

Dear reader,

Since the beginning of the century, reflection became a real hype, especially in formal education. It became integrated in curricula and applied in courses by teachers just too enthusiastically. As a consequence, so the research of Dutch educational scientist Kinkhorst demonstrates, "students have to fulfil too many reflection assignments whether appropriate or not, whereby they start to dislike reflection, making it into a mandatory routine with few results." Also in non-formal education participants complain of too many reflection activities during debriefs, possibly also at a moment experienced as being inappropriate to them. **When reflection is 'imposed' by the educator, learners soon start to experience this as a kind of reflection coercion and will most of the time withdraw themselves:** they don't engage in the reflection process anymore, give it much less effort. It becomes just one more 'assignment to fulfil'.

**Authentic reflection requires the development of a personal point of view on the topic, a deep insight or felt sense in which learners connect thoughts, feelings, values, intuition and/or experience.** This can only be done appropriately when learners 'plug into' their intrinsic motivation for learning. Therefore, **the principle of 'owning up' is crucial to foster reflection.** To be clear, this 'owning up' has no connotation of guilt, in the sense of 'being responsible for something which went wrong'. It has, simply put, to do with the way in which learners make the reflection their own, i.e. connecting it to what they feel to be important for their learning process. When doing so, they start to fulfil the assignment and answer the questions not because the educator told them to, but rather because it's appealing for their personal and/or professional development. Therefore, it's important for the educator to **fine-tune with learners at the beginning which questions are relevant to them to pose right now, what evokes their attention and energy concerning the learning topic, and what makes sense for them personally here-and-now in their learning process.** For sure this will differ between individual learners, and so will the exact point within the timeline of the course when they find out about it. This kind of differentiation very much fosters the creation of the reflective space as learners experience the openness to be personally involved, to share their questions and at least partly co-decide with the educator which content is important to reflect upon.

Here we are at the heart of the **steering paradox of the intrinsic learning processes: the educator needs to steer the learner to the point where the learner steers himself.** He cannot take over the steering control, nor can he let go of it completely as he is (co-)responsible for the learning process of his learners within the educational context. This **balancing between steering and not-steering, controlling and not-controlling is the crucial factor in order to raise learners' inner readiness.**

It provides learners the freedom to relate to the knowledge, skills and/or attitudes in such a way that they can make them their own.... or not when they do not relate to it (for whatever reason). In any case, all of this points to a **fundamental reciprocity in the relationship between the educator and the learner** concerning what, when and how to learn: if he wants them to learn intrinsically, he cannot impose his learning agenda on them. He can only 'invite' them in all possible ways to be personally and intrinsically involved in the learning process (and for sure this 'invitation' should sometimes be a firm one, a kick start so the speak). At the end it's always up to the learner to acknowledge the invitation (or not), after which the educator can continue to facilitate the learning process from that point onwards. So finally, balancing the steering paradox is about finding a common ground between educator and learners about the reason and goal to meet.

This underlines, according to REFLECT, **the importance of the reflective atmosphere as an indirect approach (not a method!) to stimulate reflective and intrinsic learning.** In themselves reflection assignments or debriefs are (most of the time) not the problem as such. More likely they are often too linear, functionally organised and the educational context in which they are presented makes them intrinsically unappealing to learners. For example, asking for a compulsory reflection report at the end of the course or internship without previous engagement with reflection, transforms the assignment into some kind of evaluation which blocks the reflection process. Although some learners may connect to it in a personal meaningful way in spite of the educational context, many will only engage from extrinsic motivation in order to get a grade. That's why it's essential to integrate the reflection assignments within the 'larger' reflective atmosphere. Reflection will not be experienced as a compulsory task separate to the rest of the course, but rather as something which is happening by itself. Asking for a reflection report at the end of the course would then be perceived as being in line with the whole course, within the reflective atmosphere, and will connect more easily with their intrinsic learning (as they were already used to be present in the course in this way).

This leads to the following guidelines to deal with the steering paradox of intrinsic learning and fostering 'owning up':

**1. Be attentive and responsive to learners' reactions.**

E.g. You notice how learners react, both individually and collectively, on what's happening in your course. It reveals their (lack of) interest in certain topics within your course. Follow these cues as all of this links with the idea of 'owning up'.

**2. Try to 'personalise' the questioning to something which makes sense to learners individually.**

E.g. 'what have I learned?' can be perceived as too generic, needs to be personalised toward 'why do I feel attracted to this particular project of visual artist Renzo Martens?' or 'why don't I take the lead in this group, why is no one taking the lead in our group, even though it's clear for everyone that we do need a leader?'

**3. Develop assignments in an open way in which students can ‘personalise’ the output of the reflection task, both on the level of content as well as format.**

Multiple intelligence research clearly indicates how people reflect and process information differently according to their intelligence profile. E.g. someone with a strong kinaesthetic intelligence reflects better when doing something (like modelling clay), whereas someone with a strong interpersonal intelligence reflects better when talking to someone. Consider encouraging learners to propose an appropriate reflection assignment themselves at a certain point in the learning process.

**4. Stop reflecting, or don’t even begin reflecting, when the learning context is not appropriate** (e.g. bad timing, not enough input for students to reflect upon, too many (reflection) assignments, goals of the course don’t match the reflection task, students are not ‘present’ enough ...)

**5. ‘Start reflecting less, but in a better way’, so the literature review on efficiency of reflection in formal education by the Dutch educational scientist Tom Luken concludes!** [too many reflection activities ‘kills’ the flow of reflecting]

**6. Consider not mentioning the word ‘reflection’ immediately as it may become a barrier and raise resistance within learners** (due to the ‘reflection coercion’ they experience in some curricula). Just start questioning and conversing with learners, connecting with their curiosity and let them experience the appropriate reflective atmosphere.

Sincerely yours

*Your REFLECT correspondent*

This letter was informed by the following writings:

Kinkhorst, G.F. (2002). Routine reflecteren leidt tot weinig leerresultaat. *HBO-journaal*, 36-37.

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

**Suggested reading related to ‘the steering paradox of intrinsic learning processes and the importance of ‘owning up’:**

Freese, A. R. (2005). Transformation Through Self-Study. In *Making a difference in teacher education through self-study* (pp. 65-79). Springer Netherlands.

Korthagen, F., & Vasalos, A. (2009). From reflection to presence and mindfulness: 30 years of developments concerning the concept of reflection in teacher education. In *13th Biennial Conference of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI)*, Amsterdam.

Mortari L. (2012). Learning thoughtful reflection in teacher education. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 18, (5), 525–545.

Korthagen, F. A., Kim, Y. M., & Greene, W. L. (2012). *Teaching and Learning from within: A core reflection approach to quality and inspiration in education*. Routledge.

Smith, E. (2011). Teaching critical reflection. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(2), 211-223.