REVALIDATION AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Alison Finch explores how reflection is an important aspect of the re-registration process and suggests ways that managers can help nurses to make the most of it.

Abstract

From April 2016 nurses must meet the requirements of the new Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) revalidation process to maintain their registration. It is their responsibility to ensure they meet all revalidation requirements, but organisations and nurse leaders can support them to do so. Reflection is an important part of revalidation, and nurses are required to submit written reflective accounts and engage in reflective discussion. This article discusses how revalidation encourages a more conscious and active form of reflection. It also describes how leaders can help nurses to reflect on practice to identify improvements and become more familiar with the NMC Code.

Keywords
revalidation, reflection, reflective discussion, nurse leaders, professional practice, NMC Code

REVALIDATION HELPS nurses demonstrate that they practise thoughtfully. It encourages a culture of enquiry, reflection and learning which, if attended to as part of professional practice, creates opportunities for nurses to become more self-aware and responsive to those they work alongside.

According to McKinnon (2016), self-awareness and the ‘effective use of self’ are prerequisites to sound, reflective practice. Many of us use reflective skills in our everyday life, often without thinking consciously about it. Revalidation builds on this and encourages a conscious, active form of reflection that seeks to identify learning that will improve practice. Reflection in this context helps nurses engage with the world in which they work, assisting them to pause and consider interactions with patients, families and colleagues, or how well they are working as a team.

For nursing leaders, the qualities required to derive the value of revalidation are not dissimilar from those related to effective leadership. Revalidation can be seen as a tool to help coach staff to learn from their experiences.

A manager’s leadership skills can help their team fulfil the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) requirements, and realise the value within the process.

Sharing feedback
Nurses are required to produce five pieces of practice-related feedback for every three-year renewal period (NMC 2015a), and these can focus on individuals or teams and the wider service. Helping staff acknowledge and respond to feedback promotes self-awareness and provides a challenge to complacent or habituated practice.

Effective leaders encourage prompt and responsive feedback. Revalidation represents an opportunity to make this part of routine professional practice so that it becomes a cultural norm. Taking time to notice, share and document positive feedback encourages nurses to pause and appreciate the effect of their work, and can help foster a sense of belonging to, or connection with, the team. Feelings of self-worth derived from positive feedback helps reinforce the value of nurses’ work.
A mentor explained how she had never paused to reflect on the effects of her mentorship until she saw herself described by a student as ‘truly inspirational’ and ‘someone who would be remembered’ throughout the student’s nursing career. The mentor conceded that she had never known the real effect of her mentoring and had simply been doing her job until she began to reflect consciously on this feedback. She felt immensely proud and re-energised, and described how this insight reinforced the importance of mentoring for her. The mentor now seeks to inspire every student, and truly guide their practice.

This example demonstrates the potency of feedback. The sharing of feedback is something leaders can model to support revalidation requirements. Feedback offered to colleagues is almost always easier to convey and receive if framed around a particular situation, aspect of care or event. If it is more broadly sited it is more likely to feel like a character reference, and more difficult to reflect on in relation to practice. Constructive feedback, or feedback that is more difficult to hear, requires some thought about when and where it should be delivered so that it is not just given and received, but can be explored together in conversation.

It is often inappropriate to solicit feedback from patients or their families, so nurses need to truly attend to patients’ and their families’ conversations to hear what they convey about their work. Nurses can be coached to notice and ask open questions about the effects of their actions. For example, saying ‘thank you for letting me know how clearly you understood my explanation just now. What was it that I said about your planned surgery that made it feel so clear?’ can yield rich information unobtrusively. Nurses can then record their personal accounts of feedback they have received.

At service or team level, leaders can support staff by sharing audit and survey results and, better still, take time to integrate this information into handovers or team discussions.

Letters of thanks, performance results and serious event reviews give teams opportunities to understand how they are perceived by others and allow nurses to learn from root cause analyses. The NMC expects nurses to describe how feedback they have recorded for revalidation evidence has influenced their practice. Exploring its significance or associated meanings can help them in this.

The benefits of reflection are summarised in Box 1.

