Reflecting through learning communities:
A unique opportunity to provide instruction while maintaining student openness

E. Michael Powers MBA, Amy E. Fleming MD, Quentin Eichbaum MD, PhD, MPH, MFA
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY
School of Medicine

Background

Medical students have matured in a system of competitive grading and assessment; therefore, creating an atmosphere where students can be honest without fear of judgment is a major barrier to genuine reflective writing.

Research on reflection suggests that students have conflicting concerns related to reflective learning, simultaneously desiring privacy and personalized feedback.[1]

Learning communities may provide a unique venue for addressing these needs, because they promote an environment of trust and bonding between mentors and students.[2]

In 2011, VUSM initiated a reflective writing curriculum through the College Colloquium consisting of six written reflections that were read by learning community mentors, who provided individualized feedback.

Hypothesis

We hypothesize that the student-mentor bond provides students with a level of comfort and trust needed to communicate openly in a faculty-evaluated reflection. Simultaneously this bond ensures that faculty members are invested enough in student development to provide the judgment-free feedback students desire.

Methods

An online survey was conducted to quantifying students' characteristics and attitudes toward reflections and mentors.[3]
- General attitudes toward reflection
- Self-reported introversion/extroversion
- Openness at the first reflection
- Openness at the last reflection
- Change in openness over the year
- Impact of reflections on trust and closeness of student-mentor relationships
- Quality and usefulness of feedback

An online survey was administered to faculty mentors that assess the following:[3]
- Self-reported introversion/extroversion
- Openness of students
- Change in openness over year
- Impact of reflections on trust and closeness of student-mentor relationships

Results

Did your willingness to be honest in your reflections change as the year progressed?

