was labeled as "non-reflective." Written work that demonstrates reliance on the textbook or confined solely to theory was labeled as "understanding." Written work that integrates theory with personal experiences was labeled as "reflection." Written work that exemplifies a change in perspective over a previously held belief is labeled as "critical reflection". See Figure 1 for further explanation of this categorization.



**Figure 1**. Flow of reflection depth and learning retention as categorized by Kember and colleagues (2008).

Despite the wide usage and support for reflective journals, there are a variety of implementation suggestions for an effective rollout (Kember et al., 2008; Liuoliene & Metiuniene, 2011; Ruiz-López et al., 2015; Saras, 2003).

- An informative meeting should be arranged with students.
- Written guidelines should be provided.
- A personal interview with the student is recommended at the start of the activity.
- Feedback should be offered over short time periods.
- Teachers should provide constructive feedback.
- Students should adopt a free writing approach, or be guided by very open questions.

Further considerations for reflective journal implementation are summarized in Figure 2 below. These suggestions are based on research by Kember and colleagues (2008), Liuoliene and Metiuniene (2011), Ruiz-López and colleagues (2015), and Saras (2003).
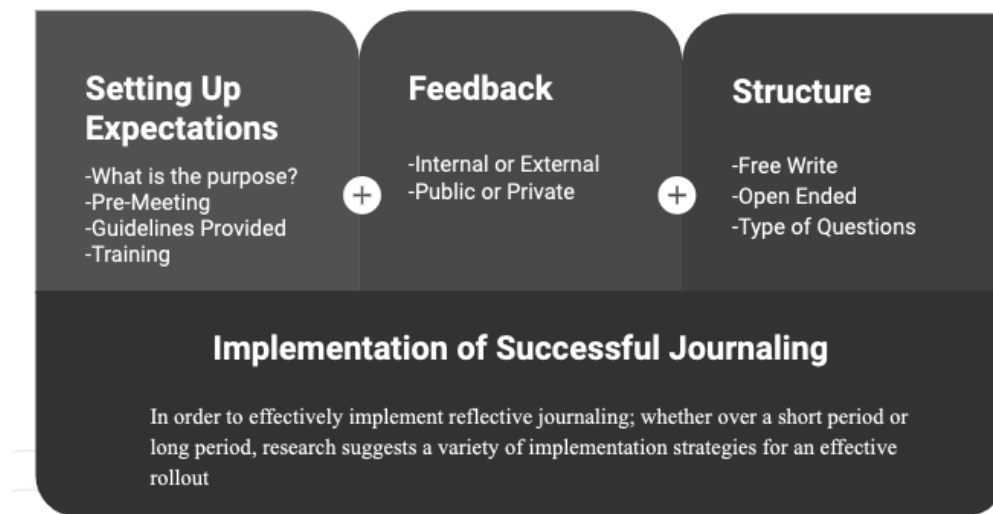
**Figure 2.** Considerations for use of reflective journaling in clinical education.

To date, no single method of journaling implementation has been thus far established as superior. Due to the wide variety of training methods, settings, students populations, and implementations, it is difficult to surmise what approach to reflective journals would be best for any one group of students or for any particular clinical scenario.

In summary, the literature supports the use of reflective journaling in a variety of settings with a range of methodologies. However, it is unknown whether students could achieve sufficient depth and, thus, benefit over a short duration of journaling with minimal training in reflective writing. These unknowns led to the development of a pilot study implementing reflective journaling at a short duration clinical placement in an effort to increase understanding of learning and student growth at this type of setting. Furthermore, the study sought to determine what type of reflection students would typically use to express their experiences in this setting when given the opportunity. The driving questions in this study are as follows:
1. When provided with an opportunity to use reflection through journaling, what depth of reflection will students produce?
2. Do students increase their depth of reflection over time?

## Methods

This study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of Pacific University and approval from the Aphasia Network, the cooperating partner. All participants provided written consent to participate.

