

POSSIBILITIES FOR REFLECTING ON AND OFF-LINE

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INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century, e-learning is without any doubt transforming the landscape of formal and non-formal education. Digital technology is proving to be an efficient means to support learning processes in several ways, including by sharing learning materials, enabling online communication and stimulating research. Based on the integration of e-learning tools, a lot of literature deals with the technical modalities of this e-learning, i.e. how for example courses are being categorised on a continuum of didactic models from fully face-to-face, to those including some web-based tools, to those fully online. Within REFLECT however we did not elaborate a technical perspective on e-learning nor did we develop new e-tools. Rather we explored possibilities to incorporate already existing e-tools (usually for free) in order to co-create a reflective atmosphere. So, the first part of this text deals with the general pedagogical approach that would best suit the REFLECT-framework for facilitating reflection processes in higher and adult education. The second part deals with more particular experiences coming out of our test phase and concerning reflecting on and off-line within REFLECT, ending with a specific story of a blended learning test project. The third and final part of this text will give an overview of existing e-tools which can be used for reflecting online.

IN SEARCH OF A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

E-learning for instructional learning

In general, the discourse on e-learning emphasises the enhanced possibilities for student-centred learning. In this respect, the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) is a good example. MOOCs are mostly fully online courses, consisting usually of a series of web-lectures and discussion forums, and have open access, allowing everyone to participate (as long as one has internet connection). MOOCs are student-centred in the sense that they enable learners to learn what and when they want to learn, independent from one's location or educational institution. In a preparatory, non-published text for the first training event of REFLECT in September 2015, staff member Nancy Vansielegem (2015) points out how MOOCs in general "focus on acquiring pre-structured knowledge and skills according to a step-by-step plan and with programming the best way in which the transmission of clear-cut and fixed objectives can be achieved. [...] Digital technology is used to construct a learning environment where knowledge is available as a resource for fast, efficient and effective learning – an environment without any noise or disturbance."

This pedagogical approach is clearly linked to a classical teaching and lecturing model: digital learning is organised in the best possible instructional way for transferring information. All of this, however, does not fit to 'learning by reflection', as learners shouldn't 'duplicate' outcomes already predefined by the educator, but should essentially 'make sense' themselves of the subject matter. As already mentioned in the first letter, we see reflection as an important catalyst for so-called *deep learning* which means that learning results have to be personally meaningful and significant to learners.

Blended learning as an integrated pedagogical approach towards reflection

We prefer to advocate for a blended learning approach. The term 'blended' refers in general to the combination of traditional face-to-face and online contact between educators and learners (in contrast to the fully online e-learning activities without off-line contact). This approach gives better opportunities to co-create the reflective atmosphere, as it's easier as an educator to 'warm' your relationship with learners, letting them experience the necessary trust, openness, empathy and transparency. Furthermore, blended learning also suits better the need of process-directivity, e.g. by being able to notice learners' non-verbal communication, by allowing slowing-down and by fine-tuning the questions during face-to-face meetings which can be taken home for individual e-reflection.

During the test phase, several blended learning test projects were conducted. It became clear that the e-tools for reflection need to be sufficiently integrated as a part of the course. In this respect, Evelien Maris

and Saskia Nauwelaerts (2016) from Outward Bound Belgium had an interesting experience. They reported how during a five-day course on group dynamics their last year Master students in occupational psychology did not use the proposed e-tool for valuable reflection, but more for having fun and sharing about relaxing subjects. They mentioned two reasons for this: “[firstly] we think that this is due to the fact that the students already reflected during the day about their experiences and that it was a ‘reflective overkill’ to ask them again in the evening.” Secondly they also mentioned the gap between the natural outdoor context of their five day course and the online tool: “the students preferred to keep the connection between the ‘natural experience’ and the corresponding reflection/debriefing more closely in the same authentic context. They mentioned that they were relieved to not be bound to social media and technology for four days.” As Maris and Nauwelaerts continued to reflect afterwards, they could see how the reflection activity with the e-tool was not sufficiently integrated enough in the course. It was just one extra reflection activity added to an already existing programme.

