

Images of reflection: on the meanings of the word reflection in different learning contexts

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Abstract Reflection is today a watchword in many learning contexts. Experience is said to be transformed to knowledge when we reflect on it, university students are expected to acquire the ability to reflect critically, and we want practitioners to be reflective practitioners in order to improve their professional practice. If we consider what people mean when they talk about reflection in practice, we will discover that they often mean different things. Moreover, their conceptions of reflection are guided by images rather than by definitions. This paper explores six distinct images of reflection and discusses the consequences of adopting one or more of these images in learning situations: (1) dedoublement, (2) analogical thinking, (3) mirror, (4) experiment, (5) puzzle solving, (6) criss-crossing a landscape. Reflective thinking can be improved if we are sensible of what we are reflecting about and according to which image of reflection we are doing it, since the step between using an image and seeing this image as a model is short. Using models, in turn, implies knowing their limits.

Keywords Reflection · Meaning · Image · Model · Education · Learning

1 Introduction

Experience is said to be transformed to knowledge when we reflect on it, university students are expected to acquire

the ability to reflect critically, and we want practitioners to be reflective practitioners in order to improve their professional practice. But if we consider what people mean when they talk about reflection in practice, we will discover that they are referring to different things. Moreover, their conceptions of reflection are guided by images rather than by definitions. On the other hand, academic scholars often tend to claim universality of their own definitions and models of reflection.

My aim with this essay is to show that trying to find a universal definition of the word reflection is a wrong way to go. There is no one and only model that covers all situations when we need to think reflectively, but there are several models based on the imagery behind the idea of reflection. Thus, we need to study differences between different images of reflection and, from these differences, learn to apply appropriate image when needed, particularly in educational contexts. In this paper I will present six distinct images of reflection: (1) dedoublement, (2) analogical thinking, (3) mirror, (4) experiment, (5) puzzle solving, (6) criss-crossing a landscape.

Why just six images and not two or eight? The first answer is that those six images were the most frequently encountered in my by now more than 10 years long activity as a researcher and teacher in the area of reflective practice. My examples come mainly from my knowledge about the Nordic working life research, where several research groups since the mid-1970s have been exploring epistemology of practical knowledge.

The other, actually more important, answer has to do with my belief that trying to find a general definition of reflection is not an especially constructive move. An anecdote can illuminate this point. I have heard a story that philosopher Allan Janik was once asked by the participants in a conference about the concept of culture to help them

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