

## Chapter 12

# Bridging Theory and Practice: Reflective Learning in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter focuses on reflective learning in higher education as central point of reference in answering to the social demands and the ongoing changes in modern societies. Empirical basis is a two and a half year study with a group of students in different master's programs at a University for Professional Studies and interviews with teachers who are teaching in master's programs of professional studies. The chapter presents a concept of reflective learning that values the students' practice and expertise as professionals and provides ways to further develop and transform this practice into new contexts. Hence, the productive linkage between academic ways of knowing and professional ways of knowing and the development of students as reflective practitioners are central elements.*

### INTRODUCTION

The issue of bridging theory and practice in higher education gains relevance in the light of the social demands and the ongoing changes modern societies are facing. Higher education needs to equip students “for twenty-first century skills of reflective practice” (Zuber-Skerritt & Cendon, 2014, p. 21), as Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt puts it. In this chapter the focus is put on reflective learning as a mode of learning that has the potential to bridge the world of theory with the world of practice in a productive way, and hence, to support lifelong learning at universities. In the first

part, the understanding of reflective learning and its features are presented, drawing on literature both from the organizational and professional context and from higher education. The second part focuses on students as lifelong learners and professionals. Based on empirical data from a two and a half year study in the third part the concept of reflective learning is scrutinized and further developed. In the fourth part, the role of the teacher in reflective learning is analyzed: What is the role of the teacher? What are teachers' self-perceptions? Finally, the concept of reflective learning as enriched by the student and teacher perspective is presented and critically discussed.

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## BACKGROUND

When writing about bridging theory and practice and reflective learning, one needs to establish a framework of thoughts that helps to integrate the different lines of thinking. When focusing on theory and practice, it is necessary to broaden one's perspective to include both the academic world (which is more theory-driven) and the professional world (more practice-driven). The discussion is often focused on the distinction between academic declarative or propositional knowledge (knowing what) and action-oriented procedural knowledge (knowing how) (Billett, 2009, 2014). Donald A. Schön wrote in the 1980s against the model of technical rationality that both sets a hierarchy of (scientific) knowledge above knowledge in action and divides the development of theories and solutions for problems from practical problem solving (Schön, 1983). But the issue of bridging theory and practice within the academic context is a much older one, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century as Barnett (1990, 1992) shows in his analyses.

When looking at theory and practice in higher education, the concept of reflection becomes central. As Van Manen (1991, p. 98) points out, in educational theory reflection can be understood "as just another word for 'thinking'." If one reflects, he or she thinks. Two concepts of learning, closely interlinked with each other, become relevant: the concept of experiential and the concept of reflective learning. Both concepts take experience in its various forms as their central basis (Moon, 1999; 2004).

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was American philosopher and educational scientist John Dewey (1859-1952) who addressed the issue of theory and practice, focusing primarily at that time on education. As the "founding father" of experiential and reflective learning, Dewey laid the foundations for an interconnection of theory and practice that put primary emphasis on critical thinking and reflection that always uses experience

as point of departure. For him, an "ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory (...), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as theory" (Dewey, 1923, p. 169).

As Dewey explains, experience and reflection are closely connected. Reflection denotes a certain quality of experience as reflective experience. A reflective experience consists of the following elements (Dewey, 1923, p. 176):

1. Perplexity, confusion, doubt, due to the fact that one is implicated in an incomplete situation whose full character is not yet determined;
2. A conjectural anticipation – a tentative interpretation of the given elements, attributing to them a tendency to effect certain consequences;
3. A careful survey (examination, inspection, exploration, analysis) of all attainable consideration which will define and clarify the problem in hand;
4. A consequent elaboration of the tentative hypothesis to make it more precise and more consistent, because squaring with a wider range of facts;
5. Taking one stand upon the projected hypothesis as a plan of action which is applied to the existing state of affairs: doing something overtly to bring about the anticipated result, and thereby testing the hypothesis.

Dewey (1923) specifies the difference between reflective experience and a trial and error situation: "It is the extent and accuracy of steps three and four which mark off a distinctive reflective experience from one on the trial and error plane. They make thinking itself to an experience" (p. 176).

Thinking is then further distinguished from knowledge. While knowledge is taken for granted

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