

Dear reader,

When giving an assignment or simply asking a question to learners, educators sometimes have the right solution or answer already in the back of their mind as they have 'deduced' the answer from the 'bigger story' they want to teach. Accordingly, they will evaluate the answers of learners by comparing them to this 'right answer'. When the aim is simply transferring knowledge or training skills, this can be very valuable: the logic that underpins the right answer can be easily explained and understood. However, **when it comes to personal reflection, you cannot as an educator expect any kind of 'right answer' deduced from the bigger story.** Reflection is a different way of creating knowledge compared to logical thinking. For one thing, it processes (at least partly) information unconsciously in contrast to logical thinking that processes information consciously. Tom Luken (2010) links important consequences to this distinction:

" [...] conscious thinking covers only a small part of the capacity of our brain. Unconscious processes have much more capacity. According to Dijksterhuis [...] we can process unconsciously 200 000 time more quickly comparing to conscious processing. The conscious works serial whereas the unconscious brain works with parallel processes. The conscious brain should necessarily limit itself to a few aspects, whereby there is always a certain arbitrariness. [...] The conscious thinking is inclined to use logic, also for questions, paradoxes and dilemma's that can't be answered with logical thinking. One of the consequences is that in order to get to a solution inconsistent information gets 'pushed away', whereby the eventual decision is based on a distorted representation [of reality]."

According to us this different way of processing is essential for reflection to get to deep personal learning. So it's of the utmost importance for the educator to allow these unconscious, parallel brain processes to start functioning. He can do so by **directing the reflective attention in the learners' mind.** They should not focus on chasing quick, logical and/or problem-solving answers, but rather **slow down and take time to question the assignment or question thoroughly from a deep, personal level: "what's my personal 'right answer'?"** Most of the time, this answer will not be clear from the very beginning ('it's not a quick yes or no'), but will rather unravel itself through enquiry during the learning process. So directing the reflective attention is essentially asking learners to start questioning and considering that-which-is-at-stake more broadly and from different perspectives.

In this respect it is interesting to mention that the word 'attention' is connected with the French verb *attendre*, which means 'waiting'. Two remarks need to be made here. Firstly, it's important for the educator not to close down this process of questioning too soon by providing definitive statements or interpretations. "Exploration is stifled when participants or the leader jump in with hard and fast answers," Ringer mentions (2008). "When there appears to be

only one answer to any question, no further space exists for curiosity or enquiry, with a consequent loss of the reflective space. Therefore, any person who consistently makes definitive statements about what is true in the group will potentially close down the reflective space. In particular, leaders who respond to the group's implicit request to tell them what is going on, will reduce the room in the group for open reflection and enquiry. Thus, leaders who provides too much information or interpretation too soon will reduce the reflective space in the group [...]."

Secondly, reflection-as-a-kind-of-waiting also implies that one should value moments of not being sure and not-knowing. In this sense, talking about Socrates' maieutics, the Dutch author Jos Kessels (2006) is accentuating how **"in a certain way you need to lose your mind... in the conversations of Socrates this not-knowing – the moment of indecision, the recognition and experience of your own ignorance – is a condition to gain genuine insight."** This not-knowing helps, according to Kessels, learners to progressively unfold a good quality dialogue with themselves, constructing 'poetic arguments' (quite different from 'logical reasons' as you can imagine).

When reviewing the pedagogy of his theoretical seminars on sociology at the international renowned dance school P.A.R.T.S. of Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker in Brussels, Belgian professor Rudi Laermans (2012) talks as well about the importance of not-knowing: 'doing theory [at P.A.R.T.S.] differs from just learning or instructing [at the university]. For the accent now decisively shifts to the living encounter between theoretical concepts [...] and the students' co-thinking. Theory thus changes from a firm body of knowledge into a verb, an open dialogical practice that again and again faces its own contingencies. This 'thinking aloud together', with or against particular ideas, initially aims at a heightened awareness of, e.g., the socially constructed and intrinsically complex nature of phenomena [...]. Yet when the teaching really goes in the direction of 'doing theory' a collective situation emerges in which something genuine may happen because the public thinking of both teacher and students leaves behind canonical problems and validated answers, willingly becomes uncertain, and deliberately takes the risk of ending up in a zone where [...] the experience of not-knowing is openly affirmed. A theory class may thus open up a common space for possible reflection that never closes off the sense for 'the possible': no definitive Truth can stop the public process of inquisitive questioning."

We would like to conclude these paragraphs by referring once more to Ringer (2008) who states explicitly how "the reflective space is supported by a tolerance for and space for not-knowing (and) enquiry [...]."

This leads to the following guidelines:

1. **Look for an appropriate context for 'slowing-down the pace of learning'.** This may include: the physical setting (e.g. a pleasant environment that could be related to the topic to reflect upon, learners able to look at each other etc); being patient and allowing moments of silence after questioning (instead of continuing teaching or giving the answer immediately) and splitting up the learning group to reflect in small groups or individually.

2. **Don't go along too easily with very obvious and straight forward answers from learners.** A quick 'yes or no' only reveals their attempt to assimilate the question to their prior knowledge. Just continue your questioning a little bit further to go 'deeper'. Play the so-called devil's advocate and put forward the complete opposite point of view, or 'con-front' learners with their circular way of reasoning.
3. **Allow yourself as educator to express moments of not-knowing.** This is linked with the idea of becoming a learner among learners yourself.
4. **Allow and value the learner's moments of not being sure and not-knowing.** Don't evaluate moments when the answer is not given (quickly enough), as that something has gone wrong in the learning process. This is linked with the importance of trust and emotional safety within the relationship between educator and learners.
5. **Keep your assignments and questions as educator 'open'.** Don't have the right answer in the back of your mind.

Sincerely yours

Your REFLECT correspondent

This letter was informed by the following writings:

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| <p>Dijksterhuis, A. (2008). <i>Het slimme onbewuste. Denken met gevoel</i>. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.</p> <p>Kessels, Jos. (2006). <i>Het poëtisch argument: Socratische gesprekken over het goede leven</i>. Amsterdam: Boom Filosofie.</p> <p>Laermans, Rudi. (2012). Teaching Theory and the Art of Not-Knowing. Notes on Pedagogical Commonalism. <i>Krisis, journal for contemporary philosophy</i> (1), 63-74.</p> | <p>Luken, Tom. (2010). Problemen met reflecteren. De risico's van reflectie nader bezien. In Luken, Tom & Reynaert, W. (2010) <i>Puzzelstukjes voor een nieuw paradigma? Aardverschuiving in loopbaandenken</i>. Eindhoven-Tilburg: Lectoraat Career Development Fontys Hogeschool HRM en Psychologie, 9-34.</p> <p>Ringer, Martin. (2008). <i>Group Action: the dynamics of groups in therapeutic, educational and corporate settings</i>. London: Jessica Kingsley.</p> |
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Suggested reading related to 'directing the reflective attention and valuing 'attendre' & not-knowing':

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