

Dear reader,

Learners often experience their relationship with educators as being hierarchical as the latter decide which content is important to learn, how the learning process should be organised and which final evaluation and grade is appropriate for the learning results. As such the learning process is basically centred around the expertise and the knowledge of the educator and is directed in one-way. Although these kind of relationships can be valuable for teaching certain knowledge and training certain skills, according to REFLECT it is not appropriate to create an adequate reflective atmosphere.

Rather, as already mentioned in the previous letter, we favour a less hierarchical, more **'two-and-more-ways-relationship'** between educator and learners in which they are equally important to each other (i.e. equally important concerning the possibility to decide what's important for the learning process). However, this equivalence does not assume that they have equal roles to play in the learning process (in general it can be said that the educator is mainly facilitating the learning process, the learner is mainly involved in learning). We believe such relationships can only be built with a base of **mutual trust, openness, empathy, transparency, dialogue and feedback between educator and learners**. These are big words that are easily written down, but really have to be put into practice one way or another, as they are quintessential qualities which help to develop the reflective atmosphere within the learning group. For one thing, these qualities let learners experience how the educator is receptive to their ideas and feelings (as well as the other learners of course). They do support, connecting again with Ringer, "not only talking about ideas and feelings, but also support the participant actually *having* these ideas and *experiencing* the feelings". When failing to create these qualities and relationships in the learning group, it "not only prevents the voicing of ideas, but also seriously inhibits the thinking of ideas and the experiencing of emotions".

The bottom line is that all of this comes down to **developing a kind of 'interconnectedness'**, so Ringer states, assuring sufficient linking between the many parts of the learning group as a system (educator, learner, group-as-a-whole, task, role, place and time). When these connections are positive and directed to the learning purpose, at certain moments they will start to form the reflective space which "at the same time is 'taken inside' [...] by group members and nurtured by them. Once the reflective space has begun to form, it is accompanied by a growth of participant attachment to the group and a sense that 'the group is working' grows as thinking and feeling in and between group member takes the form of associative chains." Quite interestingly, Ringer mentions as a first indicator that the reflective space is operational in a group is the moment when the educator "him or herself experiences an attentive alertness that welcomes input from the group". However, this attentive alertness is on its own not enough. The

second indicator according to Ringer is the occurrence of **an associative flow of ideas without any intervention on the part of the educator**: “the group conversation is relatively free-wheeling so that not every idea expressed is deliberately linked with the one before it”. What’s happening at these moments is that learners start to feel addressed by that-which-is-at-stake. This links with the idea of the Belgian educational scientist Jan Masschelein about how education should “ensure that you feel addressed to by something, or that things get authority. Not ‘authority’ as power, but authority rather as ‘something that speaks to you/is meaningful to you’.”

This leads to the following guidelines to take into consideration:

1. **Participate in the reflection process yourself.** Question your thinking in front of the learners, or allow learners to question your thinking. Become a learner among learners (at least at some times during the course).
2. **Explicitly value the input of the learners.** Especially when a new element or perspective is introduced by them.
3. **Direct dialogue in such a way to include different learners’ points-of-view.** Don’t let the conversation get fixed one-on-one, nor let the dialogue be centred around your knowledge and expertise as an educator, but stimulate learners to dialogue with you as well as with each other. As such this will strengthen their awareness of being a learning group and they will benefit from the collective intelligence.
4. **Make space and time during or at the end of the learning process for genuine feedback between you and the individual learner and/or within the group of learners.** Feedback is not about evaluating and assessing in a one-way direction (from the educator towards the learner), but is a two-way dialogue in which learners can take the ownership of the feedback process, both as ‘transmitter’ as well as ‘receiver’ (or not...).

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.

Masschelein, Jan & Piessens, Ann. (2013). Op school ontdekken nieuwe generaties de wereld. *Qua Jong* (2), 2-6.

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

**Suggested reading related to 'the relationship between educator and learners':**

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

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.

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

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