

ANALYSIS OF EXISTING PRACTICES, CRUCIAL SOURCES AND RESEARCH ON REFLECTION IN HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION

Written by Daniela Frison, Monica Fedeli, Tino Concetta and Erika Minnoni (University of Padua)

With the support of Nancy Vansieleghem (LUCA School of Arts), Bjorn Vilhjálmsson (Askorun), Jan Leysen (Outward Bound België), Jolita Buzaityte-Kasalyniene (Vilnius University) and Bert Vandenbussche (LUCA School of Arts)

1. REFLECTION AS A GENERIC SKILL IN HIGHER AND ADULT EDUCATION

Within the framework of modernisation of the European Higher Education system, universities are invited to go beyond a knowledge-based perspective focused on disciplinary approaches, and to encourage generic skills and creative learning outcomes such as complex thinking, social skills, participatory learning, and personal shaping of knowledge (European Commission, 2013). This focus on generic skills also concerns non-formal settings.

In this framework, deep attention has been given in literature to the definition of generic skills, a definition that differs across disciplines, contexts and, sometimes, nations, as De Villiers states (2010). For example, Bennet, Dunne, and Carré (1999) define generic skills as those which “support any discipline (generic), and which can be transferred to a range of contexts, in higher education or the workplace” (p. 71) and Kearns (2001) explains them as skills “essential for employability at some level for most” (p. 2). Furthermore, Bridgstock (2009) underlines that these skills have also been variously named as core skills, key competencies, transferable skills or underpinning skills. Referring specifically to the European context, the Tuning Educational Structures’ proposal for the assessment of generic competences distinguishes three types of generic or transversal competences: the instrumental one, that are “means or tools for obtaining a given end”, the interpersonal one that “enable people to interact well with others”, and the systemic one concerning “the comprehension of an entire set or system. They require a combination of imagination, sensibility and ability to see how the parts of a whole are inter-related” (Villa Sánchez & Poblete Ruiz, 2008, p. 60).

Within the debate on definition, encouragement, and assessment of generic skills, reflection is recognised, under different labels (e.g. critical reflection, reflective thinking, reflective skill, etc.), as one of the most important competences for academic and professional life (Buiskool et al., 2010) and the Tuning’s model mentions reflective thinking among the interpersonal competences, identifying it as the recognition of “how we go about addressing a task or problem, and to take steps that will lead to growth in our way of thinking” (Villa Sánchez & Poblete Ruiz, 2008, p. 94). The richness of contributions about reflection in Higher and Adult Education, but also the different approaches and perspectives mapped by the literature and followed by the REFLECT group members in their practices, have oriented the strategy chosen in order to build a project definition of reflection.

2. THE REFLECT’S APPROACH TO DEFINE REFLECTION

2.1 Step 1: REFLECT’s problem & needs analysis

The REFLECT Erasmus+ Proposal takes place starting from the above mentioned recognition of reflection as one of the most important generic competences in learning processes, especially in formal education where it became a real hype since the turn of the century. At the same time research paradoxically shows that the quality of most reflection by students in formal education is moderate to bad (Kinkhorst, 2002; Pauw, 2007) and it doesn’t necessary bring forth the expected learning outcomes (Luken, 2010). We question here the reasons behind this, relying mainly on the work of the Dutch educational scientist Tom Luken (2010).

First, it is generally assumed that students already know how to reflect or will learn it quickly by simply doing it. As a consequence, little to no effort is given by lecturers to teach students on how to reflect properly (Luken, 2010). This explains why Kuijpers and Meijers (2009) state that “students hardly know what

it means to reflect: they don't connect the content of the course with themselves". Reflection "is experienced as a 'mandatory task'" (p. 7). Ironically even for lecturers themselves, good reflection doesn't seem very easy nor is it integrated in their professional functioning (Gulikers, 2008; Stokking, 2004).

Starting from this point, the REFLECT project was interested, firstly, in exploring and understanding *how to encourage an adequate learning (and reflective) environment* (Luken, 2015; Meijers, Kuijpers, & Bakker, 2006) where reflection is not about applying certain tricks, but considered to be the natural development of personal reflection processes (Luken, 2010; Verhofstadt-Denève, 1995).

Second, in formal education, reflection is often organised as a written assignment in which students have to answer standardised questions, such as: "how have you executed the task and what have you learned?", "what goes well?", "what can you do differently and better?", "how are you going to improve this, who or what do you need for this and what do you want to reach?" (Luken, 2010, p. 10). These questions are inspired by a functional way to define and understand reflection: the student is invited to describe a problem, to think logically about it and then to find a good answer to solve the problem. Furthermore, the partners of REFLECT link another aspect to this: this type of reflection is often assessed as a product, in terms of a correct answer. By using this way to assess reflection, it seems that the complexity and holistic nature of the reflection process are not taken into account, considering it only within a linear, causal, and logical thinking process.

This second point invited the REFLECT project to explore a reflection model which stimulates learning processes in their spontaneous, non-linear, non-cyclic, and hazardous way of being (Van Eekelen, 2005), as well as an evaluation system coherent with this approach.

Third, in her doctoral research Mansvelder-Longayroux (2006) looks at the use of reflection portfolios by 21 lecturers-to-be. Reflections in these portfolios can mainly be catalogued as "remembering" and "evaluating" ("what happened?" and "what do I think of it?"). Most of them lack other quintessential activities such as analysing, critical processing, diagnosing, and genuine reflection. She concludes that the use of reflection portfolios in this way doesn't stimulate the learning process in a fundamental way.

So, this third point invited the REFLECT project to explore a broader perspective on the quintessential aspects of the reflective process.

Fourth, Kinkhorst (2002) states that "students have to make too many reflection assignments where appropriate or not, whereby they start to dislike reflection, making it to a mandatory routine with few result" (p.36). As a consequence of this reflection coercion, students withdraw from the assignment: they don't engage in the reflection process anymore and give it as little effort as possible (Luken, 2010; Meijers, 2008).

So, this fourth issue invited the REFLECT project to understand *how to engage students in the reflective process*.

2.2 Step 2: Analysis of crucial sources and the practices

Starting from the four main points of the needs analysis, at the beginning of the REFLECT Project (January 2015) the staff members were asked to identify and share with their colleagues one "crucial source" that is a book chapter, an article or a report which represents a crucial reference in their research and practice, as well as to describe reflective practices they use or find inspiring in their own work.

