

# LETTERS FROM OUR REFLECT CORRESPONDENT

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During the project we gradually built a framework of principles and guidelines on how to facilitate reflection in formal and non-formal education, starting from the needs analysis (see the section in the introduction titled ‘scope of the project’). These principles and guidelines were written down as a series of 10 letters, in the form of essays to be read one per day. In this way, we aim to slow down the pace of reading and allow ideas to sink in differently (compared to a more academic text of similar length). Just before finalising the publication, we decided to add one more letter. Or actually, it’s more of a post scriptum connecting the framework of principles and guidelines with the idea of inner readiness. This last pages serves as an appetiser, so to speak, of what’s still to come.

## LETTER 1

## WELCOME TO PROJECT REFLECT

Dear reader,

This is the first posting out of a series of ten you that will receive daily from today onwards. Slowly these postings will tell you about our perspective on facilitating reflection processes in both formal and non-formal education. Bit by bit they will build up a set of principles and guidelines. However, it’s important to realise from the very beginning that these are not developed as step-by-step didactics, to be applied rigorously in order to guarantee certain reflective output at the end of your course. Rather, all of this should be understood as a **framework of principles and guidelines which need to be ‘translated’ (i.e. examined closely and if needed adjusted) into your practice as teacher or trainer.** When doing so, we believe you will create a fertile learning environment for reflection to ‘happen more spontaneously’. In order to exemplify how (some of) these principles and guidelines have already been put into practice, we will add to these letters several stories about the testing projects that were run in both formal and non-formal education settings during REFLECT.

As you will read within a few days, ‘slowing down’ is an important aspect for reflection to occur. That’s why we would like to ask you to **read these postings in a slow manner.** We suggest that you read them when you’re not busy arranging babysitting for the children, sending mails to colleagues and preparing your course for tomorrow. Really take some time for considering the writings more thoroughly. And while reading, be attentive to how you relate to the writings: what’s new compared to your own experience as an educator? What do you possibly already recognise? Which paragraph, sentence or word

seems to arouse your interest? Which further thoughts and associations are elicited? Notice what's going on in your mind... and maybe even this invitation is not appealing to you. So be it. Just read it then the way you want to.

Some short explanation is needed about the vocabulary used in these postings. When talking about *principles and guidelines*, the former are about general ideas (expressing the vision of where to go) while the latter are about practical applications (expressing how to get there). All principles are important and therefore need to be put into practice by applying them with guidelines. But the list of guidelines is not meant to be exhaustive, nor will they be always and everywhere applicable due to cultural and organisational differences. They are more of a kind of suggestion how to translate the principle into practice: practical pointers so to speak, based on our own experiences. And sometimes it may be necessary for you to invent other guidelines which are still expressing the 'spirit' of the general principle but at the same time fitting better to your specific context. Secondly, the terms educator and learner are used in a rather formal way. *Educator* refers to teacher as well as trainer, *learner* to both students and participants. The terms refer to the formal role one takes in education. However, as will become clear later on, we do not want to fix the position nor the attitude of the educator and learners during the reflection process. Quite on the contrary, we strongly advocate to understand **educators and learners both as participants in the educational experience: they are both taking part in the learning process, i.e. co-constructing as well as getting involved in the experience that leads to learning.** However, when quoting authors directly, we will be using their terms. Thirdly the term *learning group* is referring to both the classroom- and outdoors-setting. Finally, we have always used the pronoun 'he', although this obviously does not exclude 'she'.

Let's start writing something about reflection itself. In the last few decades, reflection has been defined in a lot of different ways. Each definition goes along with a specific methodology on how to foster reflection (Schön, Kolb, Korthagen, Mezirow, Boud...). With project REFLECT we are not aiming to add a new definition nor a corresponding methodology. Rather we hope to explore a **specific perspective on the relationship between reflection and inner readiness and, as already mentioned, a corresponding framework of principles and guidelines to facilitate reflection processes.** This perspective and framework can be beneficial to, and integrated, into already existing methodologies in both formal and non-formal education.

