

# Using Reflective Journals in Athletic Training Clinical Education

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*What is heard is forgotten; what is seen is remembered; but what is written is understood.*

—Anonymous

*I don't know what I think, until I see what I've said.*

—E.M. Forster

**A**S THE ABOVE QUOTES indicate, writing is an important tool for learning. Unfortunately, though, it is a commonly overlooked tool. This is particularly true in regard to athletic training clinical education. In this column I discuss using writing, specifically writing in reflective journals, as a means to enhance learning in clinical athletic training education.

## Overview

A reflective journal or learning log is an academic tool. It provides students an opportunity to ponder and reflect back on an experience and to give meaning to that incident. By removing themselves from the moment of the situation, students can analyze what did or did not happen, in the context of maximizing learning from the experience.

Reflective journals have been used in a variety of academic settings and in a variety of disciplines to enhance student learning.<sup>1,2</sup> Nursing education in particular has very commonly used journals and logs to facilitate learning in student's clinical education experiences. Cameron and Mitchell indicate that reflection is essential for developing effective practitioners.<sup>3</sup>

There are numerous reasons given to justify the use of student reflective journals or learning logs. Most commonly noted is the development of critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Writing entails an active involvement in the learning process. It provides an opportunity to deepen the quality of learning through reflective thought.<sup>4-7</sup> Patton et al. state that

journal writing facilitates the linking of classroom work with clinical experiences.<sup>6</sup> Other benefits from journals and logs include documentation of student progression and an increased ability to empathize, to develop observational skills, to learn from mistakes, and to define the meaning of a critical incident.<sup>6,7</sup> Boud indicates that journal writing enables students to understand their own learning process, enhances creativity, enhances professional practice, and provides an alternative voice for those not good at expressing themselves verbally.<sup>4</sup> Personal growth and development can occur through the self-expression of writing and intuition.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, the development of students' writing skills is also enhanced.

Equally important are the less commonly recognized health benefits from stress reduction. Journal writing affords students the opportunity to release feelings and pent-up emotions. It provides a vent for frustration and anger. Stress and anxiety can be reduced. Students are afforded the opportunity of gaining a different perspective through writing about their clinical experiences.<sup>5,7</sup>

In addition, a journal or log allows students to share thoughts they might never have verbalized and to let the clinical instructor know about their learning experiences. It provides a mechanism for students to ask questions of the clinical instructor.<sup>6</sup> Journal writing also provides a benefit to instructors by giving them insight into the personalities and needs of their students. This serves to humanize the student-faculty relationship.<sup>7</sup>

In order to maximize the learning benefits of a reflective journal for athletic training students, one

must carefully structure the assignment. Students must understand that this is an academic journal, not a personal journal. It is not simply a rigid accounting of all practicum hours and experiences, nor should it entail a free response format. Clear expectations validate the exercise, provide parameters for faculty response, and reduce both student and faculty time commitment.

## Journal Format

A format for the reflective journal that has been found to be beneficial in developing students' critical

### Reflective-Journal Instructions

All athletic training students are required to keep a clinical reflective journal to record their perceptions of situations occurring during practicum experiences. Rather than making a brief listing of clinical experience events, develop your thoughts as fully as possible. This is an opportunity to share with faculty and clinical instructors the application of principles, theory, and research to the practicum. Write a journal entry describing a clinical experience you found significant. This doesn't have to be the occurrence of a specific injury but an experience from which you learned something. For each journal entry, discuss at least three or four of the following:

- Describe what athletic training interventions occurred.
- Describe the decision-making process.
- Identify previous knowledge or clinical experiences that helped you in this situation.
- Describe resources you identified or used and your rationale.
- Describe the application of concepts, theories, or research discussed in class as you move from theoretical to clinical practice.
- Describe your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.
- Describe any ethical situations/dilemmas.
- Describe any interactions and experiences with other health-care providers.
- Describe what you would do differently if a similar situation occurs.

thinking skills is "What? So what? Now what?" For "What?" students give a full description of the experience, identifying important points. "So what?" involves making meaning out of the experience. Insight and discernment are essential elements here. "Now what?" requires students to analyze the experience for future implications.

The instructions in the sidebar at lower left are an example of how a reflective journal can be incorporated into an athletic training clinical education course. Reflective journal entries might be submitted electronically or by hard copy, depending on the preference of the instructor. Feedback must be given to the students in order for the objectives of the journal writing to be met. Suggested responses to journal entries are included in the sidebar below.

## Evaluation

Athletic training reflective journals can be evaluated by many methods. Possibilities include nongraded (pass/fail), skim read with a few selected responses,

### Suggested Responses to Journal Entries to Encourage Critical Thinking

- What did you think about this experience?
- What assumptions were you making at this point?
- What facts support this assumption?
- Did you challenge the assumption of \_\_\_\_\_?
- Was intuition involved in making this decision?
- Did you reflect on the feasibility of \_\_\_\_\_?
- How did you arrive at this decision/conclusion?
- How did you evaluate your thinking processes related to \_\_\_\_\_?
- How did you feel at the time? Now?
- Did you trust your judgment?
- Did you consider other alternatives?
- What conclusions did you reach after examining your own critical thinking?
- How would you handle this situation differently?

*Note.* Adapted from Degazon and Lunney.<sup>9</sup>

peer review, criteria established by the instructor, and feedback from clinical instructor. Whatever form of assessment is used, it is critical to remember that the reflective journal is a communication tool to document clinical learning. Assessment of learning over time can also be addressed with a reflective journal, particularly in terms of the difficult-to-document affective clinical competencies.

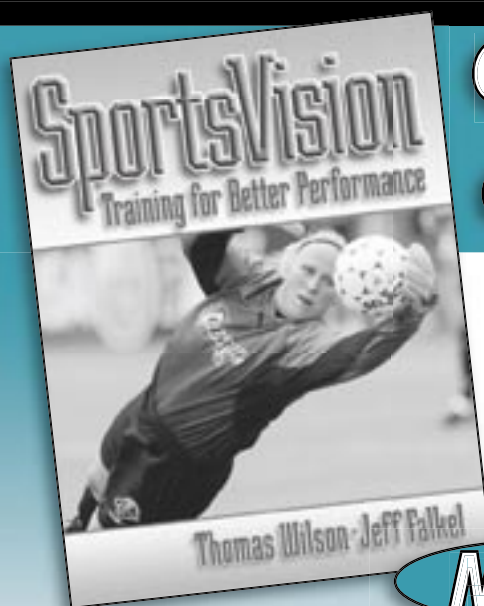
## Conclusion

Writing is a powerful mode of learning because it is physical, visible, and personal. Writing is physical as it focuses attention and actively engages the writer in the subject. Writing is visible. It provides a tangible product that records ideas and makes refinement possible. Writing is personal. It encourages commitment to a point of view.<sup>8</sup> If used appropriately to meet specific learning objectives, writing in a reflective journal can greatly enhance the clinical education experiences of athletic training students. ■

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