

LETTER 2 ON CREATING A REFLECTIVE ATMOSPHERE

Dear reader,

It's generally assumed that learners already know how to reflect or will learn it quickly by simply doing it. As a consequence, little to no effort is given to teach learners how to reflect properly: educators just give the reflection assignment and learners are supposed to fulfil it easily. However, research indicates that most **learners don't know by themselves how to reflect properly**. So the question seems to be how to teach learners to reflect well? Generalising one could say that most educators would advocate classical didactics, i.e. he first teaches about reflection in a theoretical way, students have to understand and integrate this knowledge and only then can they begin to reflect. When the reflection process is too structured, this approach risks that reflection is understood in a manner that is too rational, eliciting often merely logical thinking whereby learners don't connect their thinking, feeling, intuition and experience properly.

That's why REFLECT wants to propose another approach, a more indirect didactic by not teaching learners anything at all, but slowly letting them 'grow' into reflection by **facilitating what we would like to call a reflective atmosphere**. We have modelled this term from a base of Martin Ringer's work. In his *Group Action: the dynamics of groups in therapeutic, educational and corporate settings* (2008) he talks about **the reflective space as some kind of attentive reflectiveness** which at certain moments becomes present. To be clear, this reflective space has no physical form whatsoever. It is, according to Ringer, on the contrary a tangible and precarious phenomenon, to be experienced when **associative chains of thoughts and feelings appear spontaneously**. What's actually happening at those moments? According to us, learners are taking some distance from that-which-is-at-stake due to the attentive reflectiveness. They are constructing 'on the level of thought' some open space, so to speak. In this respect Ringer talks about an 'unconsciously held internal companion' with whom learners can have a conversation. As a consequence, answers are not that easily taken for granted any more, that-which-is-at-stake is looked at from different perspectives and thorough questioning begins. Learners don't consider things in a logical, linear way of thinking any more, but in a more open, associative and holistic way of reflecting. At this point it's also important to notice that this reflective space is not merely an individual phenomenon, but a collective one as well. And both are essentially interdependent of each other: the conversation with one's internal companion is fostered by the conversation with the companions in the learning group (be it the educator or other learners) and vice versa. According to us, this highlights the importance of the group as an essential factor for stimulating reflection processes. Therefore, we propose not to focus solely on the relationship between educator and individual learner, but rather on the triad relationship between educator, learner and group. It also highlights how, in our view, the educator becomes, in a way, less important: the reflective space will start doing its work for the learners, even without the educator and in spite of all his knowledge on the topic and/or his expertise to facilitate reflection.

You have probably noticed a small difference in wording: while Ringer talks about the ‘reflective space’, we mentioned in the beginning of the previous paragraph the word ‘reflective atmosphere’. Although closely linked, both terms are not interchangeable. The reflective atmosphere refers to a more general climate within the learning group, to the general way the educator and learners interact with each other. The reflective space (as that tangible but nonetheless precarious phenomenon) solely points to the specific moments when attentive reflectiveness has appeared and learners express their thoughts and feelings in a more open and associative flow. As such, the reflective atmosphere is quintessential for the reflective space to actually occur.

Interestingly, Ringer does not mention didactics nor methods as essential factors for building the reflective space, but he rather stresses the capability of the educator to reflect himself (i.e. the capability to take some distance and to question things differently himself) and to facilitate the psychology of learning processes in groups: “when the leader successfully facilitates secure containment and effective linking (within groups), groups are likely to support the development of reflective spaces. Leaders who themselves have a robust capacity for sustaining their own reflectiveness are likely to be able to facilitate reflectiveness effectively in their group.” We’ll come back to these qualities of the educator in the penultimate letter. Here we just want to make the point that the reflective atmosphere cannot be ‘constructed’ by any tricks, methods or teaching didactics applied by the educator, but can only be developed slowly and authentically within the learning group by both educator and learners by taking care of some crucial conditions for deep learning. After long talks we have summarised these deep learning conditions as following:

1. Raising awareness within learners to ‘own’ their learning in personally meaningful way (it is not about taking over the expertise of the educator!)
2. Developing a relationship between educators and learners based on trust, openness, empathy, transparency, dialogue and feedback
3. Co-creating the reflective process
4. Managing to keep up the steering paradox of intrinsic learning processes
5. Directing the reflective attention of learners
6. Slowing down and valuing moments of not-knowing
7. Deepening your questions progressively
8. Recalling that reflection can never be imposed, only kindly invited
9. Always considering reflection as a broad, deepening and holistic process
10. Being careful how to assess reflection (or not at all).

These conditions are at the same time the general principles of REFLECT’s approach on how to facilitate reflection processes and we will come back to them more extensively in the next letters. At this point it suffices to state that creating an appropriate reflective atmosphere is about facilitating a

particular way of being present during the course for both educator and learners, a way of being together that is conducive to that reflective attentiveness about which Ringer talks. That's why the primordial focus of the educator should **not be narrowed to directing content solely (i.e. teaching), but rather broadened to directing the 'surrounding' conditions of learning processes** in order to enable a reflective way of being. Ringer is very explicit in this matter: "leaders who provide too much information or interpretation too soon will reduce the reflective space in the group." This kind of facilitation is called **process-directivity**: it's about the educator being attentive all the time and responsive to the process of both the learning group and the individual learners as they develop.

Sincerely yours

Your REFLECT correspondent

This letter was informed by the following writings:

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.

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

Suggested reading related to 'creating the reflective atmosphere':

We will conclude most of the letters to come with a short list of suggested reading. These should not be taken as readings to 'explain' the topics discussed more deeply. Most of the time they just have a general link to the topics, as the literature review within our project pointed out. So they basically really are just tips for further reading.

Andresen, L., Boud, D., & Cohen, R. (2000). Experience-based learning. *Understanding adult education and training*, 2, 225-239.

Boud, D. (1994, May). Conceptualising learning from experience: Developing a model for facilitation. In *Proceedings of the thirty fifth annual adult education research conference* (pp. 49-54).

Aronson, L. (2011). Twelve tips for teaching reflection at all levels of medical education. *Medical teacher*, 33(3), 200-205.

Mann, K., Gordon, J., & MacLeod, A. (2009). Reflection and reflective practice in health professions education: a systematic review. *Advances in health sciences education*, 14(4), 595-621.

Baker, M. (2005). Landfullness in Adventure-Based Programming: Promoting Reconnection to the Land. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 27(3).