CAREFUL ASSESSMENT

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Dear reader,

We would like to introduce you to a delicate and ambiguous topic. In the letter on assessment (see letter 8 from our REFLECT correspondent) we've already put forward the complicated situation concerning the assessment of reflection: on the one hand assessments are a valid tool for tracking the learning process of learners, but on the other hand we've experienced in our partner organisations how assessments can have an often underestimated negative impact on the quality of reflection. In this chapter we want to explore how to deal with assessment of reflection in an alternative way, questioning even the possibility to assess reflections (especially in the case of exposing personal feelings and experiences).

AMBIGUITY OF ASSESSING REFLECTION

Assessment as such, and assessment of reflection in particular, is a delicate and important part of the learning process and has a strong impact on learner's motivation to explore further the inner and outer world. Careful and proper assessment that is done on time could encourage the learner to enhance quality of their reflections, helping to find new meaning, motivation and ways to reflect; while inappropriate, too harsh or formal assessment of personal reflection may demotivate the learner to reflect further and may distort the educator-learner relationships.

Discussion within REFLECT's focus groups on assessment of reflection

The topic of assessment of reflection raised ambiguous thoughts and feelings within REFLECT. At the end of the testing phase in February 2016, the University of Padua organised two focus groups with some of the participants who had run a test project in their organisations. The facilitators of these two sessions led the groups through a question about assessment: to what extent can you assess reflection? Concerning this point, it's interesting to notice how during the discussion different positions emerged.

The first one referred to 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 the process was, if it was useful, how it was and what the facilitator did. It is not about grading, but just evaluating how it was in order to improve next time."

Additionally, there was a fourth perspective according to which assessment is not connected to a way of grading, but to the possibility of registering some changes occurring 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 sixth 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 on the contrary obstructs it.

From this intertwined discussion appears a strong feeling on how assessment of reflection can be difficult and at the same time a challenge for all teachers/educators. In fact, the participants of the testing phase 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 focus groups suggests that there is still much hesitation and caution related to the assessment of reflection.

Literature on assessment of reflection

This difficulty is demonstrated also by the available literature; in fact, few papers are focused on the assessment of reflection, with those available divisible into three categories:

1. Self-evaluation, with a specific focus on the metacognitive process;
2. The way to assess reflection through models or tools;
3. The validation of instruments to assess reflection, especially in medical education contexts (see the previous chapter "Exploring the landscape of reflection").

Starting from this overview of literature on assessment of reflection, it appears that the attention on 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.

For example, during the focus group, partners tended to recognise that reflection was a competence but at the same time admitted that it was impossible to assess it. They would argue that they could recognise if the reflection was happening, but they weren't able to assess the extent or level of it. That reflection was not a product but a process, so then how would they assess the quality of the process? Reflection helped with the learning of the learner, but assessment of reflection would obscure the reflection. It meant they wouldn't assess reflection, but if they wouldn't assess the quality of reflection, how could they improve it?

We believe that the development of assessment guidelines and the assessing reflection that follows them, to be one of the ways to improve the quality of reflection. While developing guidelines for assessment of reflection we departed from the REFLECT principles. These principles involve: the importance of the creation of a reflective atmosphere; the development of a personal point of view and a kind of 'interconnectedness' between the educator and the learner; valuing "not knowing" and openness to things that were unforeseen and an increased inner readiness to reveal the personal potential in a certain situation. Aspects of reflection mentioned above are described in the chapters "Letters from our REFLECT correspondent" and "Exploring the landscape of reflection".

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT OF ASSESSMENT

Reflection is used as a means for learning, both in formal and non-formal education, when the learner is given assignments to reflect on the processes, experiences, attitudes and learning in order to achieve other goals. But formal and non-formal education having different traditions creates completely different contexts for reflection in the field of assessment.

Assessment in formal education is generally about establishing to which degree learners meet certain educational standards. Measured achievement of a certain quality level, comparison and grading takes place. A procedure of grading itself is connected with judging from "those who know", or at least could be easily perceived as such, and is contrary to the non-judgmental atmosphere and equal dialogue which are so important for reflection.