In general, this experience stresses the importance of an integrated pedagogical approach concerning blended learning: the crucial factor is the embedding of e-learning tools within an overall didactic concept, consistent with the learning objectives of the course. In this respect we connect to the definition of blended learning, as offered for example by Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal (2004):

“It’s our position that blended learning should be viewed as a pedagogical approach that combines the effectiveness and socialization opportunities of the classroom with the technological enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment, rather than a ratio of delivery modalities. In other words, blended learning, should be approached not merely as a temporal construct, but rather as a fundamental redesign of the instructional model [...]” (p.3)

Subsequently they distinguish three important characteristics of blended learning. Firstly it presupposes a shift from lecture- to student-centred learning in order to empower students to become active learners (not only concerning the online-contact, but through the entire course, so concerning the face-to-face contacts as well). This matches the first principle of REFLECT’s framework: raising awareness within learners to ‘own’ their learning in a personally meaningful way. In a test project on the topic of visual essays in the arts, learners reported a remarkable change in their engagement: “we were more passive consumers during the first two lecturing classes in group [which were classic lecturing]. With the reflection assignment on the padlet (i.e. an e-tool, more explanation will follow) in small homework-groups, we were more active and looked more attentively to the pictures and documentaries. The discussion in these small groups also gave everybody the possibility to engage. You had more personal input in the conversation.” (Vandenbussche 2016)

As a second characteristic Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal mention how blended learning should enhance interactive learning. The use of e-tools should increase the interaction between educator-learner, learner-learner, learner-content and/or learner-outside resources. This is a response to several authors mentioning the loss in efficiency and quality in learning when learners are addressed only individually by e-learning (Bliuc, Goodyear & Ellis 2007). This relates to REFLECT’s second principle, which emphasises the importance of dialogue and feedback for deepening the reflection process and for facilitating the group of learners essentially as a learning community. In the same test project students also reported the importance of sharing their views with one another via the padlet. It stimulated them to look beyond what they first saw and to notice different things in the discussed visual essays. In this respect, Alessio Surian (2016) also talked about what he calls the enzyme-quality of the online-postings of his learners: “the mood of some on-line posts is a combination of providing reflection with ideas/opportunities for further exploration and/or action to themselves and to their colleagues. This sparks an interesting thread of reflection by other students.”

Finally, Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal advocate just like REFLECT for a broader approach concerning assessment: blended learning requires sometimes not only summative assessment, but formative as well. For more detailed arguments about this, please see the chapter on ‘careful assessment’.

The presence of the educator within blended learning

Student-centred and blended learning imply more autonomy of learners (compared to classical lecturing). Learners are no longer fully ‘dependent’ on the contact with the educator, but can decide themselves (usually within particular limits) ‘when’ to fulfil the e-learning activities and ‘how’ to integrate them in their personal learning process. However, this does not mean that educators are becoming less important, quite the contrary. Anne-Marie De Jonge (2013) points out how the educator’s job no longer consists of solely transferring content, but also of coaching learners in their personal questioning in order to bring the essence of their thinking to the surface.

Garrison and Vaughan also underline the crucial role of educators in *Blended learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles and Guidelines* (2008). More specifically, they distinguish three different ‘presences’, all of them required in order to enable a high quality educational experience: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. It’s worth going more into depth in their ideas, highlighting the relation with REFLECT.

Educators should firstly establish *social presence* within the learning community. This is about creating solid social relationships among learners. As social presence enhances a sense of belonging, open communication and group cohesion, it’s considered by Garrison and Vaughan as a sine qua non for the learning process. It supports the learning process in an essential way by enabling risk-free expression of thoughts, encouraging collaborations and expressing emotions. All of this relates to REFLECT’s principle of developing a relationship of trust, openness, honesty and empathy between educator and learners, essential for the reflective atmosphere to be developed.