*Pilot Study*

To explore the use of reflective journaling in a non-traditional setting, a pilot study with students was developed to be implemented at a weekend-long clinical experience. A proportion of graduate students attended a weekend long aphasia couples retreat in addition to their primary spring

semester clinical placement. This retreat is hosted yearly on the west coast and is run in partnership between The Aphasia Network, a local 501c3, and the Pacific University speech-language pathology and occupational therapy programs. The goal of the retreat is to give persons with aphasia and their spouses an opportunity to reconnect and strengthen their bond as a couple in a social setting. Couples are paired with an interdisciplinary team of students and participate in professionally-led groups. Throughout the weekend-long retreat, couples discuss challenges of married life with aphasia side-by-side with other couples facing similar challenges (Stead & White, 2019). To determine if journaling could support reflective practice in this setting, students were given the opportunity to keep reflective journals throughout the retreat experience. Using Kember and colleagues' (2008) rating system, the nature and quality of student reflections were examined.

## *Participants*

A total of 20 individuals (17 women and 3 men) participated in journaling throughout the retreat. The mean age was 24.9 years. First- and second-year students from the speech pathology (SLP; $n = 13$) and occupational therapy programs (OT; $n = 7$) attended the aphasia retreat as part of their clinical rotations. The ages of participants ranged from 19.6 years to 52 years at the time of the study.

## *Procedures*

One month before the retreat students attended a half-day training for the clinical experience At the end of this training, students were presented with the opportunity to participate in the reflective journaling investigation. The only training on reflective journaling students received prior to attending the retreat was a verbal explanation of the importance of clinical reflection and a verbal description of the importance of the depth of reflection. If students opted to participate, they were provided with two scholarly articles describing reflective journaling (i.e., Kember et al., 1999; Ruiz-Lopez et al., 2005) and their physical journals. They were asked to complete their first entry prior to retreat attendance.

Students were given opportunities before and after the retreat to use their journal to reflect on their experience and specific interactions. The journal entries were both free-form and prompted. Each journal had instructions and prompts for each of the three time periods listed on the inside cover of the journals for guidance. The prompts were modeled off those used by Liuolienė and Metiūnienė (2011) for a teaching fieldwork experience. These specific prompts were chosen to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on specific instances rather than just report. During journaling periods, students were provided with verbal and email reminders to complete their entries regularly. Timing for reflective journal use was as follows:

- Pre-retreat reflections needed to be completed between the training period and arrival at the retreat (three weeks).
- Post-retreat reflections were to be completed within four days of the retreat experience.
- Post-post retreat reflections were to be completed between two to three weeks after retreat completions.

No journal contained identifying information about students or clients; thus, they were considered anonymous. The following statement was listed within the cover of the journals to remind students

not to use identifying client information: "During the course of your journaling, to maintain privacy, please use the following pseudonyms: Person with Aphasia [PWA]; Care Partner [CP]; Student Partner [SLP partner or OT partner]." See Table 1 for the scaffolded prompts.

**Table 1**. Flow of reflective journaling process and prompts

| Pre-Retreat Reflection | Post-Retreat Reflection | Post-Post-Retreat Reflection |
|---|---|---|
| ● What were your previous experiences like with PWA? | ● What was your experience like with your PWA/CP at the retreat? | ● Briefly describe a situation that occurred at the retreat that was memorable. |
| ● What were your previous experiences like in interprofessional teams? | ● What was your experience like with your SLP/OT partner at the retreat? | ● Why did you choose this incident – did you experience challenges in meeting it? Did you exhibit strengths? Did you learn something? |
| ● Please reflect on both your challenges and successes in working on teams. | ● Please reflect on both your challenges and successes working interdisciplinarily | ● How has this experience challenged your assumptions, or biases of interdisciplinary work? |
| ● What learning from these events will you take forward into the retreat? | ● What learning from these events will you take forward into the retreat? | ● How will this experience alter your future behavior, attitudes, or career? |
| ● What other thoughts are you having at this time? | ● What other thoughts are you having at this time? | |