Non-formal education usually has no strict requirements for assessment. The focus of assessment is mainly on the progress of the individual learner or the group of learners, or they focus on the usefulness of the learning process for the learners.

On summative and formative assessment

To proceed further with the topic of "Assessment of reflection", we will rest for a while on assessment itself. In the Cambridge Dictionary, assessment is defined as the act of judging or deciding the amount, value, quality or importance of something, or the judgment or decision that is made. In education, the term assessment refers to the variety of methods or tools that educators use to evaluate, measure, and document the learning achievements, learning progress, skills, or educational needs of learners.

Assessment can be done in both summative and formative ways. Summative assessment is "assessment activity which results in a mark or grade which is subsequently used as a judgement on student performance. Ultimately judgements using summative assessment marks will be used to determine the classification of award at the end of a course or programme" (Irons, 2008). Formative assessment is referred to as a task or activity which creates feedback for learners about their learning. Formative assessment does not carry a grade which is subsequently used in a summative assessment (Irons, 2008). Black and William (1998) suggest that formative assessment refers to "all those activities undertaken by teachers (and by their students in assessing themselves), which provide [formative] feedback to shape and develop the teaching and learning activities in which both teachers and students are engaged". Formative assessment should: provide positive learning opportunities; encourage dialogue and discourse between learners and educators; enhance the learner's learning experience and provide motivation. One of the goals of formative assessment is to improve learners' metacognitive awareness of how they learn.

It is interesting to mention while talking about reflection assessment that reflection of the learning process itself is a type of formative assessment (e.g. reflection journals that are reviewed periodically).

Reflection can be invited by creating a non-judgmental reflective atmosphere, but it cannot be imposed. Also, marking/grading affects reflection. The moment the learner learns that her reflection is going to be graded, the genuine reflection stops, or reverts back to attempts to fit with the educator's expectations. Reflection can't be marked because it is unquantifiable, it can be assessed only qualitatively, unless it becomes an aim (object) of learning.

Keeping in mind the principles developed during the REFLECT project we could say that reflection should be assessed in a formative rather than summative way of assessing.

In both formal and non-formal educational settings, the usefulness of reflection can be assessed in a formative way together with the learner by looking at the learning process as a whole. Reflection is only one step in the learning process; it is used together with active experimentation, knowledge gaining and the development of new skills in the learning process in order to achieve certain learning aims. For example, if reflection has been used for the enhancement of competence to cooperate and work in teams, then reflection was good or high quality if it contributed to the development or improvement of abilities to cooperate and work in a team.

Summative assessment and grading is an inevitable feature of formal education. There are different sets of standards which have been historically and socially developed and which are constantly renewed, e.g., there are some standards for higher education (some are national, others institutional), there are standards developed by professional communities, e.g., psychologists, doctors, lawyers, engineers etc. Formal education institutions issue diplomas, certificates and take the responsibility to guarantee that the graduate would meet those standards. Here we see the control function of the educators: they are like gate keepers that permit the candidate into professional circles (or not, if they fail to meet the required standards). This control function implies the use of power: the educator has power over the learner and the relationship between the learner and the educator is unequal. The danger is that this power can be misused and this is the main reason for the learners' distrust and dishonesty. This is a very important dynamic of which we must be aware while discussing the use of reflection and an assessment of the quality of reflection in formal education.

When there is pressure to assess learning in a summative way we recommend the assessment of whether the leaning goals of the certain subject have been reached, keeping assessment of reflections formative unless reflection becomes an aim (object) of the teaching/learning. In this case, the primary goal is to enhance the learner's ability to reflect and somehow measure the progress. Anyway we should be very careful about assessment of reflection and shift from summative assessment as the focus of learning from both teachers and students.

WAYS OF REFLECTING

While assessing reflection it is important to keep in mind that depending on the different aims, reflection happens on different levels of intimacy. These levels range from descriptive accounts about external phenomena, to different levels of mental and emotional processing, to intensive reflection of inner reality. At times reflection in the learning process involves changes: changing ones' views, attitudes, and behaviours; accepting and incorporating new ideas; improving communication, changing relationships etc. At other times, we use reflection in the learning process to get more knowledge on the specific subject without any expectation of personal change.