Although emotional bonding and camaraderie are to be considered the ultimate experience of this social presence, Garrison and Vaughan point out clearly that blended learning involves more than “social online chatting”. As such, social presence does “not structure and focus academic interests among the students. [...] Higher levels of learning inevitably require purposeful discourse to collaboratively construct, critically reflect, and confirm understanding.” This is the area of what they call *cognitive presence*, needed for exploring, integrating and finding solutions. Here reflection comes into play: “cognitive presence is basic to the inquiry process. Inquiry includes the integration of reflective and interactive processes. [...] (It) is a recursive process that encompasses states of puzzlement, information exchange, connection of ideas, creation of concepts and the testing of the viability of solutions”. Although we encounter here the solution-driven approach of their inquiry model, all of this connects with important principles of the REFLECT-framework as well: valuing not-knowing, dialogue and feedback, deepening the questioning progressively etc.

Finally, they describe the teaching presence as bringing all elements together by designing and organising a course, by instructing learners and facilitating the discourse. “Teaching presence is essential to provide structure, facilitation, and direction for the cohesion, balance, and progression of the inquiry process,” Garrison and Vaughan (2008) state. “(It) provides the design, facilitation and direction for a worthwhile educational experience. [...] Teaching presence establishes the curriculum, approaches and methods; it also moderates, guides, and focuses discourse and tasks. It is the means by which to bring together social and cognitive presence in an effective and efficient manner.”

As indicators of the teaching presence they describe the setting of curriculum and methods, focusing discussion and sharing personal meaning by educators. This relates to several important aspects of REFLECT’s framework: co-creating reflection, directing the reflective attention of learners and slowing-down and deepening the questioning progressively. Garrison and Vaughan really emphasise the importance of the teaching presence by referring to recent research indicating clearly that blended-learning demands strong teaching presence by educators.

In conclusion, we want to point to the fact that the social, cognitive and teaching presence that Garrison and Vaughan talk about, partly overlaps with REFLECT’s notion of the ‘reflexive presence’ (as described in letter 10). With this ‘reflexive presence’ we want to stress first the capability of educators to reflect themselves, secondly the contagious impact of ‘putting into action’ the essential qualities of trust, openness, empathy, transparency, curiosity and attentiveness, and thirdly the reciprocal influence between the educator and the learners in co-creating a reflective atmosphere. When integrating e-tools for reflection, we believe it will be essential for any educator to uphold this reflexive presence.

TESTING E-REFLECTION FOR AN INTEGRATED BLENDED LEARNING APPROACH

Within REFLECT nine educators decided to experiment with e-learning tools, most of them in formal education. In general, these tools can be divided into two categories. Firstly, there are the individual digital journals or log books which are offered by the online learning platforms of the partner organisations, such as Moodle or Toledo. They are the digital reprocessing of classic diaries, adding the possibility to share the individual writings with other learners, and for them to react. Secondly there are the already existing e-tools, to be found on the internet. In the full text on blended learning on our website, we offer a survey of these e-tools. The online tool which was experimented with the most during the test phase, was padlet (see www.padlet.com). This is a ‘virtual wall or bulletin board’ which can be used by learners to express their ideas, thoughts and opinions in an interactive way. Also, they can easily share pictures, videos, texts and react to all of these by adding comments which look like sticky notes.

In general educators as well as learners within the test projects expressed several reasons for the added value of the e-reflection activities. Firstly, e-reflection makes it possible to leave more time between the topic discussed and the reflection afterwards. It brings some distance which sometimes helps learners to reflect more deeply. Learners can also more easily take the time they need to develop and express their thoughts, feelings, questions and/or remarks (in contrast to the sometimes limited time during face-to-face meetings). In this respect, Alessio Surian (2016) pointed out as one advantage of using a digital learning log in his story on blended learning: “not everything posted on-line is reflection but a lot of the posts are more reflective than what happens in class.” Secondly, when shared in the learning group, e-reflection also helps to involve the quieter, introverted or shy learners, resulting in an important increase in the amount of interactions between educator and learners. Thirdly, as e-reflections can be stored easily, they proved also helpful on several occasions for learners to look back at things discussed and reflected later on during the course.

