

International Education through the Erasmus Programme: A Nurse educator's Reflection of Teaching in Istanbul University.

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Abstract.

This reflective article explores the purpose and significance of the Erasmus+ programme and examines the motivations underpinning my participation as a nurse educator. The paper reflects on the personal growth and professional development gained through participation in the programme, specifically in the role of a reflective teacher within an international university setting. Reflection is recognised as a structured approach to analysing experience and learning processes to enhance professional practice and self-awareness, particularly within education and practice-based disciplines such as nursing.

Several established reflective models are used within academic writing to guide critical reflection; however, this article adopts Gibbs' Reflective Cycle as the analytical framework. Gibbs' model was selected due to its comprehensive and structured six-stage approach, which enables systematic exploration of experience, emotional responses, critical analysis, and future action planning. Using this framework, the article reflects on key aspects of the Erasmus+ teaching experience, including cross-cultural engagement, pedagogical development, and professional identity formation.

The reflection highlights the value of international academic exchange in fostering reflective teaching practice, cultural competence, and professional confidence. The paper concludes by identifying key lessons learned and outlining actions to inform future teaching practice, thereby demonstrating the relevance of structured reflection in supporting continuous professional development for nurse educators within international contexts.

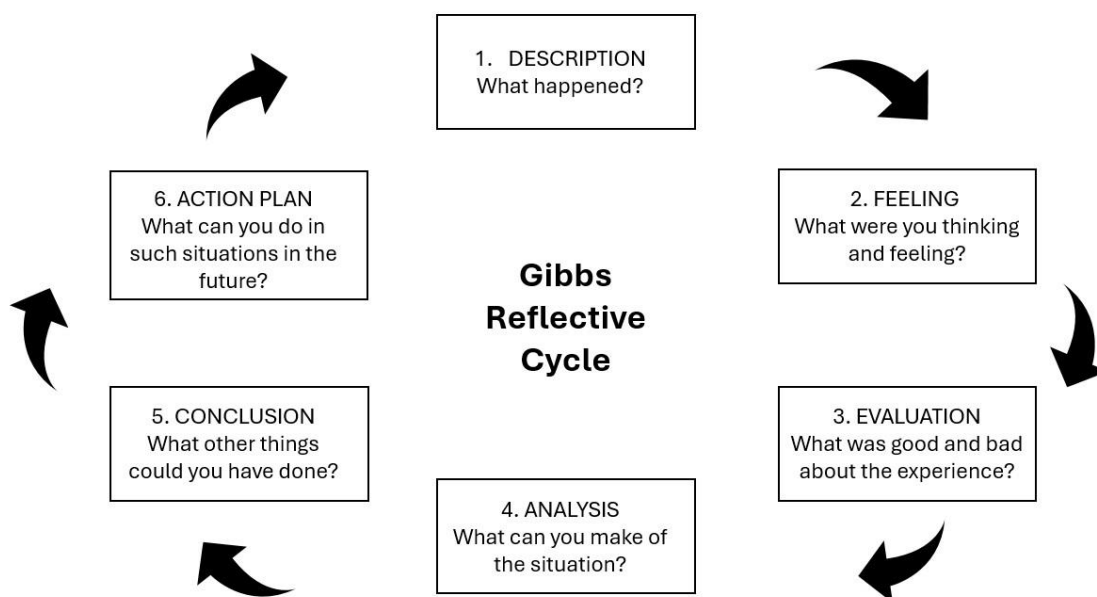
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1. Introduction.

This reflective article aims to explore the purpose and significance of the Erasmus+ programme while reflecting on the motivations behind my participation as a nurse educator. It also examines the personal growth and professional development I achieved through this experience, specifically as a reflection teacher in an international university.

Reflection is a structured way of analysing personal experiences and processes of learning to enhance professional growth and personal self-awareness. It is a popular form of writing used to develop deeper understanding of a particular topic mostly within the academic or professional environments. There are several reflective models developed to guide this kind of writing. Schön's (1983) model is an approach where thinking is done during and after an event, which are often used in practice-based fields. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) highlights four-stage processes which include: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988) has six stages of reflection, which are; description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. Driscoll's "*What?*" Model (1994) uses three (3) questions: "*What?*", "*So what?*", and "*Now what?*" to simplify reflection. While Johns' Model (1995) uses guiding questions to enhance critical thinking. Each of these models provides structured methods of reflective writing, while also promoting critical analysis.

For this reflection, Gibbs' Reflective Cycle was chosen because it is structured to capture the educator's experiences entirely. It has six stages: Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion, and Action Plan (Helyer, 2015; Taylor, 2017). The six stages of this reflective cycle demonstrates the Erasmus+ experience, and conclude with lessons learned from the experience.

