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Reflexivity

Being able to locate oneself both personally and professionally in history in order to be clear about the forces that have come to determine one's existence, is the hallmark of a teacher who has been able to harness the reflective process and can begin to act on the world in a way that amounts to changing it.
(Smyth 1989:15)

Why read this text?

Reflexivity is a central pillar of responsibility and professionalism as a teacher. This basic idea is scientifically laid out in the following text and examined from an educational anthropological perspective. The text intends to encourage the reader to see reflexivity as a vital and essential part of their personal and professional qualities.

After all, the working environment of teachers is more dynamic than in almost any other profession - they accompany diverse groups of learners as they develop and grow as individuals. Although this takes place on an intellectual level - in terms of didactics - it is even more so through interpersonal contact and exchange. There is no "pure" knowledge transfer, rather it is constantly embedded in social interaction - knowledge transfer is always person-dependent. This becomes clear from our own biographies when we think about how much influence certain teacher figures had on our personal development. Every reader is able to recall memories, both positive and negative: in one case, the English teacher opened the door to the beauty of language in the 9th grade, in another case, he or she will never again practice a ball game because the sports teacher in the middle school was unfairly grading him or her. Interpersonal interaction is what makes us who we are, yet conflicts have a lasting effect on us. From a social science point of view, however, interpersonal conflicts in social interaction are not only of a "purely private" nature, but also always point to major social problems. Thus, conflicts in the school context can never be separated from problems of society as a whole. These often manifest themselves in micro-situations, but are often not recognised by those involved and thus remain invisible. In this sense, the following contribution invites you to take a fresh look at your own teaching practice and to examine it. Reflexivity is the central ability here to be able to look at oneself and to perceive one's own part in dynamics and possibly conflicts. Ultimately, this ability is a central part of the responsibility of the teaching profession to design inclusive teaching processes and to understand oneself as a lifelong learner.

Historical Context

In an educational anthropological approach to reflexivity in the classroom, two developments of the second half of the 20th century in particular have had a major influence. These are briefly outlined below and are helpful in understanding the importance of the discussion today.

On the one hand, emerging discussions in the social sciences of the 1970s and 1980s have emphasized and redefined the relevance of reflexivity as never before. This left a profound impact on the social sciences and led to reflexivity becoming a central pillar in the quality



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and ethical standards of research. Until then, science was understood as "objective", i.e. through research generally valid and value-neutral statements about society and people could be made. In this approach, reflexivity simply entailed the following: considerations to ensure that scientific standards such as repeatability, verifiability and falsification or verification are met. In other words, conditions were desirable as they are ideally found in the laboratory - every influence can be regulated, every factor can be taken into account. In the course of time, however, critical voices were raised. These voices raised the fact that social science research did not live up to its own standards in this respect, as it completely neglected one thing: the role of the researcher himself.

This is of central importance, as one's own ideas, perspectives and assumptions have an enormous influence on the research itself. What I take into account, how I look at things and which aspects I pay less attention to depends very much on what I bring with me as a specific individual with a particular biographical experience. One of the main criticisms in the debate was that social science approaches do not recognise this and look at society with a "view from nowhere" (Haraway 1988), i.e. completely ignoring the specific position from which things are observed and analysed. Illustrated by a fictional example, this implies the following: A researcher from the German upper class would generate completely different research results in let's say a suburb of Cape Town than a researcher with local roots. My own experiences, based on my specific biographical background, have a tremendous influence on my perception, my set of values and my view of the world.

In general, this is not necessarily bad or good per se, but it raises important questions: What role does my specific background of experience play in the field? What are the differences in life experience compared to the researched individuals? To what extent is my perception shaped by my assumptions? These debates led to the idea that reflexivity in contemporary approaches includes the following: being aware of one's position and responsibly reflecting on the consequences of this position.