It's a kind of puzzle in the field of education, that we use the same term 'reflection' for a process of personal disclosure in an intimate conversation and also for a written reflective analysis of an external phenomenon for example an art exhibition or a migration crisis. The educators participating in the testing phase of the project agreed that reflection on personal issues is much more sensitive to assess than reflection of external things, and should be assessed much more carefully.

There are also different forms that reflection takes which affect reflection and the possibilities to assess it. An individual reflection, where the written form is preferred to the oral, is more often used in formal education. In this case an educator usually does not see the process of reflection and perceives understanding about a learner's reflection only from the written text he provides.

In a group reflection which is more often used in non-formal education, the educator is usually taking part and moderates the process. In that case, the educator can witness the process, sometimes noticing simply from the nonverbal signs if the person is reflecting now or not, and at the same time this strongly affects the quality of reflection.

FOCUS OF ASSESSMENT

The major question of the REFLECT project was: how can educators support learners to reflect more appropriately in formal and non-formal education? While thinking about assessment of reflection we focused on those aspects of reflection which, when explored and taken into consideration, could help educators to support learners' reflection.

Consequently, reflection in formal and non-formal education is one of the steps in the learning process: it is a tool for reaching the learning goals, helping learners to learn, however it is not an aim in itself. That's why while assessing reflection it is crucial to concentrate on how useful reflection was for learners in the specific process of learning.

To do that, we as professional educators should be able to firstly designate some indicators that reflection is happening; secondly, to find ways to decide how useful reflection was for the learning; and thirdly, to assess the context of reflection including our own input (the process and involvement of the learner, the efforts and conditions created by the educator, the relationship and interaction between the learner and the educator). We think it's useful to assess all those aspects if we want improve the quality of reflection and increase the probability of reaching broader learning aims.

Was there actually reflection?

Thinking of indicators that reflection was happening, it's necessary to bear in mind all the various reflection aims, forms, learners' backgrounds and the fact that reflection could be planned and organised or could happen spontaneously. For example, it could vary from individual written reflection about external phenomenon, to a group expressing through drawing unspoken thoughts and hidden feelings. It is also important to understand that the process of reflection is not equal to the process of the expression of it.

Here is a list of possible indicators which could show that the learner is reflecting:

Being present. For reflection of any phenomenon to happen it is crucial to be in contact with that phenomenon, or to say it in a more poetical way, to be present or "to be". Instead of expressing themselves, individuals can be impressed by the world, having to slow down to be immersed in the context and the flow of the living moment, embodied. The importance of being present is stressed by the authors of the phenomenological model (Bleakley, 1999; Fay & Riot, 2007; Lewis & Farnsworth, 2007; Mortari, 2012) as well as in the report of the testing phase of the REFLECT project. ¶ On the language level it

could be reflected through much more personal use of language of the learner ("I think", "I felt…"), expressing specific authentic experiences. The learner dissociates from inertia and stops using clichés ("Usually people…", "We did it, because we felt like a team…"). The learner focuses attention on the expression of the world in a specific authentic experience, instead of referring to common practices and authorities. He identifies phenomena which are touching him on a personal level. ¶ On the behavioural level the learner also intercepts inert behaviour and engages in reflection. This could manifest itself in a diversity of ways: the learner could slow down, take time, contemplate phenomenon, listen attentively or he could be very active in trying to reach understanding of "What is really happening?" ¶ On the emotional level this could be marked with emotional intensity, which usually follows a revelation of a new (previously undiscovered) and personally important thing. The learner is in contact with his feelings more strongly than usual.

Not knowing. Analysis of testing projects during the REFLECT project revealed experience of "not knowing" as an important part of the process of deep reflection. The learner experiences "not knowing" while dissociating from the habitual behavioural models or clichés. The learner could "not know", how to name what is happening; even what he is feeling. In an article for Coyote Magazine Mark Taylor adds how not-knowing implies a certain kind of 'stuckness': it's a "time when you are confronted with a problem or a dilemma and you really do not know what to do or which way to proceed. To put it mildly, the feelings associated with this moment are pretty uncomfortable, even painful: confusion; frustration; fear of being laughed at; embarrassment; nervousness; being out of balance and so on. As such, most people want to pass this stage as quickly as possible and get back to their comfort zone."

