

Dear reader,

By now you have read all there is to say about REFLECT's framework of principles and guidelines for creating a reflective atmosphere. It may be clear that the educator plays an essential role in all of this. At the end of his chapter, Ringer states explicitly how one key characteristic of the educator stands out for creating reflective space: **“the intrinsic capacity to hold inside oneself a durable reflective space that stands up to the inevitable challenges that occur in the life of most groups”**. This is essential to consider, as it implies the following: if the educator is able to hold the reflective space within himself, he will be able to hold it for the learners and the learning group too. Or to put it another way: there would be no reflective space without an educator willing and able to co-create it with his learners. And we would like to add one more essential remark to this: neither will there be a reflective space when learners are not willing nor able to co-create it with their educator! So, educator and learners are dependent on each other and interconnected in a very fundamental way.

This deserves some white space...

Why they are so dependent on each other for creating a reflective atmosphere and space? **Call it the chameleon-effect which comes down to ‘what you give is what you get’.** When the educator lets his learners experience trust, openness, empathy and transparency, when he demonstrates a dialogic, inquiring attitude and when he’s attentive to direct learners’ process by deepening questioning, learners will at a certain point start mirroring these qualities, attitude and attention back to the educator. This mirroring does not imply that they should exactly copy the educator (in the sense of replicating his ideas, qualities and actions, please don’t!), but rather that learners have themselves ‘modelled’ by a specific kind of mimicry, comparable indeed to a chameleon adapting to the colours of his environment. Please notice the passive construction of the previous sentence: ‘have themselves modelled’ indicates that this

is generally more an unconscious process of adaptation. One could say that learners become influenced by the educator's qualities, attitude and attention, additionally by his particular way of being present as an educator. And at a certain point they start taking it over, transforming it meanwhile into a personal way of being present.

But this is not the end, because then the educator in turn will start adapting himself to the qualities, attitude and attention of the learners. So further on 'in the life of the group', as Ringer says, educator and learners evolve to a continually fine-tuning to affect each other. It's a kind of dynamic interplay so to speak, which enables them to steer together the learning process in the direction needed for the aims of the course. As if they are dancing partners who are continually reacting to the dancing of the other and passing the lead between each other. This is how the circle of interdependence and interconnectedness fully closes.

We would like to define **this particular way of being of the educator as a 'reflexive presence'**. In the dictionary 'reflexive' has several meanings, but we limit ourselves here to two meanings. Firstly, it means **'marked by or capable of reflection'**. In this respect it refers to the ability of the educator to hold the space for reflecting about that-which-is-at-stake. The second meaning of the word brings us to social theories. There reflexivity refers to circular relationships between cause and effect: the cause leads to an effect which become the cause of the effect and so it goes on. It's a phenomenon whereby, according to the dictionary again, things are **'directed or turned back on themselves'**. "A reflexive relationship is bidirectional with both the cause and the effect affecting one another in a relationship in which neither can be assigned as causes or effects. [...] (Therefore), reflexivity comes to mean an act of self-reference where examination or action 'bends back on', refers to, and affects the entity instigating the action or examination" so one can read on Wikipedia. When the reflective space becomes operational within the learning group, leading to this associative, free-wheeling flow of ideas about which Ringer was talking, it's not clear any more (nor is it important) to be able to distinguish what's cause and effect within the process of reflective enquiry.

So, the 'reflexive presence' shows us how the educator is not only capable of holding the space and reflecting himself, but also an understanding of how this affects the overall atmosphere in the learning group and the individual learners. It's the so-called 'first stone' from where the reflective atmosphere will be co-created. So, if the educator sets the appropriate reflective tone, learners will tune into it and start mirroring it back, resulting in an increase of the qualities, attitude and attention needed for reflection. As a result **learners gently model themselves as well as being modelled by the reflective atmosphere into a similar reflexive presence.**

This brings us to the final conclusion: it's not just about having the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to facilitate the reflection process (although they are very well needed of course), it's also about the **inner readiness as an educator to connect with your learners in a reflexive way in order to feasibly raise their inner readiness to reflect** (and here the adjective 'feasibly' is really important. We'll come back to this in the chapter on inner readiness)

This leads us to a short elaboration of some important qualities of the reflexive presence of the educator (not an exhaustive list):

Trust

Our staff member Angelica Paci gave an inspiring description of the quality of trust: “Trust is about trusting the potentiality and capability of learners to engage in the learning process in a meaningful way. It’s rather a general, overall kind of trust. As such it has not that much to do with the more specific expectation if learners will meet the established standards or not. This broad trust is not related to the ‘pass or fail’ issue.” A similar idea is expressed by the already-quoted Rudi Laermans (2012) about his classes of sociology at the dance school: “Trust is actually the cornerstone of each instance of pedagogical communalism. The teacher has trust in every student’s ability to respond to the issued invitation to become part of the eventually generated common; and the students trust the teacher that the proposed thought object is indeed a worthy one, and that s/he will be instrumental in the sustainment of the created intellectual togetherness.”