Another test project stood out, as it clearly illustrates how some principles and guidelines are translated into an integrated blended learning approach in the teacher education department of LUCA School of Arts. The test project was run by Filip De Roeck and Nancy Vansieleghem (2016):

“We ran our test project in ‘Labo’, a regular course within our teacher training curriculum in the arts implying some kind of micro-teaching. Within this course, students can experiment with preparing, teaching and reflecting. Students were divided into groups of three and had to prepare together a lesson in advance. The target group is their peers. The prepared class takes about 1 hour 30 minutes. The group is free to choose the subject of the lesson. Afterwards the complete group takes about one hour to reflect upon the given class. We wanted to explore during the test project the potential of the e-tool padlet as a technology that brings oneself closer to the experience of teaching and being prepared. Each group of three students prepared their lesson on a padlet-wall.

During the course, the focus to facilitate reflection shifted from the padlet to the concluding conversation that we had at the end of every labo/micro-teaching session. This is a concluding conversation with the students who were teaching their peers that normally provides feedback on the lesson that just happened. Gradually, while experimenting with the possibilities to stimulate and accommodate moments of reflection, this conversation shifted from a feedback moment (direct comments to improve the teaching) to a conversation about a situation.

There was a shift in focus. Instead of talking about what we thought that should have happened, we tried to see and speak about what was actually happening.

We organised our test project as following. Firstly, we introduced padlet as a collective tool to prepare a micro-teaching class. Secondly, we divided the students into groups of three to prepare a micro-teaching course together. Thirdly, as students were not only organised in groups of three but also paired in buddy trios, these buddy trios were given the assignment to observe the lesson and to moderate the conversation at the end of each session, using only their observations.

The introduction of the padlet, and working in groups of three, was an important shift away from how we previously worked in our labos. Immediately noticeable through conversations was the cooperation between students in preparing a lesson together or collecting material on their padlet. The contents of the lessons were much more mature than in previous years. Students were confronted with their different opinions on certain topics, they were confronted with each other’s knowledge of images, techniques, and approaches to the artistic process.

The groups tended to start more quickly to prepare a lesson. The padlet made it possible to visualise and prolong the collecting, brainstorming phase of creating a lesson. The visual nature of the padlet invited them to make associations towards each other’s materials, the topics, suggestions, etc. The information/material became much more layered than previous years.

The process of preparing the lessons (creating steps, goals, a sequence of assignments, ...) didn’t happen only on the padlet. Every group met in real life or used another tool to communicate more directly with each other. The padlet was more the space where they worked on the architecture of a lesson: collecting the materials, putting up structure, hierarchy within the information, leaving notes and sharing ideas with each other.

Because most students were preparing their project sooner than in previous years, students were also perhaps more involved in reflecting on their lessons than previous years. As described above, at the end of each labo there was a concluding conversation about the experiences of the labo lesson that just happened. This conversation was moderated by a buddy-trio who observed the lesson.

The concluding conversation was no longer a moment in which difficulties or problems were discussed. While previously the buddy-trio often gave tips and tricks that can improve the teaching, they began to speak more and more in terms of a practice taking place.

It was specifically this potential shift, from consuming information 'how to teach better', towards reflecting on what was present in the labo, that challenged us to facilitate a more profound personal reflection. Our other test project 'As long as I'm walking' was in many ways very inspiring to facilitate this shift. It introduced a focus outside of ourselves. It introduced the possibilities and potential of capturing, seeing what happens (movements, patterns etc) and not to start interpreting immediately.

So instead of just asking the buddy-trio to moderate a conversation about the labo lesson, we started to formulate the following:

- You will not express your personal opinion.
- You will not address a person directly.
- You will try to make the lesson/ what happened visual and present in the conversation.

