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# Grounded (Re-)Construction of the Self-Reflection Core Competence from Statements of Adult Education Professionals

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Keywords: self-reflection, competence modeling, professionalism in adult education, reflective practitioner, grounded theory

**Abstract:** This article discusses the significance that is assigned to the core competence of self-reflection by adult education professionals. Therefore, a conceptual classification in connection with the research design and initial results of an empirical study will be introduced with the intention of providing a grounded (re-)construction of the self-reflection competence.

## Purpose of the Study

The study, presented in this paper, is intended to contribute to the empirically well-grounded definition of the competence of “self-reflection” as an important component of personal competence in the context of professional behavior in adult education. The formulation, recognition, and teaching of core competences with the goal, among other things, of international comparability coalesce politically in papers such as the European and the German Qualifications Framework (EQR/DQR). In the German Qualifications Framework (AK DQR, 2011) for example, reflexivity is briefly described as “the ability to deal with changes, to learn from experience, and to think and act critically” (p. 9). Self-reflection is recognized as an important prerequisite for learning, change, and innovation in adult education as well. Its hitherto imprecise definition, however, hinders its certification as well as its promotion in adult education professionalization processes. This study is intended to provide a solution to this challenge.

## Theoretical Framework: Professionalism, Competence and Self-Reflection

Tietgens (1988), one of the central theoreticians of German adult education, first defined professionalism in adult education in the 1980s by saying, “Professionalism means, briefly summarized, being able to use the ability of *appropriately employing* widespread, scientifically well-grounded and thus *in many ways abstracted knowledge in concrete situations*. Or seen the other way round: in exactly these situations recognizing what components of the body of knowledge may be relevant. It means discovering the general problem in the individual case. Relations need to be repeatedly established between learned generalizations and situations that arise, between a comprehensive interpretation repertoire and the immediate experienceable” (p. 37, emphases in the original). Gruber and Wiesner (2012) expand this definition today to include the crucial component of self-reflection: “In addition to possessing a theory-based and behavior-oriented foundation of knowledge, professionalism in adult education is grounded in construction, diagnosis, and interpretation. It is not self-contained, but must repeatedly prove itself as a competence and develop anew (cf. Nittel, 2000, p. 85). This means that it demands, more than basic academic knowledge, practical experience and a high degree of reflective ability” (p. 14).

In psychology, various manifestations of self-reflection are described, whereby not every form of self-reflection results in changed behavior. Only so-called result-oriented self-reflection does so.

Greif (2008) defines it as “a conscious process during which a person thinks through and explicates his ideas or behavior that relate to his real and ideal self-concept. Self-reflection is result-oriented when the person develops conclusions for future behavior or self-reflection during this process” (p. 40). In contrast, “aimlessly circling ruminations” (ibid, p. 37) remain fruitless (for further definitions of self-reflection see Pachner, 2013a, b). Self-reflection thus has three essential functions (cf. Tisdale, 1998, p. 12): It should help adapt ways of thinking and acting that have not proved to be expedient in a given situation. Self-reflection supports the comparison of one's own ways of thinking and acting with empirically established values. These values are usually derived from experience or through validity testing of thoughts and behavior in concrete situations, but can also be the result of previous self-reflective processes. Starting from these processes of analysis and evaluation, self-reflection also structures future thinking and planning. Self-reflection thus allows the individual to constantly evaluate and, as necessary, to change his or her own thinking and behavior in the interests of situational appropriateness.