After students completed their final reflection, they anonymously returned their journal via intercampus mail to the principal investigator. Upon collection, each journal entry was coded for its depth of reflection (1 through 4). A primary coder scored every reflective statement and then re-coded 20% of the original sample to check for intra-rater reliability. The 20% re-coded were 92.3% congruent, indicating excellent intra-rater reliability. A second trained coder scored the entire sample and compared their scores to the original coder. These coders had 84.1% inter-rater reliability indicating a good reliability between each other. In instances where the two coders did not agree, they discussed the individual response and came to consensus for final scoring and data analysis. Examples of scored statements follow:

1. **Non-reflective -** "The OT showed us how to make salsa with new ingredients that help the PWA cook. It was fun!"
2. **Understanding -** "My SLP partner is really wonderful at being present rather than worrying about the next activity or next transportation to and from buildings. They were super focused on connecting the PWA and CP in whatever they were working on. I think my couple is here to not only connect with their community, but to also teach us as future professionals."

3. **Reflection -** "Moving forward, I'm going to be one of the people leading the charge for better interdisciplinary work. Now that I've seen how effective and satisfying it can be, I'd love to encourage myself and my peers to treat each interprof. opportunity as something unique. Thinking all OTs/PTs/PAs, etc, are the same person will only contribute to a lack of comm. that could mean subpar care for the patient. In terms of working w/ people w/ the PWA, I learned to treat them like experts on their own condition, and what it's like to be them. Trust them when they say yes/no/too hard, etc, that will build a rapport and show them it's a team."

4. **Critical reflection -** "This experience has altered the way I think about therapy in general. It is truly a branch of healthcare that exists for the patients, not for us. Although we gain a lot too, we need to prioritize the needs of the patient completely. I have learned that patience is not just a virtue, it is a skill. A skill that can be practiced and honed. I will carry this experience with me throughout my career. It was incredibly formative because it was the first time I had ever applied certain techniques or skills to a real person with real feelings and did not know how they would react. I will continue to believe that communication breakdowns are inevitable, but not always bad. I will carry the importance of trusting my SLP partner, or whatever healthcare professional I am working with. I have been incredibly moved by this experience, and it has certainly made me a better person, student, and future practitioner. I will carry the memories and powerful emotions with me always. Small actions have exponential impacts."

## Results

All twenty participants (100%) completed journal pre-retreat, post-retreat, and post-post-retreat entries. One of the driving questions behind the pilot study was: When provided with an opportunity to use reflection through journaling, what depth of reflection will students produce? Non-parametric statistical tests were chosen due to the small sample size of the study and non-normal distribution. A Friedman test was conducted to evaluate the differences in medians among the pre-retreat (median = 1.43), post-retreat (median = 2.0), and delayed post-retreat (median = 2.58) reflection. The test was significant $\chi^2 (2, n = 20) = 18.56, p < .000$. This means that the groups are significantly different across time points in terms of their reflection depths. Kendall coefficient of concordance of .464 indicates moderate association.

An additional driving question of the pilot study was: Would students increase their depth of reflection overtime? To answer this question, a Wilcoxon test was conducted to evaluate whether students were more reflective at different time points across the retreat experience. Results are as follows:
- Pre-retreat reflection and post-retreat, $z = -2.46, p < .014$
- Pre-retreat reflection and delayed post-retreat, $z = -3.57, p < .000$
- Post-retreat reflection and delayed post-retreat, $z = -2.75, p < .006$.

Results indicate that between each time period there was a significant change in the depth of reflection.

# Discussion

The results of the pilot study indicate promise in the use of reflective journals for short duration clinical experiences with minimal training. When provided with an opportunity to use reflection via journaling, students produced a limited amount of deep reflection prior to the retreat. This is consistent with research indicating that reflection and reflective writing takes practice and instruction (Lepianka, 2014; Liuolienė & Metiūnienė, 2011; Sage & Sele, 2015). Students demonstrated a preponderance of "non-reflective" statements and "understanding" statements during the pre-retreat. Saras (2003) found that continued use of reflective journals combat this issue by allowing student clinicians to analyze their behavior deeply and make plans for implementing behavioral changes when needed.