Figure 1: Gibbs reflection cycle.**Figure 1. Gibbs Reflective Cycle, adapted from Gibbs (1988).**

2. Description.

Scholars have acclaimed the Erasmus+ programme to be a consequential endeavour for advancing global education and facilitating cross-cultural interaction (European Union, 2017; Di Pietro, 2015). The programme, which is an initiative of the European Union, was established to provide an avenue for teachers, students, and staff to gain international experience by volunteering to teach, study, or work in regions outside their home countries or countries where they are currently based. The Erasmus+ programme has been widely recognised for its immense benefits, including skill enhancement, employability boosts, and enhancement of cross-cultural understanding (Di Pietro, 2015). The European Union (2019), has facilitated over two million participants, including students and staff members from various geographical locations, to partake in the Erasmus+ programme.

My reasoning to participate in the Erasmus+ programme was inspired by the exposure and experience I had gained in my career as a nurse educator. It was not a decision I made lightly; it took me five years of teaching at an Irish university to build the confidence required to volunteer for the programme. Although I had always been aware of the opportunities and

benefits the Erasmus+ programme could offer, I chose to prioritise my nursing educator's career and focus on my professional development. I believed that this would enhance developing essential skills such as teaching techniques, classroom management competencies, and effective communication. I strongly believe these skills are required for imparting knowledge and students' engagement.

I felt I had accumulated sufficient knowledge and experience to take on the role of an international educator, and winning the "*Best Educator of the Year*" award in my Higher Education Institution (HEI) further solidified my confidence to participate in the Erasmus+ programme. This recognition reassured me that I had made a meaningful impact within the Irish educational and healthcare systems. It also fuelled my ambition to contribute to HEI within or outside Europe, through the Erasmus+ Programme.

The Erasmus+ programme offers participants the flexibility to choose institutions either within or outside Europe. As a nurse educator, the decision to participate was also driven by a desire to step out of my comfort zone. I deliberately avoided selecting a country close to Ireland, where the cultural environment might have been too familiar. Instead, I opted to educate at a university in Istanbul, Turkey, a marked different culture from my HEI. My primary objective was to foster a meaningful bilateral exchange by sharing insights from an Irish perspective on nursing education while simultaneously enhancing my personal and professional growth. I also saw this as an invaluable opportunity to test myself by teaching in an unfamiliar environment, surrounded by people from a different culture and background, and thus gather new nursing education experience.

3. Feelings.

This experience offered me an avenue to step out of my comfort zone and explore more opportunities in my career as a nurse educator. Significantly, I have had a moment of reflection on the immense impact which the programme has contributed to my personal and professional growth, including acquiring an international teaching experience, building invaluable relationships with international students and practitioners, and imparting a new facet of knowledge which was uncommon in an academic environment.

The programme was a transformative experience that I had initially deemed a valuable opportunity and I was keen on participating in the programme from the very beginning, especially because it afforded me the opportunity to engage in instructional exchanges that

plays a formative role in moulding me into a professional praxis, while also exposing me to a wide spectrum of viewpoints.

4. Evaluation.

Opting for the teaching mobility option instead of observational mobility was an intentional decision that I made prior to the time, simply because of my strong belief that teaching offers more benefits. I was of the opinion that through teaching, I could impart knowledge to the students, while also learning from my engagement with students and colleagues from a different culture and academic environment. I imagined this as a give-and-take situation where I could bring in a different perspective and also gain useful insights from fellow teachers, and even students. The Erasmus+ programme created a platform where we were able to have meaningful conversations and share different perspectives on methods of teaching, expertise, and ideas of best practices in nursing education. This experience enriched my understanding and also affirmed my belief about education being a shared and continuous process.

Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, aligns with my view on disorienting experiences as opportunities for perspective transformation. While my previous achievements bolstered my confidence, my aim was to undergo transformation by venturing beyond the confines of my comfort zone.

5. Analysis.

Earlier on in the programme at the application and registration stage, I discovered that reflection was not a concept included in the syllabus of the nursing education curriculum of the university, I was planning to visit. As a nurse educator in HEI with direct experience and knowledge of the benefits of reflection within nursing and post-graduate nursing education.

I perceived this situation to be an opportunity. However, it troubled me to realise that what I intended to teach was an entirely new concept, with the uncertainty of whether or not students' would embrace reflection. I now had the opportunity to introduce an important aspect of nursing, that plays a huge role in building self-awareness and equipping professionals to analyse their individual performances, using a broader ethical and professional reflective cycle framework. I took up the task, not only as an opportunity to teach the students but also a rare chance to bring in a new concept into their nursing curriculum programme.