There are parallels to the figure of the Reflective Practitioner as Schön introduced it into the international discourse in 1983. In the face of increasing complexity, uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflicting values in professional practice (cf. Schön, 1983, p. 14), he postulates the necessity of an increased adaptability on the part of the professional (cf. ibid, p. 13 ff.). Conventional knowledge and the abilities and techniques of traditional expertise are no longer sufficient (cf. loc. cit.). This finding is in line with Erpenbeck and von Rosenstiel (2007) who assume that competences are prerequisites for the ability to act in open situations. They define competences as “dispositions to self-organization of physical and psychological behavior, where dispositions should be understood as the inner conditions for the regulation of an activity that have been developed prior to a certain time of action. Thus dispositions include not only individual predispositions, but also the results of development processes (Clauß et al., 1995, p. 126). Competences are therefore unambiguously *behavior-centered* and primarily related to *divergent-self-organizing* behavioral situations” (Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel, 2007, p. XXXVI, emphases in the original). Competences are thus dispositions, that is, predispositions or the willingness developed to master certain activities. They are present as predispositions, but must be proven anew in each behavioral situation in order to become apparent as competences. They are furthermore the products of complex competence development processes. The interest here is therefore not only what is already present, such as inherited predispositions, nor the results of simple transmission processes but also those complex developmental processes of competence acquisition. This gives informal learning, at the workplace, within the social environment, or through the internet, for example, great significance (cf. Weinert, 2001, p. 45-65, as cited in Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel, 2007, p. XXXVIII). On the other hand, the question of how these complex competence development processes can be purposefully harnessed in professionalization processes remains to be explored further. Furthermore, dispositions that are designated competences receive their relevance in relation to the regulation of activities, which means they are “behavior-centered”. At the center of interest lie the actions of the competent person, not his or her traits (subject-centered view). And ultimately the mastery of “divergent-self-organizing” situations is to be explained, that is, of situations that are open, uncertain, and complex and therefore not to be solved with routinized behavior. Schön (cf. 1987, p. 33) considers systematic, primarily scientific knowledge and its application to concrete situations as characteristic of competent, professional behavior. Proceeding from the assumption, however, that the apparatus of professional knowledge does not contain an appropriate solution to or rule

for every practical problem, the ability of “reflection-in-action” becomes an important condition of competent, professional behavior in open, uncertain situations as we encounter them today (cf. *ibid.*, p. 39; for further clarifications about the construction of self-reflection as a competence see Pachner, 2013b, 2014).

Schön (1983) further assumes that professional behavior is based on implicit “knowing-in-action”, which he describes as “ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing” (p. 49). However, in order to be able to successfully deal with such open situations, it is necessary to reflect on this knowing-in-action and thereby to attempt to explicate it and make it describable. Knowing-in-action becomes knowledge-in-action by means of this description; it loses its dynamic momentum to a certain extent (cf. Schön, 1987, p. 26). Schön (1983, p. 49 f.) writes about processes of “reflection-in-action”, when this reflection occurs during the course of action, or about “reflection-on-action”, when it occurs in retrospect (Schön, 1987, p. 26). Both processes of reflection are precipitated by unexpected results of one's own behavior, by the presence of a surprising incident, so to speak (cf. *loc. cit.*). The objects of reflection are diverse: The practitioner “may reflect on the tacit norms and appreciations which underlie a judgment, or on the strategies and theories implicit in a pattern of behavior. He may reflect on the feeling for a situation which has led him to adopt a particular course of action, on the way in which he has framed the problem he is trying to solve, or on the role he has constructed for himself within a larger institutional context” (Schön, 1983, p. 62). Reflection is thus considered the central condition for the mastery of complex, divergent situations and demands for action. By allowing skepticism towards accepted assumptions, a new understanding of the situation, and the development and testing of new alternative behaviors, the competence of self-reflection supports those engaging in professional behaviors in their efforts to understand open situations and to resolve them appropriately (cf. Schön, 1987, p. 35; Wolcott, 1995, p. 40).

### **Research Design**

Accordingly, the central formulation of the question in this study is as follows:

- What does the competence of self-reflection mean in the context of professional behavior in adult education?
- What significance do educators in this area ascribe to this competence?
- How do they interpret “self-reflection”?
- What aspects do they consider important when doing so?

To answer the question, the self-reflective portions of final theses (n=40) of those attending the Austrian Academy of Continuing Education (wba – short for “Weiterbildungsakademie Österreich”, cf. [http://wba.or.at/english/about\\_us.php](http://wba.or.at/english/about_us.php)) who submitted such theses in the context of certification of their adult education competences were analyzed.

The wba is a certification and accreditation institution at which adult education professionals can receive accreditation for even informally acquired competences. Subsequent to a “standpoint statement”, it offers a nationally recognized two-level qualification: certified adult education professional and qualified adult education professional; the latter can be used to enroll in university. The wba diploma can be earned in four areas of specialization: teaching/group leading/training, education management, counseling, and library systems. A prerequisite for receiving the wba diploma is the completion of a thesis (cf. wba, 2012, p. 19) within the framework of which students are required, in addition to a theoretical engagement with the

chosen topic, to reflect critically on their own professional behavior and thus to demonstrate their reflective competence. This textual material is therefore suitable for drawing conclusions about how adult education professionals understand the construct of “self-reflection” and how they react to the request to engage in it.

