

## LETTER 7 ON TRIGGERING REFLECTIVE PROCESSES

Dear reader,

**In both formal and non-formal education reflection is often organised as answering standardised questions after a practical course, internship or activity.** Typical questions are following: ‘how have you executed the task and what have you learned?’, ‘what went well/poorly?’, ‘what can you do differently and better?’. Within this framework reflection is understood in a very narrow functional way, generally speaking: you describe a problem, think logically about it and then you’ll find a good answer to solve the problem (or when there is no problem, how to get even better). Research shows however that this procedure doesn’t work most of the time. Firstly, the distance between question and answer in these standardised formats is just too short. Reflection is narrowed down to ‘remembering’ and ‘evaluating’, asking solely for linear thinking that can be too rational. The format does not engage learners to look at what was experienced in a more detailed way. Secondly, as a consequence, learners often experience these Q&A’s as writing down what they already know. Thirdly, reflection assignments are given to all learners at the same standard moments within the semester planning or at the end of the day at a non-formal course, thereby not taking in account the concrete and individual situation of learners (do they have enough input and personal experience to reflect properly at that time?) (Luken 2010 and 2011).

**According to REFLECT reflection is not just about ‘solving problems and becoming better’. It’s also about gaining insight in oneself and the world, eg. concerning one’s personal assumptions and reaction habits, the overall context in which one finds himself (be it at school or in an organisation), the linking between theoretical knowledge and reality etc.** So in this respect reflection is essentially about raising awareness (in the broadest possible meaning), both for personal and professional development. As such we don’t believe in standardised Q&A’s implying merely logical thinking. Rather we want to advocate a broad perspective on reflection connecting thinking with feeling, values, intuition and experience. This is needed if reflection wants to foster deep personal learning.

**In many cases the essential catalyst for deep reflective learning is not the way of questioning nor the theoretical models the educator is relying on. It’s something else, something that ‘triggers’ learners personally and intrinsically, something unexpected, powerful, maybe paradoxical and/or challenging.** Donald Schön writes in his cardinal *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) how reflection usually starts when something unexpected occurs, something that doesn’t fit into one’s way of understanding himself, others and the world. In *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning* (2004) Jennifer Moon reframes this idea by highlighting the importance of powerful experiences for the reflective process, experiences that are able to bring the learner to deep *emotional insight*, which “would seem to be characterised by the change of a particularly significant frame of reference that results in a considerable reorientation of many frames of references that

affect significant areas of life.” These quotes imply that it only makes sense to reflect when there is something to reflect about: some kind of experience that is challenging, confronting or puzzling learners one way or another.

On this point we would like to put forward a broad definition of the word ‘experience’. Although this word refers of course to experiential learning, it does not solely refer to climbing mountains or exploring caves. A strong ‘experience’ can also be understood, so we believe, as: getting a ‘challenging’ assignment to create something; as reading a book or even hearing a presentation by a lecturer. In terms of the material of learning, we propose that educators take care to create possibilities for this unexpected and/or powerful educational experience to happen. Of course there will be an important difference in this respect for formal and non-formal education in how to organise this. Generally speaking, we think it’s useful for both of them to organise the learning process in a non-linear way in order to increase the possibility for these strong experiences to happen more spontaneously. **Reflection occurs, so it seems, more easily when the content of the learning process is not over-structured by the educator.** That is to say: the learning process is not preconceived as a linear, logically developing story, but rather as a sequence of apparently loose elements required by educator and learners to create the so-called red line of learning themselves (this is also an important aspect of owning-up the learning process by learners).

We would like to add one more remark to conclude this posting. In his article on sense and non-sense of reflection in formal education the educational scientist Tom Luken (2010 and 2011) concludes with a clear statement: **start reflecting less, in a better way.** It only makes sense to engage in reflective practices when you have the possibility to facilitate the reflection process of learners, at least partly on an individual basis, so Luken believes. In line with his opinion, we also believe that creating a reflective atmosphere does not make a lot of sense if you have to teach big groups of learners without any possibility to engage individually with them, e.g. by talking to them during the lecture or by giving personal feedback. His remark also makes sense within other contexts, for example within the context of experiential education and its background in the thinking of Kolb. Participants sometimes complain about some kind of ‘reflection coercion’ when every ‘action’ needs to be followed by a ‘reflection’ as Kolb’s circle or reflection suggest when understood literally. When starting reflection in both formal and non-formal education educators need to be attentive to the willingness of learners to engage with it and, if needed, try to trigger or motivate them to do so. But if this is not working it makes no sense to impose the reflection as quality will be poor. So concluding this posting, we can summarize by saying that educators should only start reflecting when there is something to reflect upon and the conditions allow it to be done in a good way.

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.

Luken, T. (2011). Zin en onzin van reflectie. *Supervisie en coaching tijdschrift voor begeleidingskunde*. 28 (4), 153-166.

Moon, J. A. (2004). A handbook of reflective and experiential learning: Theory and practice. London-New York: Routledge.

Schön, Donald. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

**Suggested reading related to 'triggering reflective practices':**

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).

Hovelynck, J. (2000). Recognising and exploring action-theories: A reflection-in-action approach to facilitating experiential learning. *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning*, 1(1), 7-20.

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

Lucas, U., & Tan, L.P. (2013). Developing a capacity to engage in critical reflection: students' ways of knowing' within an undergraduate business and accounting programme. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38, (1), 104-123. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.569706>.

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

Hubbs, D.L. & Brand (2005). The Paper Mirror: Understanding Reflective Journaling. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 28 (1), 60-71.