



Reading the Lifelines: Professional Identity Emergence Made Legible

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Introduction

Medical students need safe reflective spaces to explore and construct a holistic professional identity. In 2015, we studied our school's innovative longitudinal and meta-reflective writing portfolio (see box below). Based on our published analysis of writings from one semester, students appeared to be using the portfolio to notice and grapple with changes in themselves.

This study builds on those findings by exploring the student longitudinal reflective writing experience over 36 months, bridging pre-clerkship and clerkship years.

Key Features of Portfolio Curriculum

- *Narrative Medicine/Writing as Discovery*
- *Supportive Feedback: from one trained faculty member over four years*
- *Non-Evaluative*
- *Periodic Meta-Reflection (Signature Reflections)*

Approach

Text Immersion

- Read 10 longitudinal meta-reflection triads: 3 entries/student, written over 3 years
- Used Gilligan's Listening Guide as a systematic approach
- Wrote summary memos which informed focus group questions

Interviews

- Sample: senior medical students
- Method: 5 focus groups of 2-5 students (18 students)
- Students reviewed their longitudinal meta-reflection triad writings prior to the focus group

Coding

- Read focus group transcripts
- Created code book; codes applied by 3 researchers
- Constructed code categories and themes

Conclusions

Research Question

What do students derive from longitudinal reflective writing and how does the Portfolio curricular context support this process?

Findings and Interpretations

Task

Act of Writing
Spontaneity
Mandatory

Students speak of transformation from reluctant to reflective writers.

- “I am not reflecting when I’m writing, I am just writing and then going back to read the things I have written to write the Signature Reflection and it’s like, “I see. This is how I was thinking.”
- “I’m someone who would not be writing if I would not have to be. I don’t tend to express myself that way... But I think it is really, its been really interesting to have a concrete mark of what I was thinking and how I was feeling at a given time, explicitly there.”

Space

Preceptor/
Relationship
Legitimate
Safe

Students emphasize having safe space to write; this included protected time and relationships with preceptors that grew over time.

- “...it was therapeutic: what is going on in my brain and how I felt about it, at least for me. It gave us a space for that and that it was something that the institution cared about in some way.”
- “... one way I saw my writing change was that I became more honest because I trusted my preceptor more. I knew that he was going to read it.”

Reflection

Checking-in with
the self

Students use writings to see themselves, revel in their strengths, and grapple with their challenges.

“I think in my case, as opposed to the Signature Reflection, I think the in-the-moment pieces were often things that I was really struggling with and would spit out. They were not necessarily very reflective, but more like expressions of what happened in that moment and what I was not yet able to process. So when I read back on them for the Signature Reflections, I would be like, “Wow, I am like a ball of agony, misery”

Students derive a sense of perspective from longitudinal reflective writing.

“There is one right before we started MCY. That one was helpful to just sort of, to ground you and say, “Okay, I’m about to start this. What is important? What am I worried about?” and then the one in the middle of MCY, where it was interesting to check in and see, “How did I match the things I wanted to, did I adhere to the goals I had for myself? Did those goals change? How am I processing differently?” We had time at the end of MCY to say, “Ok, these are the things I want to change before I finish up.” I think, for me anyway, these thoughts were all there but you are just too tired to even process what was going on. I felt like they were all extremely useful.”

Students value the perspective facilitated by longitudinal writing, and identify their own growth over time. Longitudinal relationships with dedicated reader/preceptors and protected, mandatory curricular time contribute to a safe space.