- Much less willing
- Somewhat less willing
- Neutral
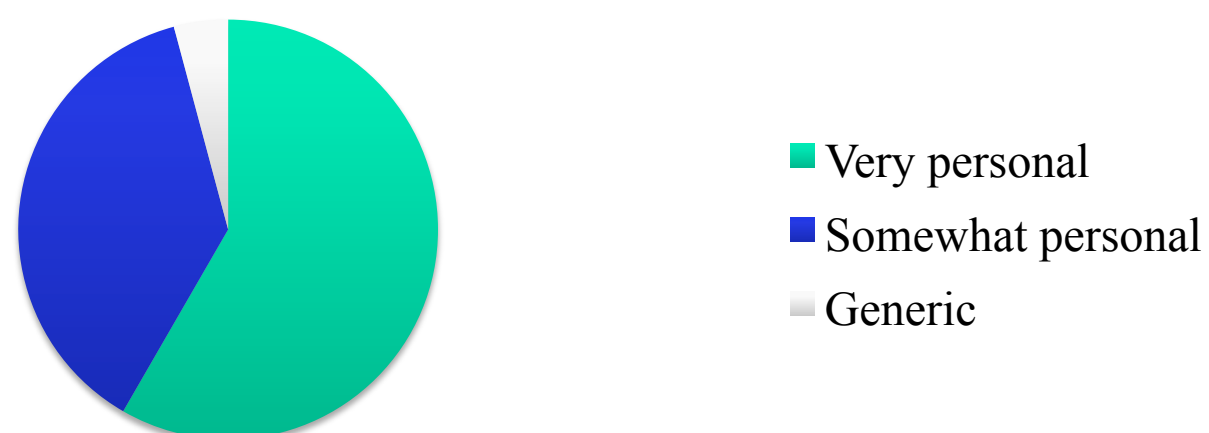- Somewhat more willing
- Much more willing
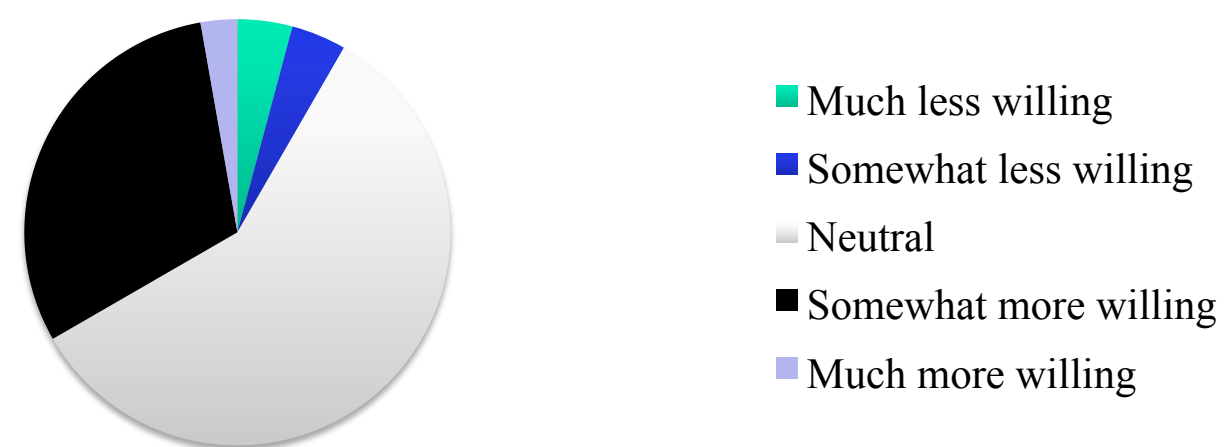
When writing the 1st reflection I was worried my reflection might negatively affect my college mentor's opinion of me.
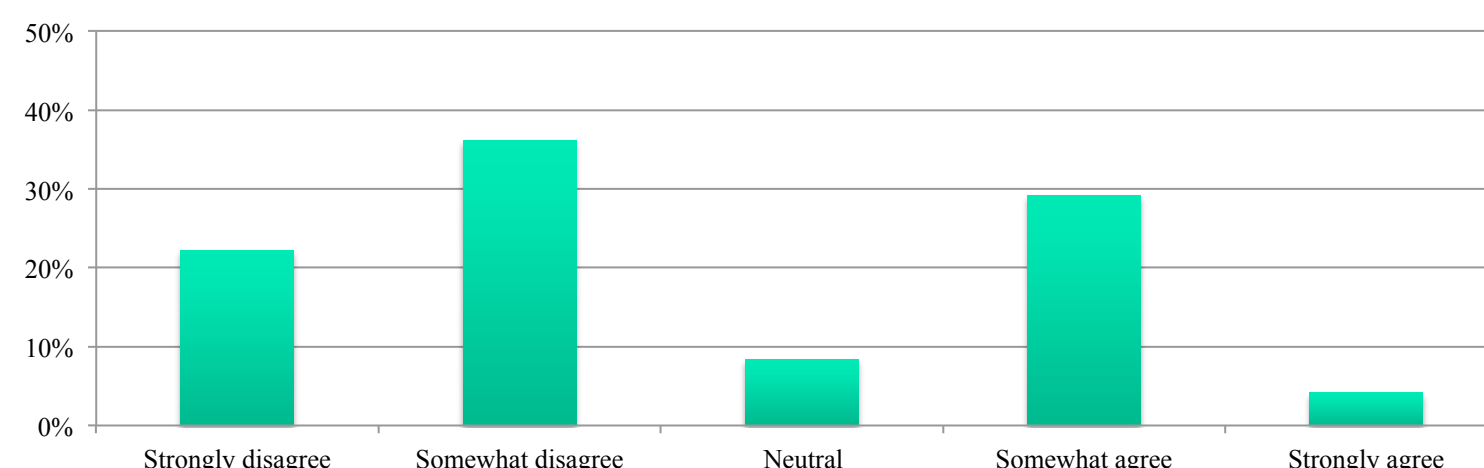
When writing the last reflection I was worried my reflection might negatively affect my college mentor's opinion of me.
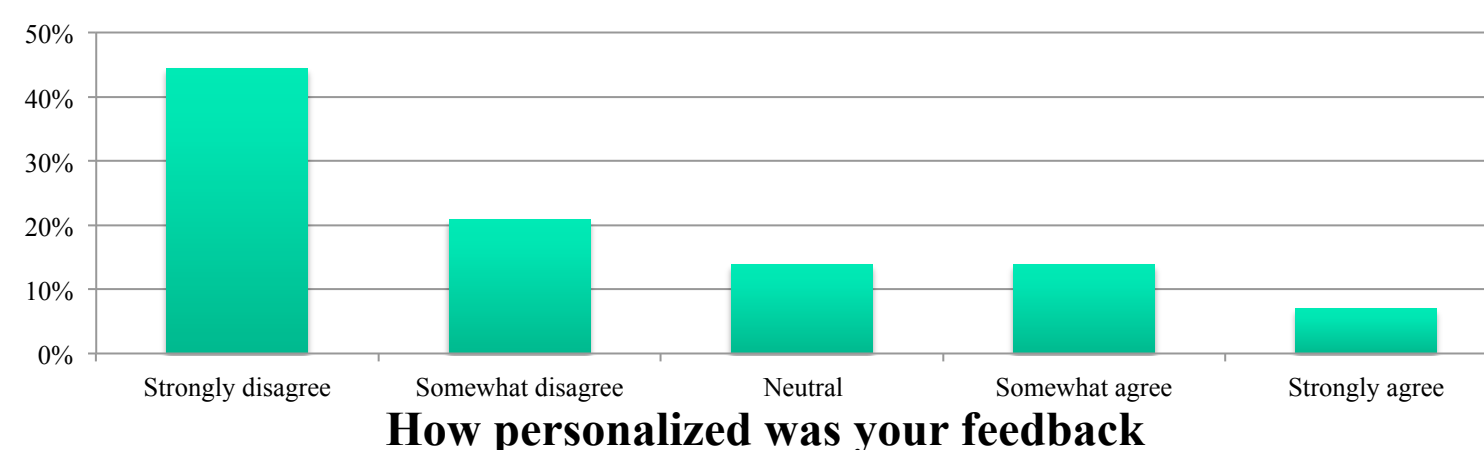
How personalized was your feedback

