

One Triangle and More – MORE3.1.2 Meaning-Oriented Reflection 3.1.2

Bert Meeuwsen

Abstract

The educational technique of ‘meaning-oriented reflection’ originally highlights two angles ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’, prior to ‘wanting’ and ‘doing’. This article emphasises that due to differences among world-philosophies, an additional third angle on ‘being inspired’ by a higher power is applicable. Bringing these three angles into ‘being aware’ precedes ‘wanting’ and ‘doing’. Based on interviews and higher educational interventions, the revised ‘meaning-oriented reflection’ appears to be a useful educational technique. However, the question remains: How to implement MORE3.1.2 among educators and other professionals who may only reflect rationally?

Keywords

Bildung; education; philosophy of education; Korthagen; reflections; world-philosophies

Reflection as a tool in learning. Do we reflect rational or irrational too?

The Enlightenment, mainly due to colonialism, has had influence on education within differing world-philosophies (Wiesner-Hanks 2018). During the past decades, discussions regarding educational epistemologies have come up in the world of international education. (Moncrieffe 2022). Within education too much attention was put on logical thinking alone, whereas attention to feeling, as well as spirituality were neglected (Wa Thiong'o 1986). Stressing too much on rationality alone has been addressed by Horkheimer and Adorno (1969) in their dialectics on the Enlightenment. As a result, linking ‘thinking’ with ‘feeling’ and ‘being inspired’ appears to be key to the ‘relation of theory to practice in education’ (Dewey 1904).

In this article, an applied practical reflection tool, based on an existing reflection tool, is introduced. The modified tool can be useful among educators, however, by other professionals too. The introduction of the revised tool provides an answer to the question raised: ‘Reflection as a tool in learning. Do we reflect rationally or irrationally too?’.

‘Meaning-Oriented Reflection’ or MORE – ‘The Lift’

In 2017, Korthagen published an article in which he addressed, among other subjects, the applied practical concept of ‘meaning-oriented reflection’. By means of this form of reflection, he connects the task verbs ‘think’ and ‘feel’ with an activity that has taken place. The two verbs are followed by two more: ‘want’ and ‘do’. By looking first at the past and then at the intended future, he creates a continuous learning-loop. It is interesting to note that during the reflection,

one can switch back and forth between the four verbs. During the reflection, the reflector may feel that insufficient information is available. One then can consider going forwards or backwards within a series of terms: ‘think’ (‘thought’), ‘feel’ (‘felt’), ‘want’ (‘wanted’) and ‘do’ (‘did’). In a way, one applies a going-up or down, etc., of the terms, until all information needed is regarded as present. That is why this form of reflection is called ‘The Elevator’, or ‘The Lift’. Ultimately, this methodology results in a more adequate meaning-oriented reflection.

Practical frame as an introduction, based on author’s experience

‘The Lift’ is a practical method, I learned during my Master of Education. Originating from both business and defence sectors, I used to analyse, after performing an activity, mainly in a rational manner only. For example, by using Deming’s ‘Plan-Do-Check-Act’ (PDCA) or ‘Plan-Do-Study-Act-cycle’ (PDSA) as developed by Deming (2022) or the ‘Observation-Oriented-Decision-Action Loop’ (‘OODA loop’) originally by Boyd (2022). However, to me this seemed insufficient, as I felt there was more. Inquiring with a colleague in the health care sector, I learned that ‘thinking’ in combination with ‘feeling’ is a common way of working for them. When I was active within The Netherlands Ministry of Defence, I once asked a senior-officer colleague, after a military training exercise (2009): ‘What do you feel about what we did?’ His sneering reaction: ‘Feeling? That is not for soldiers.’ This surprised me, as ‘something is missing here’.

Since 2016, I have been active as senior lecturer in organisational studies, within international higher education, mainly in the field of international business administration. At my Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria, over 1,200 students from some 100 countries study (Wittenborg... 2022, 2). Students and staff represent a diversity of world-philosophies and corresponding thoughts. While growing up, all of them were confronted in their own way with influences on how to deal with what they did and want to do. It appears that not all of them use the same reflection model.

‘Think’/‘thought’, ‘feel’/‘felt’, ‘want’/‘wanted’, ‘do’/‘did’ – in educational practice

My observations about different forms of reflection within the business community, defence education and the health care sector had already made me use ‘think’, ‘feel’, ‘want’ and ‘do’, as well as the applicable past tenses. In my executive coaching practice, I have used ‘The Lift of Korthagen’ since 2013. The intensive contact with several thousand international students, and colleagues, stimulated me to reflect further. It is the idea that there should be a third reflective step, and possibly even an intermediate one. These steps precede ‘wanting’ and ‘doing’. In doing so, the practical method of ‘The Lift’ had to be maintained. Why? In order to remain creatively and iteratively reflective. Something about ‘useful’ and ‘efficient’, as well as ‘effective’ kept haunting my mind. All in all, it had to make sense. Results had to be achieved. Study, consultation, reflection, thinking, feeling and ‘using the lift’ gradually taught me ‘something’ extra.