As part of the Erasmus+ programme, my classes were integrated into the students' eight hours extracurricular activities, and fully focused on the introduction of reflection as a teaching concept, with emphasis on its crucial role in clinical practices. My teaching style leans towards Esterhuizen's (2019) perspective, which describes reflection as a process of self-analysis that is used for improving one's awareness of the root causes of events and the development of those causes. This shows reflection can be adopted as a transformational tool because it can be used to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical, real-life experience. That said, reflection cannot be properly done without an active involvement and critical thoughts with which meaningful insights are gained. It is also useful for both students and certified practitioners, as it helps them improve their clinical practices and make better professional judgments. The class was taught in English language, however one of the University lecturers agreed to interpret if there is any language difficulty.

Looking back at my time in Istanbul University, I am able to deeply connect with Helyer's (2015) opinion about reflection being a tool with which an individual can evaluate the effects of their actions on other people. This thought process resonates with my personal belief that reflection in nursing practices is not just a skill; it is a professional requirement, which empowers nurses and nurse educators, thus enhancing professional nursing practice. It can be adopted to equip nurses to challenge ethical dilemmas and to improve quality of healthcare, and promote best evidence based practice. Integration of reflection into the nursing curriculum also enhances metacognition, while also promoting better healthcare outcomes for patients (Tashiro et al., 2013; Asselin & Fain, 2013).

During my teaching, I explained the theoretical aspects of reflection, as well as its relevance in practice, motivating my students to always evaluate their own attitudes, actions and behaviours, so as to become better professional practitioners. Aside from teaching the students, as an educator, I also took out time to reflect on my performance after delivering each lecture. I spent time assessing the content of my discussions with the students and also mapped out ways to improve on myself. This practice helped me ensure that I was not only teaching my students, I created time to reflect on my own practice.

In addition, my interactive lectures aimed to address what appeared to be a limited emphasis on reflective training, while supporting students in engaging more critically with their learning. This became an important focus of the lessons I delivered during my Erasmus+ exchange, where I utilised a range of interactive learning strategies to encourage engagement and

introduce the value of reflective practice. Students' participation, thoughtful questions, and emerging signs of reflective awareness suggested that these sessions may have contributed to addressing a potential gap while broadening their educational perspectives. Their interest in further instruction also indicated that reflection could benefit from greater integration within the nursing curriculum.

This exchange consequently enabled meaningful reciprocal benefits bringing a new teaching focus to Istanbul University while also strengthening my own instructional capacities and global outlook. This affirms arguments that teaching abroad fosters intercultural awareness, adaptability, and commitment to lifelong learning (Resnik, 2008).

The lectures conveyed core concepts regarding reflective practice and allowed the students to directly experience self-reflection-in-action. At the end of the Erasmus+, students' feedback indicated they had gained significant insight into the relevance of reflection for their professional identity and effectiveness as future nurses. Many reported feeling better equipped to question their own assumptions, view situations from different perspectives, and continuously improve through ongoing self-analysis. The lessons gained also helped normalise discussing mistakes or uncertainties about certain practices in nursing, a shift that students said could open the door to greater collective learning.

6. Conclusion.

Participating in this programme has been one of the most enriching experiences of my professional journey. The Erasmus+ experience has strengthened my resilience and enhanced my cross-cultural awareness, adaptability, and teaching competence. The programme also aligned with my goal of sharing knowledge, broadening my worldview in becoming a more culturally responsive and globally oriented nurse educator. Providing me the opportunity to navigate cultural unfamiliarity with patience, openness, and resilience. This taught me the value of diversity and its role in building mutual understanding and broadening perspectives.

Engaging with nursing students in Istanbul University was rewarding, their enthusiasm for reflective practices shows the need to integrate it fully into their programmes. Discussions with my Turkish professional academic colleagues did not only show me the differences in curricula and teaching methods but also revealed our shared commitment to building fundamental professional values that transcend cultural, geographical and institutional boundaries.

7. Action plan.

On reflection, I have a deeper sense of purpose and appreciation for cross-cultural collaboration, given me the determination to embrace new challenges with courage. I have also developed the commitment to educate more aspiring nurses on reflective practice in nursing education. This experience, has confirmed my long-held belief in the necessity of stepping out of one's comfort zone to impart meaningful changes in nursing practice and education around the world. I look forward to integrating my newly gained insights into building a culture of reflection that equips future nurses especially in regions where reflective approach is not popular.

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