2.2.1 The crucial sources analysis

Concerning the crucial sources, 15 of them were gathered: 12 articles (conceptual or empirical) and 3 practical documents (which referred to the description of practices involving reflection somehow). In this first phase, the collected crucial sources supported the staff group to identify some main issues related to reflection: the different theoretical and methodological background of studies or research on reflection and their different purposes which focus on specific contexts, targets, and practices and tools, as summarised in Figure 1.

Within the REFLECT Project, the staff group has analysed the main models of reflection offered by literature, in order to achieve a common and shared definition of reflection. Indeed, the models traced by Boud (1994), Mezirow (1991, 1998), Schon (1983, 1987), and by the phenomenological approach (Bleakley, 1999; Fay & Riot, 2007; Lewis & Farnsworth, 2007; Mortari, 2012) have been mapped and explored.

First, the Boud's model (1984) describes a way to think about learning from experience and how it can be facilitated. Briefly, Boud states that learning is always rooted in prior experience and any attempt to promote new learning must in some way take account of that experience. "Learners bring with them to

any event their personal foundation of experience[...]; it shapes the intent we have which guides our priorities” (Boud, 1994, p.2). Furthermore, he declares that the process of learning from experience involves learners in taking an active part in the process. Engagement and intervention are known as learning milieu (i.e. the social, psychological and material environment in which the learner is situated).

Second, according to the Mezirow’s model (1991), *critical reflection* has been developed as the major objective of adult education. Synthetically, Mezirow defines reflection as “the process of critically assessing content, process and premises of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience” (1991, p.104) and he identifies three forms of reflection:

- on content: a reflection on what we perceive, think and act;
- on process: a reflection on how we perceive, think, and act together with the assessment activity;
- on premises: a reflection on the premises foresees the awareness of the reasons why we perceive, act and feel in a specific way. We reflect on the reasons and consequences of some mistakes occurring during the process.

All three forms of reflection involve critique, but premises reflection is central to the empowerment and emancipation processes.

Third, by his model, Schön (1983) introduced the concept of *reflective practice* as a critical process in refining one’s artistry or craft in a specific discipline. He put reflection into the centre of an understanding of what professionals do. *Reflective practice* involves thoughtfully considering one’s own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline. The notions of *reflection-in-action* (which takes place whilst you are involved in the situation) and *reflection-on-action* (which involves a stepping back from the situation, meaning that it happens at some time after the situation has occurred) are central in Schön’s model.

A fourth model has been explored: the phenomenological one (Bleakley, 1999; Fay & Riot, 2007; Lewis & Farnsworth, 2007; Mortari, 2012). Literature concerning this model highlights that phenomenological practices enable one to stop, dissociate from inertia, change the perspective of attitude, and focus attention on the expression of the world in specific authentic experience instead of referring to common practices and authorities. Genuine motivation and personally meaningful activities are created as a result of such a pause. Passive and inert life is replaced by rational and free existence.

Beyond these four main and recognised reflection models, other approaches have been mentioned and explored by the staff members, above all related to the *experiential learning*. For example, the Kolb’s *cycle of experiential learning* (1984), the *Gestalt cycle of experience* (Thompson, 2013) and the Korthagen’s *model of reflection* (1982, 1985).