This focus on the concluding conversation allowed for it to not be about opinions, but about disclosing the teaching practice and to think about it. When we were able to hold focus and try to see the experience as a thing – something we could walk around, turn over - ideas were revealed that never could exist while only reflecting, specifically on competences of the teacher. Because of this shift in focus all the students became equally important in contributing to the conversation and in answering the question 'what can teaching mean?'. In this respect, it proved to be necessary to create a situation where not-knowing and doubt, daring to make a mistake, can be part of a group conversation. While exploring the possibilities of the concluding conversation, it became clear that we need to alter the gaze from knowledge to not-knowing. It is not losing the focus but rather shifting it to the present experience. Not looking for: "what did I do? How did I do it? What should I have done?" But rather seeing what did actually happen.

If you want to read about the experiments with blended learning within REFLECT, go to the inspiration box on the website www.reflecting.eu/project/toolbox-of-reflection-practices/

AN OVERVIEW OF ALREADY EXISTING E-TOOLS FOR BLENDED REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Within REFLECT we consider online tools as a means, not as the goal itself. They are 'media', i.e. digital tools mediating the that-which-is-at-stake between educator, learners and the learning group. The big challenge, we believe, is to find a way of integrating on- and off-line tools for co-creating a reflective atmosphere. From this perspective the main advantages of online learning tools (in comparison with off-line reflection) are mainly: the possibility for all learners to react (not just the ones who speak up more easily); the possibility to react in silence (learners are on their own when replying online) and what is often known as "flipping" the class room.

We have selected several online tools that can help the reflective learning process. The following criteria were taken into account for this selection: the possibility for increased dialogue and feedback between learners and the possibility for the educator to direct process. This list is only REFLECT's selection, not aiming to be exhaustive by any means.

1. Padlet (www.padlet.com)

Padlet is a 'virtual wall' that can be used by participants to express their ideas, thoughts and opinions in an interactive way. They can easily share pictures, videos, texts and react to all of these by adding what are called "post-its". Every action remains visible, so it's easy to trace the process. It's a good online tool to brainstorm and reflect on a common topic.

2. Tricider (www.tricider.com)

Tricider is a virtual forum enabling an online brainstorm, feedback or dialogue about a common topic. As educator you pose a question, learners react by writing only. All reactions remain visible so, again, it's easy to trace the process.

3. EDPuzzle (www.edpuzzle.com)

EDPuzzle enables you to upload or download a video and add your questions and/or remarks for learners (written as well as spoken). You can choose if students have to answer the questions or not before continuing watching the video. EDPuzzle is a very handy tool for flipping the classroom: students prepare at home, you discuss afterwards during the meeting.

4. Kahoot (www.getkahoot.com)

Kahoot is an online student-response tool. You can choose between three formats: quiz, discussion or survey. Learners' reactions can be shown at the end on a big screen. It is possible to add a central question, videos, pictures, etc.

5. Titanpad (www.titanpad.com)

Titanpad is an online tool for 'public pads', enabling collaboration with several learners (up to 16 of them) on the same document. All learners get their own colour for adding their texts. Titanpad can be of use when discussing certain statements or a certain text in small groups of learners. It's not possible to add pictures or videos. At the end you can easily save the text as pdf.

6. AnswerGarden (www.answergarden.ch)

AnswerGarden is a digital scribble space, allowing learners to give a quick reaction. Afterwards a word cloud shows all reactions (and there are different possibilities). In this way it's possible to trace easily where opinion of learners are overlapping or not.

7. Todaysmeet (www.todaysmeet.com)

TodaysMeet is a small-scale Twitter, enabling learners to share short messages. You can use it as a kind of one-word-feedback or one-word-brainstorm. At the end it's possible to create a transcript.

Finally, when thinking about introducing e-learning in a course, always consider to introduce the online tool to learners in advance, so they'll have the possibility to get to know how it works. In this way, you prevent learners dropping out simply because they did not know how to make use of the tool.

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