- Very personal
- Somewhat personal
- Generic

Results

- 72/104 students responded to survey (69%)
- 8/8 learning community mentors completed survey
- Data internally consistent and balanced
- Self-reported Introversion and extroversion NOT related to opinion of reflections or any other variable
- Gender differences
  - Men report talking more in colloquium (p<.05)
  - Women reluctant to share were more concerned with sharing personal information, men were more concerned with mentor perception (NS)
- A majority of students and faculty felt reflections increased the closeness (65%, 100%) and trust (65%, 88%) in the student-mentor relationship
- 64% of students report mentor feedback as helpful in improving their reflections
- Students overwhelmingly (94%) did not want to read written reflections aloud in group settings, preferring written reflections read only by their mentor
- 48% of students stated they would prefer to reflect verbally without writing compared to 40% who prefer written reflections

Discussion & Conclusion

Although written reflections are not universally enjoyed by medical students, a majority of students feel it deepens trust and improves the closeness of the relationship with learning community faculty who read their reflections.

Learning communities appear to overcome key barriers to genuine reflection by creating an atmosphere of trust and the personal investment required to ensure personalized feedback.

Some students remain reluctant to share their reflections citing concerns that the mentor may think less of them, a dislike of reflective writing, and disinterest in sharing personal reflections with their mentor.

References & Acknowledgements

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2. Rosenbaum, ME Schwabbauer M, Kreiter C, Ferguson KJ. Medical students' perceptions of emerging learning communities at one medical school. Acad Med. 2007 May;82(5): 508-15.
3. Vanderbilt Institute for Clinical and Translational Research grant support (UL1TR000011 from NCATS/NIH)