The cohorts that had submitted wba theses for evaluation were those of 2011, 2012, and the beginning of 2013 (n=40). The theses are divided almost equally among the areas of emphasis of teaching/group leading/training (n=14), education management (n=12), and counseling (n=14). Due to very small numbers, no submission from the specialization “library systems” was included in the study.

The text material was analyzed with the help of Grounded Theory (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The procedures of this method – open, axial, and selective coding (cf. *ibid.*) – allow the matter in question – the reconstruction of self-reflective competence – to be worked out in a scientifically-based manner and a grounded theory to be developed. This occurs in a process consisting of three partially overlapping steps: The open coding serves to break down the data, that is, phenomena are conceptualized and categorized. The categories arrived at receive a differentiated description according to their characteristics and dimensions (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61 ff.). Axial coding is aimed at drawing connections and relationships among the categories. This occurs along the so-called Paradigm Model, which consists of causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action and interactional strategies, and consequences in relation to the central phenomenon (cf. *ibid.*, p. 96 ff.). In the final step, selective coding, a core category is selected around which the other categories are ultimately integrated into the grounded theory concerning the matter in question (cf. *ibid.*, p. 116 ff.). The analysis was completed with the help of the MAXQDA<sup>10</sup> software.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

Findings presented in this article refer to a subset of the data collected as the submissions of the specialization teaching/group leading/training were analyzed as a first step. The participants explicitly assign a great significance to self-reflection in their professional behavior. The reasons they cite for self-reflection are successful adult education behavior, the acquisition of willingness to change, flexibility, and personal development. Thus they confirm the central meaning of self-reflection that Gruber and Wiesner (2012, p. 14) are postulating for this competence in their definition of professionalism in adult education.

Among other things, significant challenges, irritation, negative feelings, or occasions for writing such as the wba thesis were named as *catalysts* for the self-reflective processes. This is in line with Schön (1987), who assumes that unexpected outcomes of one’s own actions or thoughts and therefore surprising experiences may be causal for both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (cf. *ibid.*, p. 26). Important *topics* for the self-reflection of the adult educators encompass not only aspects of course design like contents, didactics, methods, or participants, but also issues such as personal development, potential for improvement, or challenges in their own professional behavior were mentioned. For self-reflection, *forms* of self- and third-party assessment such as peer feedback, student feedback, or the development of a portfolio are used. The most important *outcomes* of self-reflection in the view of adult education professionals are the acquisition of willingness to change, enhanced consciousness of one’s own thoughts and actions, increased self-knowledge, and growth in learning and knowledge, but also improved husbanding of one’s own resources, as well as motivation. These outcomes described by adult

education professionals may be interpreted as a manifestation of result-oriented self-reflection which leads to change and development in adult education behavior (cf. Greif, 2008). Particularly interesting for theory development in the context of the professionalism discourse is the category of “self-image”, in which participants reflect on their understanding of professionalism, their “mission” to act as adult educators and their attitude to work. These findings in themselves made it plain that self-reflection as described by the adult education professionals does indeed contribute to making possible learning, change, and innovative teaching behavior in adult education. In addition, there are concrete indications of how self-reflection competence can be initiated in the training of adult education professionals – for instance by targeted implementation of irritations in the learning process or the use of a portfolio for example to provide occasions to write. Discussing the results integrated into a grounded theory or at least the “Paradigm Model” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 99) will be particularly helpful in furthering the understanding of self-reflection and its reconstruction in the context of professional behavior in adult education as a next step.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

Gruber and Wiesner (2012, p. 14-16) emphasize the significance of core competences when they discuss what adult educators need to master in order to be able to behave professionally in this field. The authors consider the three steps of formulation, recognition, and transmission of core competences to be necessary (cf. *ibid*, p. 14-15). Before core competences can be transmitted to future adult education professionals or their successful acquisition even in informal learning processes can be recognized, however, these core competences must be developed and defined in a scientifically valid manner (*ibid*, p. 15).

Therefore, *further studies* including quantitative ones on the modeling, acquisition, and recognition of the competence of self-reflection should follow this study. Starting from the methodology employed in this study, approaches that serve to scientifically develop and define other important core competences for the professionalization in the field of adult education can be further developed and tested. For *professional practice*, it is possible to name more precise reference points for the future imparting of the ability to self-reflect, to derive more binding standards for doing so, and to develop the recognition and certification of this competence further. This constitutes a contribution to professionalization and quality development in adult education and to international comparability of the “self-reflection” competence in this context.

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