Openness

Within Kamaleonte, one of the partner organisations of REFLECT, Theory U by Otto Charmer proved to be a very inspiring entrance to the idea of the reflexive presence (see the chapter on the development of the concept of inner readiness as well as their workshop on inner readiness and theory U, as written in the inspiration box). On the topic of openness, Charmer (2009) distinguishes three levels of the human psyche so to speak: open mind, open heart and open will. And to be open and/or to create openness one needs to practice ‘generative listening’: being receptive and open to the thoughts, feelings and deepest layers of involvement of oneself and others. He concludes by stating that “effective listening requires the creation of open space in which others can contribute to the whole.” Therefore, openness goes hand in hand with a non-judgmental attitude towards learners: you accept the different answers they give, tune into them and direct the learning process further. And this acceptance and tuning-in does not imply that you always agree with learners, you simply don’t correct them. You take the answers for what they are. Also this doesn’t mean you should not have judgements (we all obviously have them), rather that you suspend your judgements (for a little while). Correcting and judging always involve a hierarchical relationship which most of the time is not beneficial for creating a reflective atmosphere.

Empathy

Empathy is needed especially when educators are asking their learners to expose their more personal thinking, feelings and experiences in reflections. Empathy can generally be described as the ability of the educator to truly understand the learner. Fred Korthagen (2009), founder of Core Reflection

for training educators, stresses for the educator to be attentive for verbal and non-verbal behaviour of the learner. “The educator puts his feelings and opinions aside and moves himself into the feelings of the (learner)”. This should result in the learner feeling himself fully understood by the educator. Consequently, the emotional safety to express oneself increases a lot. Furthermore, so Korthagen continues, empathic responses on behalf of the educator can function as an eye-opener. They function “on the emotional level where there’s often a clue for further exploration of the quintessential question or of the learner’s problem. (Empathy gives) space to the feeling and when this is expressed, it can get another meaning.”

Transparency

Transparency involves the ability of the educator himself to be open towards learners, to share his own thinking, feeling and experiences. It’s important to stress here one needs always to be careful not to impose these. Really share your thinking, feelings and experiences as being equal to the learners’, leave some space for them to ‘take or leave them’. Maybe it will prove to be of value to their learning process, maybe not. And if so, allow them to think differently. Furthermore, it’s equally important for the educator to be congruent in front of his learners. If you say you’re interested in the ideas expressed by one of the learners, but you don’t look and act interested, it leads to incongruence. One needs to keep the coherence between what one says and what one does, between what one asks his learner to do and does himself. So, how do you deal with ambiguity and not-knowing as an educator in front of your learners?

Curiosity

In the sixth posting on deepening the questioning we already mentioned the importance of the educator’s curiosity. Being curious about how learners see, think and feel about that-which-is-stake is a powerful engine for process-oriented exploration and enquiry. Jef Clement (2015) describes the profits of curiosity in others as the following: “when someone is genuinely interested in and starts exploring your ideas, your questions, your plans or your problems, your openness and willingness to show yourself increases”. The bottom line is that curiosity expresses the involvement of the educator in the learning of the learner. And by being involved yourself, you consequently affect learners to become involved themselves.

Attentiveness

When facilitating reflection, we have noticed ourselves how we sometimes become very focused: ‘What are the objectives of reflection and what should the learning outcomes be? What could the most useful questions be for initiating and processing the reflection? Which methods are best for activating, for example, different profiles of intelligences?’. When exaggerating, this focus on external aspects narrows the educator’s attention, risking the loss of

contact between himself and the learners. In order to avoid this, we propose to practice a process-oriented attentiveness which will give the answers to your questions by focusing on what's happening within the learning process: "What are learners actually talking about? In which direction is the dialogue evolving? How are they balancing 'inside' and 'outside'? How does all of it fit to the development of the learning group?".

Sincerely yours

Your REFLECT correspondent

This letter was informed by the following writings:

Clement, Jef. (2015). *Inspirerend coachen. De kunst van dynamisch en uitdagend communiceren*. Leuven: Lannoo Campus.

Korthagen, Fred, Bob Koster, Ko Melief & Anke Tichelaar. (2009). *Docenten leren reflecteren. Systemische reflectie in de opleiding en begeleiding van leraren*. Soest: Uitgeverij Nelissen.

Laermans, Rudi. (2012). *Teaching Theory and the Art of Not-Knowing. Notes on Pedagogical Commonalism. Krisis, journal for contemporary philosophy*. (1). 63-74.

Ringer, Martin. (2008). *Group Action: the dynamics of groups in therapeutic, educational and corporate settings*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Scharmer, Otto. (2009). *Theory U. Leading from the future as it emerges*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.