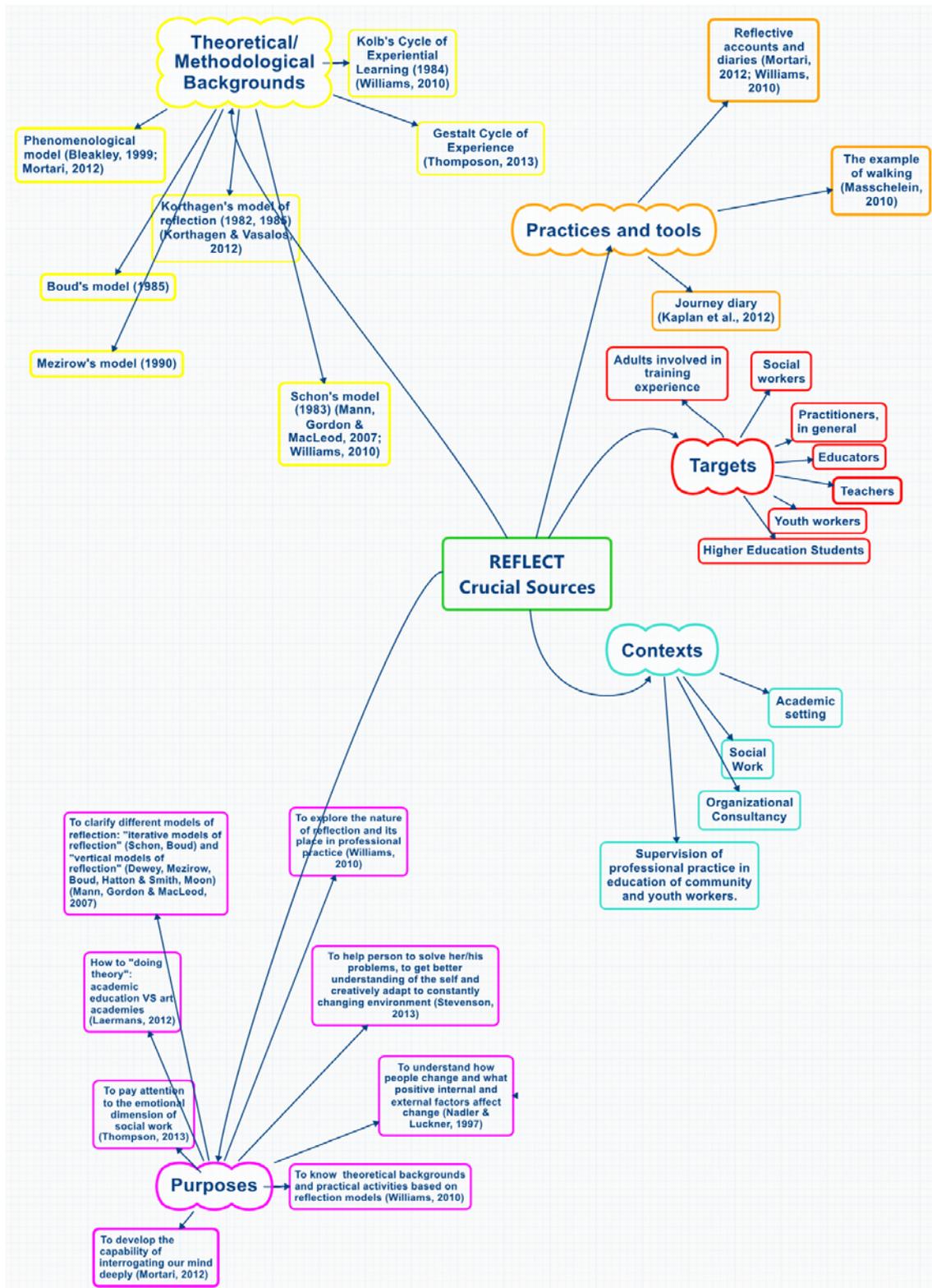


Figure 1 – Analysis of crucial sources: the "reflection map"

2.2.2 The reflective practices analysis

The collected reflective practices differ in style and content, but offer some common elements to analyse.

First, a *definition of reflection* comes up from the reflective practices collected by the group. Reflection, to a large extent, seems related to self-expression and learning in terms of making visible or increasing self-awareness for personal growth and change. It is described as an activity, an exercise, a course, a method, a tool... “a quiet solo time” in which personal experiences and inner (mental) processes are at stake, so as to observe, learn from them and change them. Expressing emotional experiences and feelings seems to be of crucial importance in most of the descriptions. The different practices mostly speak about reflection as an activity that allows the participant to look inwards and share feelings: becoming aware of different layers of our emotional being and behaviour, becoming closer to our emotional content, making interpersonal relationships visible, roles in the group, personal change, personal reactions in specific situations, wellness, etc.

In general, the goal is to recognise in oneself which driver behaviours or working styles make us act in a dysfunctional way, and to find in oneself the resources to make an effort to behave differently, resulting finally in the transformation of the reflection process into a personal action plan. It is all about developing a better reflective competence, to look at one owns’ emotions and to be able to name them as well as to name and share insights and learning.

Related to this, reflection is also seen as a “tool” or a possibility to increase one owns’ leadership style and self-management.

Finally, the practices refer to reflection also in terms of a possibility to remember, collect and arrange individual experiences and to share it with knowledgeable others who witnessed these experiences, and to discover commonalities. This sharing can be done, for example, through a diary or by talking in pairs or by talking in a group with the facilitation of the teacher/trainer.

Second, *conditions for reflection* and references to reflective strategies and settings are made explicit:

- Rich experiences and rich learning environments are suggested as important conditions; an atmosphere of tranquillity, safety and silence is asked where no form of judgment, or commenting on each other, are allowed.;
- A question, a topic, an exercise, a particular time or space activates self-reflection/gives direction to reflection (solo moments, slow down, silence time, diary, poetry, ...);
- The freedom of choice to explore or to reflect on that which makes sense for the practitioner himself. The word ‘invite’ is used a lot in the described practices;
- The guarantee that personal feelings, thoughts and reflections stay confidential and a place is offered where the group or the person cannot be disturbed;
- Small groups seem to make the participants more responsible for the process of reflection and their personal share in it;
- Special aspects that can be used for creating the atmosphere for personal thinking and helping to go into the reflective mode are e.g. music, retreating to the nature (on the bank of the river / lake), under a tree etc. Participants can be asked to be silent or they can be blindfolded;
- The physical space can also be used e.g. questions for the reflection are written in different places of the working room, or territory (on the floor, or even on different trees in the forest) so participants can move physically from one spot to the other, from one question to the other; participants can be asked to move in the labyrinth, around the chairs in a shape of horseshoe etc.;
- More than verbal exercises: different “tools” can be used to stimulate personal thinking, e. g. participants can be asked to make a drawing (self-portrait, symbol, life line etc.); to tell the story starting “once upon a time...”; to write a haiku; to choose a postcard, cards with figures, or photos; to model clay; to choose a metaphor; drama; sing a song; associative thinking mechanisms etc.;
- Providing a physical time and space for ‘slow down’ of sensory inputs - a place and time of silence and stillness... so that the participants may “hear and see” their experience as it is processed internally;
- Silence is also seen as a means of limiting the interactional “disturbances” or communication that inevitably arise when a group of people is close, for everyone to quickly discover the range and shades of opinion on an issue.

Third, *the crucial role of the facilitator/teacher/trainer* is underlined. Some practices highlight the relevance of the feedback given to the learner after he shared his thoughts. In some cases, it is “mirroring” in others – as noted in the observations provided by group members when they experienced the specific participant during joint activities. The facilitator/teacher/trainer is an important source of observations and feedback too.

He/she is someone who ‘(co-)creates’ a comfortable scene in which people are confronted with the lacunas of their own thinking and doing. Here the figure of coach is not someone who knows the answer of one’s inner problems, but the method to acquire insight to their inner needs and aims.

2.3 Step 3: from the Reflective Questionnaires to the focus groups

The crucial sources and the collection of reflective practices has underlined the variety of “ideas” and concepts of reflection spread between the REFLECT staff members, both in formal and non-formal settings. A more in-depth analysis of these “local concepts” was valuable in order to build a common frame on reflection and to design a literature review process strictly connected to the background of the partners, matching theory and practice.

With this aim in mind, a *Reflective Questionnaire* (Taylor & Fedeli, 2016) was administered to the staff members in order to explore, practically, how the REFLECT project and its partners deal with challenges relating to the four major concerns generally associated by literature with the construct of reflection.

First of all, assessment: how do the REFLECT group members assess reflection? How do they know reflection when they hear it or see it (read it)? Can they identify in a journal what a reflective thought or comment is, and what is not reflective?

Second, the context where reflection is encouraged: in the REFLECT members’ opinion, how does an educator or a teacher promote reflection within a course that is contextually relevant (related to the course content) and can be engaged within the institutional constraints (e.g., time, content)? What is fundamental in a reflective activity? What does it have to include? What should it not include? What is inherent in facilitating a potentially successful reflective experience? What are the barriers?