Being able to name things. In the model of critical reflection (see the literature review), 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) ¶ The learner's ability to name/recognise what he perceives, what he thinks and how he acts is an important grounding for other parts of reflection. The learner can describe the issue or incident to be explored in detail, recalling actions, words, feelings, thought etc.

Exploration from different angles. The learner is exploring an issue or incident from different perspectives, trying to understand how others could perceive the situation or phenomenon.

Connecting. An ability to connect different aspects of inner and outer reality was mentioned as an indication of reflection by almost all the participants of the workshop on assessment of reflection. ¶ The learner is making connections between the incidents, discipline, knowledge other external or internal phenomenon, and his own experience, attitudes, personal ideas and outer world. ¶ The learner connects with the topic or process on the personal level: recognises the situations and moments when her opinions and attitudes were challenged or reinforced. ¶ The learner makes connections between his experiences during the course with real life or in work situations. The learner is trying to find how, what and when he could apply his learning. ¶ The learner refers to relevant theory and literature supporting his reflections.

Reasoning. The learner is trying to understand and explain the reasons behind a specific phenomenon which he is reflecting upon. The learner is naming factors underlying the reflected phenomenon; exploring why they are important. ¶ The learner reflects on the reasons and consequences of the process. She becomes aware of the reasons why we perceive, act and feel in a specific way (Mezirow's (1991) model of critical reflection).

The learner takes **ownership and responsibility** of the learning process, using reflection to explore topic of interest. The learner expresses his opinion and attitude, explains them, gives his arguments in support of the specific opinion or attitude.

4.   How useful was reflection for the learner?

While assessing the usefulness of reflection for the learner it is important to do that in open dialogue with the learner, exploring how much the learner has moved towards his or her learning goals with the help of reflection. This part of assessment is focussed on the learner's self-evaluation based on metacognitive process (see chapter "Landscape of Reflection).

Here are examples of questions which might be helpful in assessing the usefulness of reflection for the learner. After answering each of these questions with short initial answers, it is recommended to explore further details.

- Have you, while reflecting, discovered new things about … (the content of learning – hereafter CL)?
- Does the reflection help you to deepen/broaden/ground your understanding of …(CL)?
- Did you have other personally meaningful moments during reflection?
- Which way (if at all) has the reflection influenced your attitude, opinion towards …(CL)?
- Does reflection support your ability to express or act out your potential (knowledge and skills) in a specific situation?
- Does reflection enable you to connect your owned competences with a specific context of your life?
- Which skills, knowledge or attitudes have changed somehow during/after your reflection?
- Did you learn something from your reflection? (What did you learn you're your reflection?)
- How do you think you will take something for the future from this experience and reflection of it?

5. In which way did the reflective atmosphere foster reflection?

One of the educator's tasks is helping the learner to reflect or to support their reflection. While assessing reflection and looking for further possibilities for improvement, it is crucial to have in mind the entire picture of reflection including the whole atmosphere which is affecting reflection. This reflective atmosphere encompasses: the impact of the educator; the relationship between the learner-educator-group; a particular educational system and the other contexts of reflection.

Assessing the impact of the educator

One responsibility of the educator is to take the initiative in building a relationship between educator and learners based on trust, openness, empathy, transparency, dialogue and feedback (see letter no 4), direct the reflective attention of the learner (see letter no5), encourage the learner to take ownership and responsibility for the learning and learning results (see letter no 3). While assessing the impact of the educator (or me if I'm an educator) it could be helpful to look at some of the following aspects which the educator could follow to support reflection:

- Did I explain the principles of reflection for the learner? Did I and the learner have a common understanding of what reflection is?
- Is the reflection that I am inviting others to do appropriate or not? It might be that it is becoming just an obligatory routine for the learner.
- Did I give the reflection assignment in a way which is possibly 'appealing' for learners personal and/or professional development?
- Can I give learners the possibility to choose a focus (topic) of reflection?
- Have I created enough of a trusting relationship for reflection to happen? Am I basing my relationship with the learner on openness, dialogue and empathy?
- Did I "hold space" for reflection – "a supportive environment both intellectually and emotionally, an authentic context" (these points are going to be described in more detail later on a paragraph devoted to assessment of the context of reflection)?
- Have I asked questions which have helped the learner to reflect? Was I deepening my questions progressively?
- Did I give enough tools/knowledge which could help the certain learner to reflect?
- Did I invite and stimulate learners to dialogue with me as well as each other? Am I creating a dialogue that accounts for multiple perspectives and allows meaningful learning to take place?
- Can I and do I give the learner a possibility not to reflect on this topic if he does not need or want to?
- Can I accept the "not knowing" of the learner and support him in this experience?
- Can I give power and control of the reflection results to the learner? Can I let go of the control and follow the flow in reflection created by the learners?
- Can I guarantee confidentiality of spoken or written personal reflection?
- Am I participating in the reflection process myself? Am I open enough and sincere?
- Am I aware of myself and my feelings in the reflective process?
- Am I a person the learner can trust?
- If I'm intending to assess reflection, did I explain to the learner which aspects of his/her reflection will be assessed and how I'm going to assess?

Assessing the Context of Reflection

The reflection process requires learner's openness and honesty to articulate and explore uncomfortable issues or conflicting feelings which may arise. All contexts of reflection could have a huge impact on such an intimate and personal process, so it is important to look at the elements that possibly enhance or hinder the reflective atmosphere.

- Does the particular educational system (format of course), or study programme allow the building of a trusting relationship with the learner and in between learners?
- At some point of the educational process, did the learners learn how to reflect?
- Is the environment of reflection supportive both intellectually and emotionally? (Is it welcomed to have different opinions, make mistakes, express feelings?)
- During the process of reflection did the learners have moments of not doing anything and silence?
- Is the level of trust and safety between the group members sufficient for reflection to be openly and authentically expressed?

Each group is a complex entity of people, relationships, dynamic, and has a certain stage of development, with a different culture and tasks to do. There could be many distinct reasons why the level of trust among the particular group of learners is, or becomes, low. We as educators may always look at possible causes seeking to enhance that level, and therefore possibly quality, of reflection.

Some areas to consider:

- Do they know each other well enough for feeling safe in the group?
- Do we reflect in the same group or are members of the group constantly changing?
- Do they have burning conflicts or other issues, which probably should be resolved before reflection can take place?
- Do we create a group culture of sharing and listening to each other with respect? Do the norms of the learning group allow individuals to have a different point of view, being different both from their peers and from the educator?
- Is the group small enough to talk and share reflections?
- Are the ways or methods we are using for reflection appropriate for this particular group of learners?

Another group of contextual factors is purely external, but sometimes they can play an important role in the quality of reflection, especially for some learners. These are items such as inappropriate place, a constant noise and other interruptions, an external observer, bad timing, a lack of time etc.

To summarise, if while assessing the reflection atmosphere, including an input of the educator, we are answering "No" to most of the prior questions, it is more a miracle than a norm that sincere and profound reflection is still happening.

CONCLUSION

Ending the chapter about assessment of reflection we would like to stress the recommendation to not use summative but formative assessment while assessing reflection: to spot indications and moments which could be important for the quality of reflection and to explore this in open dialogue with the learner. Another way to call this form of assessment could be "Reflection of Reflection".

In educational process (both formal and non-formal), mostly reflection acts as a tool not as an aim in itself. Thus, the main attention while assessing a reflection should be paid to how useful it was for the learner's achievement of his learning goals, (or in finding new, unexpected achievements) and how the process of reflection could be supported in the future by the educator.

In those cases, when we should assess the learner by the grade, we recommend to assess his knowledge, skills and understanding of a certain subject, but not the way that the learner reflects in the process of getting there.

So, dear reader, be careful each time when you enter through the open learners' door to the land of personal discoveries and especially while assessing them!

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