

Self-Reflection

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Reflection is a comparative process of thinking aimed at attaining perception of what has happened in the past that can be used for pending decisions and future action.

Self-reflection focusses this thinking on the person reflecting – one's own actions in the past with their pre-conditions and consequences are subjected to analysis and evaluated in relation to one's objectives and the degree to which these were achieved. The conclusions drawn from this process form the basis for subsequent actions.

Thus, (self) reflection is a learning process that is the basis on which further personal development is at all possible. This is particularly true of the professional domain – and here especially in educational occupations. Here responsible and accountable actions are inconceivable without the corrective of parallel reflection.

At the same time, pedagogical thinking towards oneself is also appropriate. Teachers are all too often fixated on finding and avoiding mistakes. As a result, their reflection tends to limit itself to trying to find out what they can improve.

However:

He who does not know what he is doing well and why it is good, cannot develop his strengths and use them to compensate for weaknesses!

After an especially good lesson, a situation resolved brilliantly, it is tremendously important to realize WHY it was so successful! Without this reflection success is like a win in the lottery: gratifying but not repeatable.

Reflection – why?

To be successful as a teacher requires among other things competence in reflection. Only those who have a clear idea of where they want to go will find ways that lead to their objectives. Observation and analysis of one's own actions and the consequences arising from them are important aids to orientation. This chapter offers suggestions for implementing them and profiting from them. It does not provide inflexible instructions: reflecting is thinking – and that is very individual. It is intended to raise awareness of two important aspects of all reflection:

- a) one's **own intellectual world** in which reflection takes place, and

b) **routines of thinking** that can influence or even determine the course of reflection and thus its results.

a) The world in teachers' heads

The fact that the world around us and the situations we are in is/are not easy but rather that we perceive and experience them in very different ways has in recent years increasingly become the subject of advocates of constructivist communication and learning theories für the field of teaching and learning. As examples, Friedemann Schulz von Thun and Kersten Reich may be mentioned (cf. bibliography). As early as 1986 Manfred Hofer published his "Sozialpsychologie erzieherischen Handelns" (The Social Psychology of Educational Actions") (cf. bibliography). Here it was demonstrated in detail what influences teacher activity – mostly without those involved being aware of it. Ideas of education, implicit personality theories, perspectives of perception, attribution of causes and expectations – to mention but a few factors – are the basis of decision-making and evaluation. They all reveal more about the teacher's personality than about the specific situation or the pupils involved. They are therefore a starting point for teachers to understand their own behaviour and if necessary to change it.

During reflection these factors become clear and they can be faced (What do I really expect? What ideas of how things should be guide my actions? Why do I always notice certain pupils?) – and so the way is open for decision-making based on reasons (Are my expectations realistic? Can I give reasons for my ideas of how things should be or have I just adopted them from somewhere? What makes me particularly aware of certain pupils?).

b) Habits of thinking

People think very much in categories. As long as the contents of the categories applied and the aspects that decide their creation are not very individual, this is not a problem. On the contrary, it is usually helpful, it allows us to reach a quick judgement of aspects of our environment. When, however, it is matter of people and their relationships with each other – and this is undoubtedly the case with teaching and learning – it gets difficult. If pairs of opposites develop from these categories, huge problems can easily arise. Then there are:

good lessons	bad lessons
good teachers / pupils	bad teachers / pupils
right	wrong
hard-working teachers / pupils	lazy teachers / pupils
clever pupils	stupid pupils.

This list could be continued. The fact that here it is only a question of “either/or” leads to neglect of what really characterizes human beings, namely individuality and variety, and it is in the true sense of the word inhumane. The notion “I must give good lessons” is not the same thing as “I would like to offer effective lessons”, if teachers see pupils with poor results as “lazy” or “stupid”, they will not realize that they themselves contribute to these results. Then it is often not possible to see useful ways to handle the situation.

Causality is also part of the human repertoire of thinking. There is a reason for everything, everything is caused by certain factors. In connection with relationships this can soon lead to the question of blame: Pupils have not understand what is being taught? – There must be a reason for that, somebody must be to blame! From the perspective of the learners it is then often the teachers and their lessons while they see the pupils’ “stupidity”, “laziness” or “lack of interest” as the reasons. And so the situation is confused, learning is hampered and the atmosphere is affected.

During reflection these patterns of thinking can be recognized and dealt with.

Reflection – and what else?

Teachers define themselves by the fact that they teach. ALL of them do! No matter what age your pupils are, regardless of what subjects you teach or what sort of school you work at: as teachers you are part of an interactive process of teaching and learning that has different concretizations but always the same objective – that pupils can learn with your help. Therefore teachers are successful only when their teaching really leads to learning. That requires pre-conditions:

You must be at home in the contents of your lessons!

If a teacher has mastered his trade, knows the structures of his knowledge and can establish links with other fields, he will be flexible enough in handling it so as to provide access for all learners.

→ Further training is an integral part of teaching! Successful teachers normally also enjoy learning!

You need an adequate repertoire of methods!

The more ways to your objective you know, the greater will be the chance that you will achieve it!

→ You wear different clothes for different occasions, use different forms of transport depending on your destination – so why should your lessons always proceed

according to the same pattern? Knowhow in methods and didactics enables you to select objective-oriented lesson options and helps you achieve success !

Orientation is essential!

If you constantly make sure that you are going in the right direction, you will achieve your objective. Reflection is the method that allows you to see whether you are on the right path!

→ Reflection is methodical thinking – therefore it must be learnt. An idea just wandering through your head may be a good way to start – but if you do not know HOW to reflect, you will not get any further!