Third, the development of reflection: research argues that the ability to reflect, to deeply reflect, to be open to exploring alternative perspectives and even questioning deeply-held assumptions, is a developmental process. How do the members of the REFLECT group teach someone who has limited experience with the concept and practice of reflection? How is it different, working with these young students compared to working with individuals who are highly reflective?

Fourth, the link between emotions and feelings and reflection: recognising this deep connection between feelings and reflection, what can the REFLECT members offer an educator, with specific guidance on how to engage emotions, manage emotions, and use them to help facilitate reflection, within a setting (e.g., formal classroom) and involving subjects (e.g., chemistry, engineering, etc.) often not associated with engaging feelings?

13 Reflective Questionnaires were collected: 9 from the formal sector and 4 from the non-formal one. Starting from the proposed questions, the group members explored and summarised their experiences and practices about reflection. They mentioned, for example, important features to facilitate reflection concerning the environment and the relationship between facilitator/teacher/trainer and participant/student/trainee. Furthermore, they mapped the range of assessment tools they usually adopt in their practices and the strategies followed to encourage a deep level of reflection.

Starting from the individual responses gathered - a sort of “practical” background of each REFLECT member - a focus group protocol was developed in order to obtain data “socially constructed within the interaction of the group” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 114). As Hennink (2014) explains, the characteristic of a focus group (FG) “is the interactive discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews. During the group discussion participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have heard” (p. 2-3). Interaction is the element that characterises all group techniques; it helps to deepen and plumb the topics covered, thanks to participants’ feedback on which it is based. The big advantage of interaction is the real reproduction of the process that governs the formation of opinions, and this takes place to a greater extent when the interaction is personal and less structured, as in a FG. In fact, according to Corrao (2005), what happens in a FG isn’t just cognitive comparison, but it is “a personal interaction that involves the whole person and allows the creation of confidential atmosphere which promotes the expression of opinions and feelings “ (p. 96), supporting the production of cooperative knowledge.

With this aim, the big REFLECT team was split into two FGs. The two groups were composed by considering gender and context criteria, mixing teachers and trainers coming from formal and non-formal context and splitting colleagues belonging to the same organisation. The two FGs - composed of seven people each: 4 females and 3 males - were conducted by two different facilitators and two different observers.

The staff members were questioned about these specific issues, related to the previous *Reflective Questionnaires*:

- to what extent is reflection a competence that one can define and assess?
- to what extent is reflection transferable? What are the crucial elements/features in order to make it transferable?
- what are my key abilities/tools in triggering/scaffolding/developing reflection? What abilities (of mine) would I like to improve?
- to what extent does a relevant reflection involve emotions/an affective (vs cognitive) component?

The discussion was recorded and transcribed. The two texts obtained were analysed in order to highlight the general opinions of the participants connected to the guiding questions. The gathered qualitative data, described in the following section, are valued as the background to the REFLECT project and the starting point to explore literature about reflection and the reflective process.

3. REFLECTION: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to collect resources for the literature review, each partner was invited to select at least 10 documents written or translated in English and connected with its approach to reflection and to the reflective process. Starting from these basic rules, in the first phase of the literature analysis process, excluding a few documents that were only available in National languages, we collected 65 articles and chapters, both conceptual and empirical.

In the second phase of the literature analysis, we reduced the references list to 30 European and American resources to be coherent with the following criteria:

- related to the above mentioned models of reflection (Boud, Mezirow, Schon, and the phenomenological one);
- coherent with the four main issues raised from both the *Reflective Questionnaires*, and from the FG: assessment, developmental, context, and emotions and feelings, in order to follow a bottom-up approach starting from the REFLECT staff's experience.

30 selected articles - 16 conceptual and 14 empirical - guided the REFLECT staff group to clarify terms, theoretical orientations, and practical implications on reflection and the reflective process. 3 descriptions of practices were also explored, considering their centrality to the REFLECT group's practices and experiences in non-formal settings and the relevance of the experiential learning approach (Kolb, 1984; Korthagen, 1985; Vermeylen, 2005).

3.1 A definition of reflection: the "developmental" dimension of reflection

In order to reach a sort of definition of reflection, the *Reflective Questionnaires (RQ)*, administrated before the FG, offered us a first overview on the levels of reflection recognised by the REFLECT members. Among the 13 collected RQ, only 2 questionnaires focused on this aspect, referring to the following criteria:

At a superficial level, reflection:

- focuses on objective evaluation and description;
- focuses on fact and a feasible solution;
- focuses on something that is not experience;
- doesn't change values, beliefs, assumptions, and actions;
- is not expressed with the involvement of the body and people are not affected by their reflections.

At a deeper level, reflection:

- is connected with experience;
- explores the facts, investigates them more deeply by exploring the effects on the inner world of the person and on the outside;
- involves the physical level;
- involves self-awareness skills;
- turns into learning.

Furthermore, 11/13 RQs express some suggestions to recognise reflective thoughts, following these criteria:

- the connection between the topic and the personal level (experience, feelings, values, thoughts);
- the connection with a personal meaningful experience;
- the intensity in how people express themselves, also using body language.

During the FG session, a guiding question about the definition of reflection was proposed to define reflection more exactly: to what extent is reflection a competence that one can define? The whole group involved in the FG (14 people) underlined that reflection can be defined, but only a half, among the two FG, stated that reflection can be defined precisely as a competence. Trying to cluster the collected opinions, it comes to light that for a part of the group of REFLECT members, reflection is a competence because it includes:

- knowledge (3)
- skills and attitudes (3)
- it can be taught (2)
- it can be trained (3)
- it can be practiced (2)
- it can be developed (1).

Two participants added some interesting details, identifying skills related to reflection and underlining that reflection can be developed, trained and practised, even if defining the criteria to do this is not easy: “[...] self-awareness, there is a part of inner readiness, you have a state of mind. I note that people have different abilities to reflect, different competences for reflection and it could be developed”; “There is a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes, which are important for reflection, if you want to reflect, if you want you can go on and train reflection” and “Reflection is a competence because you have knowledge, you can practice it. Then, I start looking for describing levels of reflection, looking for the criteria, how I can assess the competence, I stuck”. These quoted participants didn’t consider reflection only as a set of skills, but something more that includes the whole person (self-awareness, *inner readiness*, a state of mind) and the dynamic nature of reflection, that supports the idea of reflection as a competence to practise and be trained.