**Box 1** Summary of the benefits of reflection

Reflection offers the potential to learn something new or different about ourselves. It may:

- Highlight a learning or development need that can be added to a personal development plan
- Reinforce the value and benefit of a particular approach to work
- Support nurses to adapt their approach in response to feedback and experiences
- Help nurses grow professionally to prepare for more challenging or senior roles

**Box 2** The purpose of reflective discussion

Engaging in reflective discussion offers both participants the opportunity to:

- Make sense of a situation and understand its effect on professional practice
- Help each other think about their practice
- Identify natural strengths and help realise how these can be encouraged and supported
- Consider the role of the Nursing and Midwifery Council Code in professional practice
- Reflect on feedback, experiences and learning
- Learn from others and identify new areas for learning and development
- Consider how to put changes or improvements into action

**Reflective accounts**

Reflection is a personal activity that can help teach us about who we are and allow us to understand our values. It is a way of thinking about our experiences to give them meaning (McKinnon 2016), and it helps transform experiences into learning.

NMC revalidation requires registrants to complete five reflective accounts over each three-year period, each documented on a mandatory form (NMC 2015a). The questions on this form have been devised encourage nurses to identify learning and to describe how it will inform their practice.

The form is perhaps best considered as the end product of reflection. The reflection process may take place in discussion with colleagues, by using reflective models, such as that by Gibbs (1988), or alone during a daily commute. For reflective accounts to be valuable, they should be regarded as integral to practice rather than something ticked off simply to produce revalidation evidence, and leaders can influence how nurses regard these accounts.

The reflection process is usually seen as cyclical, where learning can be taken back and used in practice, and new approaches tested, reviewed and refined. The NMC form is clear and accessible, but may not be enough on its own to stimulate reflective thought.
Skilled leaders support staff to develop reflective skills, recognising that greater self-awareness and exploration are best achieved through attending to the feelings prompted by situations.

Some nurses are reflective in nature, yet struggle to write reflective accounts. By partnering with colleagues to reflect, nurses can support one another in conversations without becoming preoccupied with the process of the form. The role of a reflective partner is to listen and guide reflection by attending to the questions on the NMC form, and perhaps note down what is being shared.

In reflecting, nurses often identify learning needs or development aspirations that can be taken forward as appraisal objectives or as part of personal development plans. Nurses should be encouraged to complete more than five reflective accounts to help support their ongoing learning and development.

Role of leaders
Revalidation requires nurses to engage in reflective discussions with another registrants (Box 2). When leaders think about how to support these conversations they should remember that revalidation is concerned with demonstrating commitment to professional development, rather than assessing professional objective achievements or judging nurses’ performance in their roles.

Reflective discussion need not be undertaken with line managers, although they may be more valuable to revalidating nurses if they takes place with colleagues who mentor them and supports their professional development.

Reflective discussions are designed to encourage a culture of sharing, reflection and improvement. They centre on five written reflective accounts that the revalidating nurse brings to the meetings with their reflective discussion partners, who help to facilitate the conversation (NMC 2015a). Reflective discussion partners draw on their experiences to guide discussions, but are not expected to pass judgement on the reflective accounts. Both parties should come away from the meetings knowing that they have engaged in worthwhile conversations.

The perceived value of revalidation may depend on nurses’ experience of the process, but also on the quality of their reflective discussions. To ensure the discussions are beneficial, leaders should consider how they will open and guide the meetings, and how they will help nurses to reflect on, and find meaning in, their experiences. Leaders should also consider the effect of the experiences on nurses’ learning, their sense of professionalism and their practice.

**Box 3 Example of a reflective discussion**

Looking at the nurse’s reflective accounts, a reflective discussion partner could say:
- Talk me through what this account is about. What contributed to your learning on this occasion?
- What did you do that contributed to the success or learning?
- What does this account say about you and what is important to you?
- What has been the effect on you? For example, on your learning, your sense of what it means to be a professional, your personal development, your strengths, your leadership of others, your sense of feeling valued, or sense of fulfilment in your role.
- What has been the effect on patients, those you look after, or the service you lead?
- How has this informed your practice?
- Where and how does the code feature in this reflective account?

Each reflective account can be discussed separately in sequence, or discussions can integrate insights and learning from all the accounts. One way to approach and guide reflective discussion is set out in Box 3.

**Conclusion**
Engaging in reflective discussion not only helps you to understand yourself, but also helps others to understand you. These discussions can help build relationships, foster enjoyment of work, and support mutual commitment between organisations and nurses. By its nature, reflection is personally owned, and this is true of the revalidation requirements. If reflection is regarded as cyclical, further reflection on what has been taken into practice will follow.

It is important to remember that the onus is on individual nurses, not their managers, to complete NMC revalidation. However, leaders have a significant role to play in helping their teams to meet revalidation requirements, and should approach regard revalidation as an opportunity to enhance emotionally intelligent and professional practice.

**References**
Nursing and Midwifery Council (2015a) How to Revalidate with the NMC: Requirements for Renewing your Registration. NMC, London.