So how reflection actually 'looks like', can be different depending on the methodology applied. And it may not be a surprise to you that also between the 8 partner organisations of REFLECT similarities and differences exist concerning their understanding of reflection. Nevertheless, after our first project meeting in January 2015 in Ghent (Belgium) we created a broad and generic description of reflection:

*“ Reflection is a multi-layered process of identifying, clarifying, exploring “that-which-is-at-stake”. It's a process in which one goes deeper, making connections and meaning, gaining insights between different meaningful 'events' (in the broadest possible sense, both internal and external to the reflecting person). As such it leads one to*

*greater awareness: you become more conscious about your relationship with yourself and/or with the outer world. Therefore, reflection is stimulating for personal growth and/or professional development.”*

During the project we also came to stress the difference between reflecting and thinking. One general way of explaining this difference is the following:

*“ Reflection involves the whole person, connecting more body and mind so to speak: thoughts, feelings, values, intuitions and experiences are taken into consideration when reflecting. It’s a more holistic process whereas thinking is a more rational process, relying solely on logical reasoning (e.g. problem solving by straightforward, objective cause-and-effect-reasoning). Therefore, reflection is usually indicated by some kind of emotional intensity in which learners demonstrate the connection between themselves and that-which-is-at-stake (the actual topic of reflection). This intensity can sometimes be expressed only in their non-verbal body language. As thinking involves more logic and rationality, this emotional intensity is usually missing.”*

With this distinction, we don’t want to argue that one is better than or preferable to the other in learning processes. But their educational value is different and should not be confused, as sometimes happens. In his research on the efficiency of reflection in formal education, the Dutch educational researcher Tom Luken states explicitly how the quality of reflection in formal education is moderate to bad due to several factors. One of them is how the reflection assignment is unintentionally leading learners to a merely rational way of ‘solving a problem’ or ‘becoming better’. As such the responses of learners appear to be superficial, focusing more on an objective description of the problem and logically responding to it (instead of, for example, exploring more broadly the relationship between themselves and the situation). Therefore, these ‘reflection assignments’ do not lead in most cases to actual ‘learning’, marked by a change in the way they think, feel or act. After training several decennia people in the Core Reflection-methodology Korthagen and Vasalos (2009) mention as well how reflection “does not function well if the person reflecting uses it as a purely mental exercise: in each stage, thoughts, feelings and needs (or desires) have to be addressed, and brought into full awareness”. As you will notice, this distinction between reflection and thinking is at the basis of many of our letters, although in a more implicit way. In posting 7 we will return to this distinction more explicitly.

To all of this we’d like to add one more remark to conclude this first letter. According to us, reflection is an important catalyst for so-called *deep learning* which means that learning results have to be personally meaningful and significant to learners. In this respect, *depth* does not mean ‘more profound’ or ‘better’ comparing to other learning approaches (which then supposedly by contrast could be labelled ‘superficial’). Rather *depth* refers in this context essentially to a learning approach that brings the personality of the learner, his ‘internal’ experiences, feelings, values, intuitions and/or assumptions into the range of awareness and thus make them available to meaningful learning. As such, and this is crucial, it

does not make sense to use reflection for other aims and other approaches. Reflection find its maximum gain when being part of a student-centred learning approach, which first makes explicit, and then adjusts, their frames-of-reference which determine how they perceive themselves, others and/or the (both personal and professional) world(s) they live in.

Sincerely yours

*Your REFLECT correspondent*

This letter was informed by the following writings:

Korthagen, Fred & Vasalos, A. (2009). From reflection to presence and mindfulness: 30 years of developments concerning the concept of reflection. *Teacher education*, 1-17.

Luken, Tom. (2010). Problemen met reflecteren. De risico's van reflectie nader bezien. In Luken, Tom & Reynaert, W. (2010) Puzzelstukjes voor een nieuw paradigma? Aardverschuiving in loopbaandenken. Eindhoven-Tilburg: Lectoraat Career Development Fontys Hogeschool HRM en Psychologie, 9-34.