The second vision of reflection states that reflection cannot be defined as a competence. Six participants strongly supported this vision underlining that:

“ For me it’s nothing to do with a competence, nothing at all. It has to do with the kind of situation [...], reflective process sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t work. Competences are good to lead to reflection maybe, but not reflection itself”.

A participant stated that “reflection is not a competence. It’s something that you can exercise in order to be more sensitive to the situation”. These quotations highlight that in the FG session, the reference to the recognition of different levels of reflection is less stressed: only two people refer to them.

“ I think there are some levels that you can appreciate and give feedback on them. Usually when you start reflecting you start describing what’s happened. [...] It seems also that to be reflective and transferable needs a second level of thinking. Sometimes we just react, especially when something scares us. It is more difficult to go through because it takes more energy, more effort is to move to the front of the head”.

Combining the qualitative data collected from RQ and the FG, it seems clear that for the REFLECT group, reflection can be recognised when it happens, but is not at all easy to define it and to establish criteria to identify different levels of reflection.

For this part, the selected articles offer the possibility to explore different purposes and forms of reflection, and strategies to teach or train it.

As Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) have underlined, educators are more and more becoming convinced of the importance of reflection and teachers are interested in understanding how to incorporate some form of reflection into their classes. In fact, Gall, Jacobsen, and Bullock (1990) highlight that “learning how to learn cannot be left to students. It must be taught” (p. V). So, as Ertmer and Newby (1996) ask: “how does a learner acquire this ability to question and/or reflect? How can teachers promote and support the development of reflective thinking in their students?” (p. 19). Also the contribution by Ryan and Ryan (2013) is concerned with how, and at what level, learners reflect and which reflective strategies or activities can be used to develop deeper or more complex levels of reflection, according to the work by Smith (2011) too, focused on teaching critical reflection.

With a specific focus on health education, Mann, Gordon, and MacLeod (2009) distinguish reflection models by two major dimensions:

- “an iterative dimension, within which the process of reflection is triggered by experience, which then produces a new understanding, and the potential or intention to act differently in response to future experience” (p. 597): for example, Boud’s and the Schon’s model;
- “a vertical dimension, which includes different levels of reflection on experience. Generally the surface levels are more descriptive and less analytical than the deeper levels of analysis and critical synthesis” (p. 597): for example, Dewey’s, Mezirow’s and the Moon’s model, the latter focusing on the role of reflection into the learning process.

Another topic traceable in literature concerns the different levels of reflection. Atkins and Murphy (1993), and Moon (1999) distinguish three main stages of reflection. The first one is “emergence of unpleasant feelings and thoughts due to the experience being outlived and the need to solve the situation that caused these experiences” (Bubnys & Zydziunaitė, 2010, p. 62). The second stage is “critical and constructive analysis of a problem or specific situation as well as own feelings, which involves possessed and necessary new knowledge to solve a problem” (Bubnys & Zydziunaitė, 2010, p. 62). The third stage is development of new viewpoint to a situation by projecting possible ways for acting at particular future situations. In this stage emotional and cognitive changes, which lead to behaviour changes, take place (Bubnys & Zydziunaitė, 2010, p. 62).

Wittich and colleagues (2013a) propose an empirical study focused on the validation of a method for measuring medical students’ critical reflections on professionalism, based on an instrument first elaborated by Kember and colleagues (2000) and Mann, Gordon, and MacLeod (2009). This instrument considers four levels of reflection (Kember et al., 2000; Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009): habitual action, “a perfunctory feat that through repetition has become automatic”; understanding, that is “using existing knowledge without critically appraising that knowledge”; reflection, that is exploring past experiences to develop new understandings; and critical reflection, “a deeper form of reflection where a person’s perspective is changed” (Wittich et al., 2013a, p. 233).

Concerning levels of reflection, Ryan and Ryan (2013) propose a model for teaching and assessing reflective learning in higher education based on a reflective scale of four levels, named the 4Rs: Reporting & Responding (make observation, express the personal opinion, ask question); Relating (relate or make connection between the issue and the personal skills, professional experience, or discipline knowledge); Reasoning (highlight important aspects related to the issue and explain why they are important); Reconstructing (reframe future practice or professional understanding).

Similar to this model, the ALACT model proposed by Korthagen and Vasalos describes the ideal process of learning in and from practice by five ideal phases: Action; Looking back on the action; Awareness of essential aspects; Creating alternative methods of action; Trial, that is a new action and the starting point of a new cycle (2009).

3.2 The assessment of reflection

During the FG session, the facilitators led the groups through a question about assessment: to what extent you can assess reflection?

Concerning this point, different positions emerged.

The first one was referred to as the possibility to assess not reflection itself, but the process of reflection or the “elements that are involved in the reflection process”.

The second opposite position was represented by the participants who stated: “You don’t assess reflection process, teamwork process, you assess the case, the results not the process. It is the same with reflection: you have to reflect but you don’t assess the reflective process”.

According to this vision the process can’t be assessed because “reflection is a part of the learning process, you don’t assess the reflection but the learning process.” Close to this vision, a participant said: “There are some indications that can tell something about the reflection, if it takes place or not, but ‘assess them’? For me it is too much”. A third position underlined that the assessment of reflection cannot be done by separating it from the process and from the facilitator. This idea was supported by the participants who said: “I think the assessment of reflection is not the evaluation. It is about how was the process, if it was

useful, how it was, what the facilitator did. It is not about marking, but just evaluating how it was in order to improve next time.”

Additionally, there is a fourth vision according to which assessment is not connected to a “kind of putting grade”, but the possibility to register that some changes occur in the learners “and learners themselves feel, agree, see that things are changing or have changed and they see themselves looking at the world in a different way.” In this perspective assessment is not an “objective measurement, but it is a kind of “felt” judgment: you feel something or you don’t feel that something has changed”.

Then a fifth position emerged considering the actions “to assess and to reflect” as part of “human ability, human nature”, because “humans are reflective. Everybody is reflective, but to different degrees”. It would mean that “we are constantly assessing, like we are naturally reflecting.”

