

Dear reader,

In the previous letter we proposed to slow down the pace of reflection. This helps prevent quick, logical and sometimes obvious answers to that-which-is-at-stake. Authentic reflection needs time to look at things from a broader and deeper perspective: for a certain kind of waiting in order to be able to explore the limits of what you already know and what's beyond in the realm of not-knowing: to lose one's mind (as Kessels puts it). As it's an important aspect of creating a reflective atmosphere, we would like to continue today to write something more about directing the reflective attention of learners.

**Questioning is obviously an important tool for educators to direct the reflective attention of learners.** Generally, it should help you and your learners to enquire more in depth that-which-is-at-stake. Several strategies are possible. For example, don't be satisfied with short, general answers which usually come up first. Dig a little bit deeper in order to get a more nuanced or detailed view on the underlying arguments, assumptions or values, which let learners answer the way they do. Sometimes even a simple 'is it really like this?' followed by some silence, can do the work (at the same time this is an invitation from the educator to 'own' the question by the learner). Secondly, when you are discussing the theory of a certain author, just asking tentatively how they connect his ideas to their personal experiences will direct attention to the learners' personal frames-of-reference. Another possibility for deepening the process is to introduce the opposite perspective (by yourself, or by referring to another author, or by giving extra attention to a remark from a learner with a different point of view). This can be fruitful when learners are agreeing very quickly on one particular way to look at that-which-is-at-stake. Doing so, you should be careful not to get (too quickly) in a 'what's right or wrong?' dialogue when introducing a different perspective, but rather try to encourage open minds, suspending their judgments and to really begin exploring. A final questioning strategy we want to mention here is to stimulate learners to question each other as well: 'is it clear for you what Mark is saying now? What do you think about Mark's point of view? Is he not saying the opposite to you?'

However, when deepening the questioning in the learning group, you should be careful not to impose your questioning too much. Find the balance by being attentive on how learners react to your question, also non-verbally: "do they take the question to go deeper? Or not? Why could that be? Have I questioned them too much? Is the questioning maybe less relevant to their learning process? Or are they just in a lazy-Monday-morning-mood?". Maybe the following metaphor can help you to find this balance: **questioning and answering can be understood as a spontaneous process of flooding new land.** By questioning you are digging a bed or watercourse for the water to run into. An essential fact is that the water should not be limited to the bed, but has the possibility to inundate and fertilize the surrounding environment. So, by questioning you are not building a preconceived structure of dams

and canals to control the water completely, but rather you are engaging in a sort of spontaneous evolving play with the low and high tides of the stream. **Questioning this way requires you to be very clear on the learning context and goals of your course** (which content, which goals, which engagement?). It's determining a sense of direction for the reflective process and function as a kind of 'point of validation' for questioning: which questions make sense, which do not? The learning context lets you know where to start digging riverbeds.

At this point of balancing, we would like to add an important pitfall. Understanding reflection as creating personal meaning and insight can lead educators to question the personal level too exclusively. As a result, **learners are focusing too exclusively on their thoughts, opinions, feelings and experiences without taking the surrounding context (sufficiently) into account, or to put it more generally, 'the bigger world'**. They are getting trapped within themselves as their attention is directed solely to the internal world of the subjective 'I'. We would like to name this with a self-invented word the '**pitfall of subjectification**'. This is especially the case when one understands our central concept of inner readiness merely as some kind of internal process in learners that needs to be changed, regardless of the outside world. To avoid this pitfall, it's important for the educator to balance the learner's attention for what's going on within the 'subjective inside' with what's going on in the 'objective outside'. This 'objective outside' can be understood both literally (e.g. how other people are reacting within a certain situation, what's actually happening, the task to be fulfilled etc) as well as symbolically (e.g. the practices of other artists as presented by the lecturer or the discourses about good and bad art as written down in a book). As such personal meaning and insight are not the outcomes of a solipsistic process of looking solely at oneself. On the contrary, for developing a genuine reflection process, it's essential to relate the 'I' with the 'World'. Or to put it in the words of Volkmar Mühleis, as he described in his testing project for REFLECT: "The interiority of the person should not be the only focus, but also on stimulating affections (from the outside world as well) [...]. 'Inner readiness' is about an opening to the world, not about a 'key' in the person itself. One might say: the key to the inside lies in the outside." And it speaks for itself that the opposite pitfall is possible too: **'objectification' happens when learners pay attention too exclusively to what's going on outside themselves without relating properly to themselves** (as when they only think logically and are personally detached for example).

In all of this, and this is important to underline, deepening your questioning is not that much about asking continually more and more complicated and sophisticated questions. Rather, it's about exploring more in depth how learners look at that-which-is-at-stake (be it themselves, be it the world in the broadest sense of the word as 'theory' can also be understood as a 'window' to the world). As a consequence, we take to heart the advice by Jeff Clement (2015) for building a reflective space: don't bother too much with good or bad questions, but rather **use your interest in learners as the motor of your questioning**. Be curious to know about how they see, think, feel about that-which-is-stake and let your interest and curiosity guide you

spontaneously to your next question. In this way your questioning will be explorative and process-oriented. Principally the effect will be that learners start questioning thoroughly that-which-is-at-stake, to really start dialoguing with their internal and external ‘companions’ by taking some distance from their first thoughts and feelings. In doing so they will naturally start building the space to reflect within (simultaneously individual and collective). That’s the reason why we propose to **let their attention become reflective in a more spontaneous way, i.e. not by instructing or imposing, but by directing it to deepen their learning process.** In this respect, the receipt of an answer is as essential as questioning itself: take learners’ answers for what they are. Avoid (always) judging them as being right or wrong, but understand them as possibilities to tune into ‘stance’ where learners are in their learning process.

This leads to the following guidelines to take into account:

1. **Balance and be diverse in your questioning:** questions directed to the ‘subjective inside’ versus ‘objective outside’, conforming/comforting vs confronting, short vs long questions, questions for one individual vs questions for the whole group etc. Alternate between open and closed questions in a chain of continually widening & narrowing. Too many open questions can lead to chaos, whereas too many closed questions lead to limitation.
2. At some points let learners take over the lead from you. **Allow learners at certain points to create and/or choose the relevant questions for themselves, here-and-now** about that-which-is-at-stake.
3. **Be careful with rhetorical questions.** Rhetorical questions are valid of course to let learners find out the educator’s perspective on that-which-is-at-stake. But as they imply an answer that is already known, they don’t leave space for learners to reflect personally. Rhetorical questions are not explorative and by nature content-directed: they want to transfer knowledge. Too many rhetorical questions that are generally spoken undermine the openness of the reflective space.
4. **Frame your question in such way that it fits to what learners are talking about** (both on the level of content and process). Try to have your questions ‘tuned into’ their learning process without imposing your learning agenda. Take into account the learner’s reflective competence.
5. **Let the dialogue be co-created** and never forget it’s not only about questioning. It’s also about answering: allow silence after a question and wait for what’s happening (don’t respond with an answer yourself and don’t continue to question too quickly); explicitly value the input of the learners; reply to their answers as a learner yourself; add some new content to look at the topic from a different point-of-view; don’t judge their answer (too quickly) etc.

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.

Mühleis, Mühleis. (2015). REFLECT case study: Reverse Perspective, report testing project not published.

**Suggested reading related to 'deepening your question progressively':**

Baker, A. C., Jensen, P. J., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Conversation as experiential learning. *Management Learning*, 36(4), 411-427.

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

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.

Marshall, J. (1999). Living life as enquiry. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 12(2), 155-171.