Reflecting is systematic

Note: The example in this paragraph relates to primary school – the steps to reflection presented there are, on the other hand, appropriate for general use.

Reflection of teacher activity takes place fundamentally by comparing objective, planning, execution and result. It requires analytical procedures and clear argumentation. The aim is the further development and optimization of one's own actions.

Generally speaking it is a matter either of

- a pedagogical situation that was initially planned, then executed and finally (for the present) completed (usually: teaching situation) or of
- a pedagogical situation that arose spontaneously and therefore was not completed according to any plan (often: dealing with behaviour).

Contents of Reflection are:

1. The situation itself

It should be understood as accurately as possible:

When did it happen? What happened before, may have influenced what happened?

What had I planned? What happened in fact? In what aspects is my plan different from what in fact happened? How do I judge that? What perspective do I want to view it from?

What do I want to gain insights into?

Example:

During a phase of free individual work I got the impression that some pupils were "frittering away" their time while others were working keenly.

*Possible ways to gain **insights**:*

Was the reason for some children's inaction the tasks I offered or was it something to do

with the pupils themselves?

Is pupil inaction during individual work acceptable – under which conditions, when?

If I want to prevent something like this happening in the future, what are useful ways to do this and what are not?

Why is the situation a problem for me?

2. The people involved

How did I react and why? How did the children, colleagues, ... react? How do I judge that? What interpretations do I have for the reasons for my reaction and that of the others? Why?

Which insights could help me to proceed?

Example:

I tried to interest one of the children not doing any work in some material – unsuccessfully. This child suddenly had to go to the toilet and stayed away for a long time. I assume he wanted to avoid the situation with the work. I went to look for the child and found him standing around in the passage; I took him back into the classroom and told him to start working. Then he fetched a table puzzle and played around with it – but did not really work. I had the impression he wanted to seem to be working in order to be left in peace and quiet.

*Possible ways to gain **insights**::*

Is the reason for the child's behaviour something to do with me, the tasks I offered, my communication, ...? If not, what could be his difficulties – is it hard for him to make decisions, is the work too hard or too easy, is he occupied with other problems How can I find that out?

3. My own behaviour

What was my state of mind (how was I feeling, how did I enter into the situation – concentrating or absent-minded, confident or fearful, hesitant ...), what expectations did I have (→ planning!)?

Example:

I had invested a lot of work in preparing the free individual work. The fact that most of the

children were enthusiastic was an endorsement for me. At the beginning I assumed that NN. not being interested in any of the work was because he couldn't decide what was "more tempting" And so I tried to steer him towards a particular piece of material – I wanted to help him to decide. After he stayed away for so long and I had to bring him back in, I realized that he did not want to work at all. At first I was worried about him. As he then quite obviously just wanted me to leave him in peace and quiet, I did so – but I still have the unpleasant feeling that I simply had not offered the right task for this child to choose. This makes me feel unconfident and makes me rather angry as well – after all, I had spent a long time preparing the work.

*Possible ways to gain **insights**:*

How accurately do I have to meet all the children's needs? Is it a "failure" if I do not succeed? Can I include this in my planning – how? Is it worthwhile presenting material for work if success is not certain? How can I achieve an acceptable ratio between the amount of work involved and the expected success? What is "success" for me (The children's enthusiasm? The results of their learning? The implementation of the lesson plan?...). What influence does my disappointment / my anger have on my work?

4. The outlook for my work in the future

What is important to me for similar situations in the future? What will I change / keep? Is it useful to keep "working on" this situation – or is it finished? What action models do I know - which could I / which couldn't I implement? Why? Which aspect of this situation is the most important for me – and I would like to work on first of all (the amount of work, my disappointment, the child's motivation, ...)?

Example:

Possible insights:

I can accept that not all children are equally enthusiastic about the lessons I offer. In future I will remember that when I am preparing the material for work and at the same time try to make this material very inviting. I will use fewer materials that I produce mainly because I think "the children will enjoy" them – that will reduce the amount of work involved. My main criterion will be whether the material provides possibilities for learning.

In addition, next time I can ask a child that is not able or willing to do anything with the material offered what work within the framework of my teaching objectives he would prefer to do (perhaps some revision or catching up on work he missed).

And how long will this take?

Reflection of one's own teaching and the results of this teaching is part of routine preparation and follow-up work. In the same way as work on the content of individual lesson units requires different amounts of time depending on contents, which pupils it is aimed at and other general conditions, the time required for reflection varies. Sometimes it will only take a few minutes, then again it may take longer or even be a process in phases over the course of several days. Reflection is a very individual matter. The important thing is THAT REFLECTION HAPPENS.

What can assist me?

It is a good idea, at least in situations that are experienced as especially important, successful, difficult or stressful, to keep reflection records. This creates an individual general view of recurring situations and questions and of decisions that were taken in each case. This synopsis provides a basis for evaluation of one's own work as a teacher.

A table for this kind of record is suggested below.

TIP: Be careful to keep the contents of your reflection record in a balanced proportion of positive and negative connotations.

Record of Reflection

Date:	Class:	Classification*: ☹️ 😐 😊
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Occasion / Situation	
People Involved	
My Actions / Behaviour	
I want to clarify in my mind:	
Outlook – In a similar situation I will try next time:	

* Here you can record in coloured marker whether you are concentrating in your reflection on a stressful, neutral or pleasant situation. If you file the pages accordingly, you will be able after some time to recognize core tendencies: What makes me successful? What is stressful for me? In this way, individual patterns of behaviour and attitude will become apparent.

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