Finally, the last position highlights that there is a difference between evaluating one’s own reflection or others’ reflection: “I am able to assess my own reflection, but as a teacher we are always evaluating the students, but it is totally different”. Furthermore “[...] assessment works in a distractive way. The feeling of being judged stops reflection”. It could mean that assessment doesn’t support reflection, but in the contrary obstructs it.

From this intertwined discussion, it’s evident that how the assessment of reflection can be difficult and at the same time a challenge for all teachers/educators. In fact, the participants talked about the process of reflection, about some elements that support reflection, some changes that can occur during a process of learning, of a strategy of improvement, but not one of them talked about the assessment of reflection itself. The discussion that took place within the two groups suggests that there is still a lot of hesitation and caution related to the assessment of reflection.

This difficulty is demonstrated also by the available literature; in fact, few papers are focused on the assessment of reflection and those same papers can be divided in three categories:

1. *The self-evaluation*, with a specific focus on the metacognitive process (Ertmer & Newby, 1996; Mortari, 2012). Referring to Shön’s model and comparing the approach to learning of an expert and of a novice learner, Ertmer and Newby (1996) show how the model based on a metacognitive control as continuing reflection (self-regulated), allows the learner to be a promoter of his/her academic achievement. It includes aspects such as planning, monitoring and evaluating. Mortari (2012) - referring to the phenomenology theory - highlights that “reflection is a way for cognition to analyze itself”, it is the “thinking that thinks on itself”, it is “the practice of a rigorous self-examination” (p.528).
2. *The way to assess reflection through some models* (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2009; Lim, 2011; Ryan & Ryan, 2013) or *tools* (Aronson, 2011; Smith, 2011; Wald et al., 2012). Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf used Mezirow’s framework to examine reflection in the e-portfolio of teacher-candidates, concluding that “critical reflection of assumptions and critical self-reflection on assumptions are extremely valuable elements of the reflection process [...] but they are also effective descriptors for the types of reflection that occur in teacher education, in general, and in e-portfolios, in particular” (2009, p. 142). In another study, the four levels of reflective thinking - *Habitual Action, Understanding, Reflection, and Critical Reflection* (Mezirow, 1997) - were used by Lim (2011) to examine reflective habits of students at different stage of their studies within a problem-based learning context. Furthermore, Ryan and Ryan (2013) introduced a model for *Teaching and Assessing Reflective Learning* (TARL) based on the notion of pedagogic field, considered as a set of strategies combined with the assessment of learning. The model foresees the selection of the most suitable strategies during the students’ progress, within a programme that makes them increasingly exposed to disciplinary concepts and practices. The model based on a reflective scale by Bain and colleagues (2002) offers some indicators related to the 5Rs of reflection: *Reporting and Responding, Relating, Reasoning, Reconstructing*. There are 5 levels of reflection that can be considered a systematic approach of reflection. In addition, critical reflection could be stimulated, observed and monitored through reflective tools (Smith, 2011) and built on some key indicators connected to the four domains of reflection (personal, interpersonal, contextual, critical). It could be encouraged also through a combination of methods: using validated and reliable scoring rubrics and a narrative approach such as individual, group, faculty, or peer feedback, underlining the adequacy of the reflection according to the assigned topic, and suggesting next steps (Aronson, 2011). Wald and colleagues (2012) talk about a reflect rubric too, built through iterative cycles and based on five level of reflection: Non reflective/Habitual Action, Non reflective/ Thoughtful Action, Reflective, Critically reflective and Transformative Learning. These kind of rubrics are considered by the authors the best way to assess the level of reflection since they are built according to a theory and they can be tailored and made for specific purposes.

3. *The validation of instruments to assess reflection*, especially in medical education contexts (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009; Wittich, et al., 2013a; Wittich, et al., 2013b). Wittich and colleagues (2013a; 2013b) developed and validated an instrument for assessing students' reflections on gross anatomy, based on a previously validated instrument (Kember et al., 2000; Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009) based on four levels of reflection: habitual action, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection. Kember and colleagues (2000) and Mann and colleagues (2009) define: habitual action as a perfunctory feat that through repetition has become automatic; understanding as the use of existing knowledge without critically appraising that knowledge; reflection as exploring past experiences to develop new understandings (Boud et al., 1985) and critical reflection as a deeper form of reflection where a person's perspective is changed (Wittich, et al., 2013a). Mann, Gordon, and MacLeod (2009) conducted a systematic review of the research literature in the area of reflection and reflective learning in health professional education and practice. To evaluate the premise that reflection and reflective practice are essential components of competence in health professionals, they developed some questions to follow. Among them they focused on this one "Can reflective thinking be assessed?" (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009, p. 600). Starting from the analysed studies, they state that "it appears that reflection can be assessed and different levels of reflection discerned. [...] Students do not have the same opportunities as professionals do for reflective practice in authentic settings and therefore some questions remain regarding whether what is being measured (e.g. text) is a valid indicator of reflective activity, when one considers the influences of context and culture" (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009, p. 605).

Starting from this overview of literature on assessment of reflection, it appears that the attention to assessment and development of reflection is wider in medical education and health professions education contexts rather than in general courses of Higher Education, where still very little has been done in this sense.

3.3 The context of reflection

Another of the dimensions underlined among the collected resources is the role of the context in promoting reflective processes. For the REFLECT group, the context is a crucial element of the reflective process. Indeed, to promote reflection it is important to prepare the context by creating a stimulating environment in which students can experiment in safety. Just from the RQ, the majority of respondents underlined that the first step of the reflective process is to establish a good relationship with learners, build a favourable environment for reflection, be open to mistakes in order to co-create a reflective atmosphere.

To continue with the FG, according to the question about the context ("to what extent is reflection transferable?"), all 14 participants perceived reflection as a competence that can be transferred from one context to another, but, at the same time, the context has an influence on the reflection competence. There are different visions about what and how this transferability can happen. For one side, reflection transfers from a context to another when the individual can recognise a sort of pattern of features that can help him to see the similarities in a different context. Moreover, recognising the common pattern, people create links, but to do this, people need an extra effort which is the second level of thinking to create this connection in making reflection transferable. Another idea is that the transfer of reflection is something that can happen or not, but it is not something that is necessary for reflection.