On the other hand, educational anthropology has shown, almost since its beginnings in the 1950s, that a similar problem exists in the school context. Here the educational anthropological studies of the Spindler couple in the USA were groundbreaking: for example, in 1951 George Spindler showed in his classic study of a class to what extent the self-perception of the teacher Roger Harker (pseudonym) did not correspond to reality. Roger Harker was convinced that all pupils should be treated equally. However, Spindler observed that the quality and quantity of treatment of students in the classroom differed greatly - the students who were most similar to his background (white, middle class, ...) were given a lot of attention, while students outside these categories were given little. This also included informal interaction such as jokes and conversations outside the classroom. It also affected the expectations of the students, so the group outside of its categories was less challenged and ultimately less encouraged. Only the students concerned expressed criticism of the situation, while no one else - neither the teacher nor the director - noticed these problems. Central to this is the focus on Roger Harker as one of the causes of conflicts in the classroom. Here the teacher is brought back into the picture, whereas the teacher would also view the conflicts with the "view from nowhere" described above - his or her own actions and



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personality would remain unnoticed and the other people involved would be named as the reason for conflicts.

This phenomenon has been observed repeatedly in over 60 years of educational anthropological research in a wide variety of contexts. The key issue here is that such conflicts between teacher and student are never of a "purely private" nature. Rather, the experiences we make in our respective affiliations, such as cultural background, gender or social class, influence our interactions. It is problematic, however, if only the other person is attested to be "different" or incompatible without reflecting on our characteristics. Here, reflexivity is of utmost importance.

a) Discussion

However, a basic problem remains, which already arises with the attempt to write about reflexivity: Reflection is not a simple withdrawal and rational analysis of clear situations. Rather, experienced reality is quite the opposite - chaotic, emotionally charged and inhabited by complex people. In this sense, there is neither a simple instruction for reflection nor the possibility to measure reflexivity in everyday life. Rather, one's own intuition probably plays the biggest role, in school lessons as elsewhere. Nevertheless, the teaching profession requires a sensitivity, a constant examination of oneself, or as the teacher Jean Rudduck put it in relation to other teachers: „Not to examine one's practice is irresponsible; to regard teaching as an experiment and to monitor one's performance is a responsible professional act" (Smyth 1989:16).

b) Practical example

In this sense, a practical example per se cannot be an instruction manual for reflexivity, but must provide space for the respective context and individuals. The renowned educational scientist J. Smyth offers such a concept. This is now a classic example of practice-oriented systematic reflection and consists of four steps:

1. **Describe... what do I do?**
2. **Inform ... what does this mean?**
3. **Confront... how did I come to be like this?**
4. **Reconstruct... how might I do things differently?**

Describe: The basic idea here is that every form of reflexivity has to be practice-oriented - so he suggests to write down experienced situations, events and days in detailed descriptions. This does not have to be done in academic language, on the contrary, it is important to use words and terms that are familiar to you. Such personalized stories are the basic starting point for the second step.

Inform: In this step it is tried to derive the recurring themes and pedagogical principles that were intuitively applied in the described events. Possibly in the form of "it looks as if..." sentences, unconsciously chosen methods and strategies can be made visible and ultimately articulate one's own implicit theory. In Smyth's words, the goal is that teachers try to "„to



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move their teaching out of the realm of the mystical [...] into a situation in which they are able to begin to see through discussion with others the nature of the forces that cause them to operate in the way they do and how they can move beyond intellectualizing the issues to concrete action for change" (Smyth 1989:14).

Confront: This step takes up the basic idea that one's own thinking and action - here understood as teaching practice - is not an individual choice, but is influenced by profound cultural values and norms. In order to get a sense of how one's own value systems and views have formed, Smyth suggests that teachers should look at their own biographies. This can create an awareness of the specific experiences. Key questions concerning this are attached at the end of this text.

Reconstruct: The last step is the practical realisation of the previous findings. Here the idea that "„the people who do the work of teaching should be the same people who reflect upon it" (Smyth 1989:15) and vice versa is essential. In this way, decisions can be made after becoming aware of one's own practice and one's own person: Do I want to do things differently? Do I stick to this or that pattern of action? Both is possible, but the key is that one is now aware of the dimensions and effects of one's own activities.

Thinking further:

- What do my practices say about my assumptions, values, and beliefs about teaching?
- Where did these ideas come from?
- What social practices are expressed in these ideas?
- What is it that causes me to maintain my theories?
- What views of power do they embody?
- Whose interests seem to be served by my practices?

(Smyth 1989:15f)

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