Despite the short journaling timeframe, students increased their depth of reflection over time. The increased reflective depth between the pre-retreat and post-retreat experience could be attributed to both increased practice in reflective writing and a more contextual experience. Students were able to reflect on specific interactions with both peers and attendees to the retreat which likely increased the specificity of those reflections. This is consistent with literature indicating practice increases reflective depth. Saras (2003) found the quality of student reflective writing demonstrated significant improvement over time, with initial self-centered responses transforming to an analytical assessment of their clinical behaviors. Given another extended period of time, students again increased their overall reflective depth between the post-retreat and the delayed post-retreat entries. Furthermore, a study by Travers (2011) indicated reflective skills improved overtime while keeping a year-long journal (diary) to reflect on common stressors.

As Caty and colleagues (2015) suggested, reflective journaling has significant promise as a pedagogical tool; however, further evidence is required in order to increase both its usage and validity. Entries in the journal from this study suggest that in the context of this retreat experience, students are able to reflect critically and improve in the depth of reflection overtime. The underlying premise of using reflection as a pedagogical tool is that it can improve clinical learning and clinical growth. Positively, it appears this pilot study's use of reflective journals, despite minimal training, was successful in engaging students in critical reflection and increasing reflective writing skills at the aphasia retreat. This study demonstrated that despite a short weekend context, students were able to use reflective journaling as a tool to deepen their understanding of their work both with persons with aphasia and their care partners, and the value of interprofessional collaboration. This in turn, should lead to enhanced critical thinking and reflective practice skills.

## *Limitations Future Directions*

It is difficult to speculate on the unique variables that contribute to improved clinical reflection at this retreat (i.e., student attributes, journal prompts). This is supported in the literature stating that student experience and attributes can impact their ability to critically reflect (Kember, McKay et al., 2008). This perhaps could be mitigated by expanded student training. While this study used a relatively short training session and independent readings, the literature supports the use of more guided practice and feedback to develop reflective skills (Caty et al., 2015; Tillard et al, 2018). Because of the event in which the reflection was based upon (i.e., three day weekend retreat experience), the limited time between the pre-retreat and post-post-retreat reflection may have

contributed to more limited development in reflective skills. Future studies could include the implementation of the same methodology at different clinical sites both traditional and non-traditional. Future studies could include the augmentation of the prompts or response modality (e.g., digital journaling) used to see whether different results or depth of reflection are concluded. Finally, future studies should fully investigate the most efficient student training protocols for reflective writing to achieve sufficient depth and benefit from the experiences.

Further studies also aim to evaluate the content of the reflective journals for improved program implementation and understanding of the student experience. Although statements were not evaluated in depth for thematic outcomes, the majority of statements reflected positive interactions with interprofessional peer partners and attendees to the retreat. An example of a positive interprofessional interaction was, "I hope to continue in the future with this positive experience of interdisciplinary work. Before this experience I loved the idea of working on an interdisciplinary team and I still feel that way after this experience." An example of a positive comment about their own professional growth was, "This experience has given me a lot of confidence in my abilities as an OT. As someone who identifies as an introvert, this experience really got me to embrace different situations."

## Conclusion

In summary, this pilot study illustrated that students could demonstrate quality reflective writing despite minimal training and a short experience duration. Journaling can be an avenue to discussions related to patient care, management strategies, and the overall work environment (Thomas et al., 2012). The contemporary focus on learning and reflection in diaries or journals shifts the emphasis to process rather than product and makes them a helpful tool within educational environments (i.e., during clinical practicum experiences). Over time, with more practice and experience in reflection as well as clinical exposure, students were able to deepen their level of reflection. Targeted reflection can help students make both personal and professional connections to their experience. This deep reflection can aid students in feeling more prepared in future clinical work and gain new perspectives from their clients and colleagues.

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