According to another question, ("what are the crucial elements/features in order to make it transferable?") for the group there are some crucial elements or features that can make reflection a transferable competence, such as the ability to see and perceive similarities in a different kind of context, the different type of environment, courage and the feeling of reflection as a need.

Despite the strong focus of the group to the context and the setting of the reflection process, looking to the literature there are not too many references about the context.

Boud (1994) - explaining his model of reflection - places importance on the consideration of the setting where the process takes place. In fact, the model recognises the *learning milieu* - made of the "social, psychological and material environment in which the learner is situated" (p.2) - as a condition to promote active learning from the experience. The importance of an authentic and supportive environment is mentioned also by Mann, Gordon and MacLeod (2009) who consider a supportive environment - both intellectually and emotionally - as a condition to enhance the development of reflection and reflective practice. We can identify some crucial elements of this supportive environment: for example, an accommodation for individual differences in learning styles; mentoring; group discussion and support and free expression of opinions. Critical reflection should take place in an environment of thinking, reflecting and connecting the old with the new, as a skill that crosses all the disciplines of learning. By creating a reflective environment

for and with students, it is allowed to build the foundations of a critically reflective member of the world community (Colley, Bilics & Lerch, 2012). The necessity of taking care of the learning environment is marked also by Lim (2011) who tested that the Problem Based Learning (PBL) environment not only develops students' reflective thinking habits, but it also encourages a good degree of critical reflection. Even if there aren't so many studies on the relation between context and the development of reflection habits, the main aspects here-mentioned are strong enough to support the idea that the reflective environment is really connected with all parts of the learning process, and therefore with the development of reflection and critical reflection abilities. As Vermeylen underlines, it is crucial to offer "activities and reflection moments where individual themes and interaction patterns can (again) be underlined and become more visible" (2005, p. 4).

3.4. The role of emotions and feeling

Concerning the role of emotions and feeling, a specific FG question led the REFLECT group to discuss to what extent a relevant reflection involves emotions/an affective (vs cognitive) component. Some suggestions come up clearly through a range of the responses. According to the group, there is a deep connection between emotions and reflection. It would be impossible to reflect without emotions; indeed, by reflecting and making sense, people can connect to their feelings. Reflection is a moment when the individual is moved by emotions and in this sense reflection becomes "something that you don't forget anymore", quoting a participant.

According to Boud (1994), reflection is not simply a process of thinking. The reflective process involves also feelings and emotions which can inhibit or enhance the possibilities for further reflection and learning. Positive feelings can enhance motivation and desire to pursue further learning, while negative feelings can block understanding. Also Hubbs and Brand (2005) focus their attention on feelings and on the role that reflection can play in order to link student's understandings and feelings and to understand their own inner world and meaning. Furthermore, Korthagen (2013) and Korthagen and Vasalos (2009) devote strong attention to the emotional level. Concerning his above-mentioned model, the *core reflection* encouraged a step forward from reflection as "thinking" to awareness of the whole human being. According to the authors, the "model does not function well if the person reflecting uses it as a purely mental exercise: in each stage, thoughts, feelings and needs (or desires) have to be addressed, and brought into full awareness" (p. 8).

4. DISCUSSION AND CRITIQUE

The analysis of the collected literature offered to the REFLECT group an overview of the main approaches to reflection, in order to encourage and/or to assess it, through different methods or tools, with reference to different models and settings, both formal and non-formal. Starting from the quoted authors and the referred articles, it is evident that the most of the literature concerns the formal context, with a specific focus on Higher Education and, specifically, to the medical sector and to teachers' education. Under this framework, the contribution of the REFLECT group aims to enrich the discussion on reflection with a specific attention on the non-formal setting, where the *Inner Readiness* concept, presented below, has been developed. The REFLECT group also gives more attention to the role of context and emotions in encouraging reflection, which has been often overlooked in the literature. Lastly, REFLECT focuses on another element: that of the role of the facilitator and his/her attention to choose and design coherent and effective reflective activities, according to his/her aims, both in formal and non-formal settings.

References:

- Aronson, L. (2011). Twelve tips for teaching reflection at all levels of medical education. *Medical Teacher*, 33(3), 200-205.
- Atkins, S., & Murphy, K. (1993). Reflection: a review of the literature. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 18, 1188-1192.
- Bain, J.D., Ballantyne, R., Mills, C. & Lester, N.C. (2002). *Reflecting ... In order to 'move from' a reflective trigger to a meaningful reflection on practice*. Flaxton, Qld: Post Pressed.
- Bennett, N., Dunne, E., & Carré, C. (1999). Patterns of core and generic skill provision in higher education. *Higher Education*, 37(1), 71-93.
- Bleakley, A. (1999). From reflective practice to holistic reflexivity. *Studies in Higher Education*, 12(3), 315-330.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (1985) *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Boud, D. (1994). Conceptualising learning from experience: Developing a model for facilitation. *Proceedings of the 35th Adult Education Research Conference*, 20-22 May 1994, Knoxville, Tennessee: College of Education, University of Tennessee, 49-54. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.113.7691&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Bridgstock, R. (2009). The graduate attributes we've overlooked: Enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(1), 31-44.
- Bubnys, R., & Žydzūnaitė, V. (2010). Reflective Learning models in the context of Higher Education: concept analysis. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 20. Retrieved from <http://journals.indexcopernicus.com/abstract.php?icid=909742>
- Buiskool, B. J., Broek, S. D., Lakerveld, J. A. V., Zarifis, G. K., & Osborne, M. (2010). *Key Competences for Adult Learning Professionals: Contribution to the Development of a Reference Framework of Key Competences for Adult Learning Professionals – Final Report*. Zoetermeer.
- Colley, B. M., Bilics, A. R., Lerch, C. M. (2012). Reflection: A key component to thinking critically. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of teaching and learning*, 3(1), p. 1-17.
- Corrao, S. (2005). Il focus group. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- De Villiers, R. (2010). The incorporation of soft skills into accounting curricula: preparing accounting graduates for their unpredictable futures. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 18(2), 1 – 22. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10222529201000007>
- Eekelen, I.M. van. (2005). *Teachers' will and way to learn: Studies on how teachers learn and their willingness to do so*. PhD thesis University of Maastricht.
- Ertmer, P. A., & Newby, T. J. (1996). The expert learner: Strategic, self-regulated, and reflective. *Instructional Science*, 24(1), 1-24.
- European Commission (2013). *Report to the European Commission on Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Faj, E., & Riot, P. (2007). Phenomenological approaches to work, life and responsibility. *Society and Business Review*, 2 (2), 145 – 152. Doi <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17465680710757367>
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., Jacobsen, D. R., Bullock, T. L. (1990). *Tools for learning: A guide to teaching study skills*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Gulikers, J. (2008). Professionalisering op het gebied van competentiebeoordeling. *Onderwijsinnovatie*, 10, 4, 17-25.
- Hennink, M. M. (2014). *Focus Group Discussions*. New York: Oxford University.
- Hubbs, D. L., & Brand, C. F. (2005). The paper mirror: Understanding reflective journaling. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 28(1), 60-71.
- Kearns, P. (2001). *Generic skills for the new economy – review of research*. Adelaide: National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Kember, D., Leung, D. Y. P., Jones, A., Loke, A. Y., McKay, J., Sinclair, K., Tse, H., Webb, C., Wong, F. K. Y., Wong, M., & Yeung, E. (2000). Development of a questionnaire to measure the level of reflective thinking. *Assess Eval High Educ* 25, 381–395.
- Kinkhorst, G.F. (2002). Routine reflecteren leidt tot weinig leerresultaat. *HBO-journaal*, 36-37.
- Kitchenham, A. & Chasteauneuf, C. (2009). An Application of Mezirow's Critical Reflection Theory to Electronic Portfolios. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 7(3), 230-244. doi: 10.1177/1541344610383287
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (1985). Reflective teaching and preservice teacher education in the Netherlands. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 9(3), 317-326.
- Korthagen, F. A., & Vasalos, A. (2009). From reflection to presence and mindfulness: 30 years of developments concerning the concept of reflection in teacher education. *EARLI Conference, Amsterdam*, 1-17.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2013). The core reflection approach. In F. A. J. Korthagen, M. K. Younghee, & W. L. Green (Eds.), *Teaching and learning from within: A core reflection approach to quality and inspiration in education* (pp. 669- 675). New York/London: Routledge.
- Kuijpers, M. & Meijers, F. (2009). *Studieloopbaanbegeleiding in het hbo: mogelijkheden en grenzen*. Den Haag: De Haagse Hogeschool, Lectoraten en onderzoek.
- Lewis, M., & Farnsworth, F. (2007). Financialisation and the ethical moment: Levinas and the encounter with business practice. *Society and Business Review*, 2(2), 179–183.
- Lim, L. A. (2011). A comparison of students' reflective thinking across different years in a problem-based learning environment. *Instructional Science*, 39(2), 171–188. doi 10.1007/s11251-009-9123-8
- 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.
- Mann, K., Gordon, J., & MacLeod, A. (2009). Reflection and reflective practice in health professions education: a systematic review. *Advances in Health Sciences Education. Theory and Practice*, 14(4), 595-621.
- Mansvelder-Longayroux, D.D. (2006). *The learning portfolio as a tool for stimulating reflection by student teachers*. PhD thesis University of Leiden.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Meijers, F., Kuijpers, M. & Bakker, J. (2006). *Over leerloopbanen en loopbaanleren: loopbaancompetenties in het (V)MBO*. Onderzoeksrapport. Driebergen: Het Platform BeroepsOnderwijs.
- Meijers, F. (2008). Loopbaansturing: een complex leerproces. In Meijers, F. & Kuijpers, M. (red.). *Loopbaanontwikkeling tussen oud en nieuw leren*. Antwerpen – Apeldoorn: Garant, 9-29.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. In P. Cranton (Ed.), *Transformative learning in action: Insights from practice – New directions for adult and continuing education*, 74 (pp. 5-12). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1998). On critical reflection. *Adult Learning Quarterly*, 48, 185-198.
- Moon, J. (1999). *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning*. London: Routledge.
- Mortari, L. (2012). Learning thoughtful reflection in teacher education. *Teachers and Teaching*, 18(5), 525-545.
- Pauw, Jetje. (2007). *De kunst van het navelstaren: de didactische implicaties van de retoriseren van reflectieverslagen op de pabo*. Een exploratieve studie. PhD thesis University of Utrecht.
- Ryan, M., & Ryan, M. (2013). Theorising a model for teaching and assessing reflective learning in higher education. *Higher Education & Development*, 32(2), p. 244-257.
- Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, E. (2011). Teaching critical reflection. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(2), 211-223. Stokking, K., Van der Schaaf, M., Leenders, F., & De Jong, J. *Meten van reflectie bij studenten*. Paper Onderwijs Research Dagen 2004.
- Verhofstadt-Denève, L., Van Geert, P. & Vyt, A. (1995). *Handboek ontwikkelingsspsychologie: Grondslagen en theorieën*. Houten/Diegem: Boom Stafleu Van Loghum.
- Vermeylen, K. (2005). *Reflecting*. Outward Bound@Belgium, text not published.
- Villa Sánchez, A., & M., Poblete Ruiz (Eds.) (2008). *Competence based Learning: a proposal for the assessment of generic competences*. Bilbao: University of Deusto Press.
- Wald, H. S., Borkan, J. M., Taylor, J. S., Anthony, D., & Reis, S. P. (2012). Fostering and evaluating reflective capacity in medical education: Developing the REFLECT rubric for assessing reflective writing. *Academic Medicine: Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, 87(1), 41-50. doi:10.1097/ACM.0b013e31823b55fa
- Wittich, C. M., Pawlina, W., Drake, R. L., Szostek, J. H., Reed, D. A., Lachman, N., ... Beckman, T. J. (2013a). Validation of a method for measuring medical students' critical reflections on professionalism in gross anatomy. *Anatomical Sciences Education*, 6(4), 232-238. doi: 10.1002/ase.1329
- Wittich, C. M., Szostek, J. H., Reed, D. A., Kiefer, J. L., Mueller, P. S., Mandrekar, J. N., & Beckman, T. J. (2013b). Measuring faculty reflection on medical grand rounds at mayo clinic: Associations with teaching experience, clinical exposure, and presenter effectiveness. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 88(3), 277-284. doi: 10.1016/j.mayocp.2012.11.014