The extra step(s)

What, which and especially: How? While reading for my Leiden University PhD-programme it appeared that 11th to 13th-century Christian theologians and philosophers seemed to include a third consideration in ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’. This was expressed by Meister Eckhardt in his articulation of the ‘ledic Gemüete’ (Visser 2018, 17–29). Whereby ‘Gemüete’ can be described as ‘the totality of the spiritual powers or faculties of the soul’ (Visser 2018, 19). In this it is separate from ‘feeling’ and ‘emotion’ (Visser 2018, 19). The ‘ledic’ refers to emptiness, like an emptied mind, being stripped of soul powers. This means an exit from oneself, whereby a change of mind occurs (Visser 2018, 20–21). Within this change of mind, there is an openness to inspiration, through inspiration from a higher power. With Meister Eckhardt this is God. This insight is comparable to the ideas of Thomas Aquinas, ‘who affirmed the principle of the “theologically founded worldliness”’, as stated by Pieper (1958, 186). This is touched upon by Bernard of Clairvaux, as expressed by Aerden (2020, 125): ‘affective experience and intellectual reflection together form an interpretative process from which you learn and through which you progress on the spiritual path’. Bernardus emphasised personal spiritual experience: ‘It is only through the experience that you come to know the love of Jesus’ (Bernardus, in Aerden 2020, 124). As an observation to me, ‘Being inspired by a higher power’, as part of reflection, became inspiration for the third form within the meaning-oriented reflection model.

Check and double-check within theory and practice

During critical friend scientific conversations in the last quarter of 2021, with five scientists (two theologians, one ethicist, one healthcare professional and one higher education expert), they showed both theoretical and practical recognition. One of the theologians described the verb ‘to inspire’ as ‘to sense’, like to ‘become aware’. In the same period, I taught a module to undergraduate students. With them, I discussed this ‘triangle’ leading to ‘wanting’ and ‘doing’. Intriguingly, students with a European background dropped out after ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’. Even the idea of ‘feeling’ was difficult to some of them. While, to students originating from the Asia/Pacific and Middle Africa ‘feeling’ and ‘inspiration by a higher power’ appeared to be common. These three task verbs were part of their usual way of reflecting, connected to ‘wanting’ and ‘doing’.

An intermediate step appears needed

Nevertheless, there appeared to be an intermediate step, prior to ‘wanting’ and ‘doing’. Bringing together ‘thinking’, ‘feeling’ and ‘being inspired’ led to these three, culminating in ‘sensing’ or ‘being aware’. Thus, they were ‘lifting back and forth’ along the reflective ‘The Lift’, on what they ‘wanted’ and ‘did’. That resulted in the ‘being aware’. From this ‘being aware’ one appeared ready to proceed to the future oriented ‘wanting’, and then the intended ‘doing’. The word ‘being aware’, proposed by the theologian, appeared applicable.

For the final steps and reflective completeness, one has to move on to execution, to action. From Deming’s PDSA-cycle, this corresponds to the ‘A’ of ‘Act’ or ‘Action’. In here educational reflection finds its business counterpart by means of the modified ‘Korthagen’s The Lift’ as

‘Meaning-Oriented Reflection 3.1.2’ (MORe3.1.2). The ‘3.1.2’, stands for: ‘3’ for: ‘thinking’, ‘feeling’ and ‘being inspired’; ‘1’: ‘being aware’ (‘sensing’) and ‘2’ for: ‘wanting’ and ‘doing’. MORe3.1.2 can be used for reflection towards what has been done in the past, as well as towards what in the future one intends to do.

Additional check of theory in practice

Throughout the Master module ‘High Performance Leadership’, in November–December 2021, a PhD exploratory study was conducted by me. During this module, the modified reflection model – MORe3.1.2 – was explained to graduate students. They were asked to reflect based on this model. For seven graduate students present, originating from South Asia, the Middle-East, and Mid-Africa, this form of reflection proved as common as for the aforementioned undergraduate students. Without discussion, they accepted the intervention related to ‘thinking’, ‘feeling’ and ‘being inspired’, and reflected based on the steps within MORe3.1.2.

Conclusion

The extent to which the intervention MORe3.1.2 is effective and leads to higher quality reflections based on actively connecting three interrelated sensors: 1. Thinking, 2. Feeling, and 3. Divine inspiration. Justification is based on 12th century thoughts by Meister Eckhart, Thomas Aquinas, and Bernard of Clairvaux. Additionally, actual literature emphasising other epistemologies, other than the Enlightenment alone, addresses the intervention based on latest educational insights on ‘decolonising knowledge’. The intervention adds steps to existing Eurocentric reflective cycles solely based on professional rational thinking. The intervention does justice to the importance of the human factors of emotion and spirituality within an organisation. The human being not only thinks and feels, but is inspired too. From this perception, the MORe3.1.2 meaning-oriented reflection can support decision-making as part of the learning and/or management cycle. MORe3.1.2 does justice to the power of world philosophies working together towards ‘creating a better world’.

Questions

The article started with the question: Reflection as a tool in learning. Do we reflect rational or irrational too? This question appears to have received an answer, as well as a practical meaning-oriented reflection tool. A new question is introduced: How to implement MORe3.1.2, especially among professionals, whether educators or other professionals, who may have difficulties connecting emotion and spirituality to their professional reflection?

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Bert Meeuwsen MBA, MEd, FHEA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9174-3090>

Wittenborg University of Applied Sciences, School of Business
Leiden University, Faculty Governance and Global Affairs
Laan van de Mensenrechten 500, NL-7331 VZ Apeldoorn
bert.meeuwsen@wittenborg.eu