Research Article

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Reflecting Team as an Evaluation/learning Instrument for Self-reflection of Teachers

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Abstract: The Reflecting Team (RT) is a method derived from systemic therapy in the 1980s by the social psychiatrist Tom Andersen. It is increasingly being used in training and evaluation contexts. The aim of the method is to create a space for the development of diverse perspectives and appropriate ideas and solutions in which the integrity of the students/customers/clients is preserved and the acceptance of proposals is facilitated. To this end, the systems involved (advice seekers, consultants, and observers) enter a common process of alternately directed and non-directed communication. The RT is not only suitable to address communication problems in group work and other educational situations, but it can also help to consider the traditional teaching and learning processes in a reflective way. Reflecting teams can also significantly improve the feedback and quality of teaching and learning. The article deals with the use of RT in the context of the collective exchange of teaching staff with their students. It uses a problem as an evaluation form and learning instrument to reflect on their pedagogical approach and, at the same time, their relationship with students during the lessons. This is to present the RT method for collegial exchange (Process Flow: Advice-seeker, teacher, Interviewer, RT) and their need for teacher reflection as well as the experience of self-efficacy (empowerment and self-sufficiency).

Keywords: constructivism, reflecting team, questionnaire, social shaping of learning processes, self-reflection, empowerment, self-empowerment, competence expansion, evaluation, change of perspective

Introduction

RT originally developed from the area of systemic family therapy in the 1980s, when a major element of family therapy dealt with the new focus of crime in families. The method was developed by the Norwegian social psychiatrist Tom Andersen. A key purpose of the method was to make the relationship between advisor and advice seeker more symmetrical and to promote openness for change. This is still the foundation for all recent variations and differentiations of RT in different contexts. The method of RT is settled in systemic-constructivist pedagogy (Reich, 2006).

The method of RT is increasingly used in training and evaluation contexts, in order to improve the feedback and quality of teaching and learning. It is also widely used in the evaluation of teaching or of the collective exchange, where the RT becomes a necessary basic element of the evaluation survey. This article deals with the use of RT in the context of the collective exchange of teaching staff with their students in the case of a problem as an evaluation form / learning instrument, to reflect on their own pedagogical approach as well as their relationship with students during the lesson and to improve their own competences as teachers.

Using the RT method for the collective exchange represents a new context of application, where it helps to promote recognition of the need for teacher reflection as well as the experience of self-efficacy,

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resulting in empowerment and self-sufficiency (Reich, 2006). The main actors in this context are teachers and coaches, and not the learners. The counselor in this case is represented by the teaching staff who make use of the RT method. Specifically, these are the teacher coaches, seminar leaders and so on, and they are to be strengthened by using the RT in their work.

The aim of the study

The article aims to outline the procedure for instructing teachers in using the new application method of RT (procedure: advice seeker-teacher, interviewer, RT) in their work. By using the method, it is intended to promote professional growth in terms of self-efficacy, self-sufficiency, as well as competence development. This method should serve as a learning instrument or tool for evaluation and self-reflection. Consequently, the article reinforces the assumption of the human capacity for self-knowledge through reflection (Zimbardo, 1995, 9-15).

In the practical implementation of RT method, teachers contribute current topics from their field of work and are supported by colleagues from other or similar disciplines to reflect on their own role, to gain new insights and to develop alternative options for action. This gives rise to some fundamental questions, which the article will try to answer:

1. In this new field of application, can the RT be associated with enabling didactics, which is a pedagogical trend in Germany: “Ermöglichungsdidaktik” (Arnold, 2012)
2. How can the RT method be used as an evaluation or as a learning instrument for the self-reflection of teachers?
3. Can the RT method be used to evaluate teachers’ work?
4. What is gained by using the RT method with the experience of self-efficacy, empowerment/self-empowerment?
5. Does the RT method supplement the competencies of teachers?

Materials and methods

The reflecting team would not be possible without “reflection”. Therefore, the term “reflection” needs to first be defined and clarified before the RT method can be explained and applied to the context of teachers and their work. Rodgers (2002) interprets the foundational works by John Dewey on learning (and teaching) written in the early 1900s, and arrives at a helpful definition of reflection that can be applied to both students and teachers: “Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of their relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas” (Rodgers, 2002, p.845). In addition, Rodgers helps to identify Dewey’s criteria for reflection, which state that it is based on scientific inquiry (systematic, rigorous and disciplined), occurs in social interaction (community) and requires positive recognition (system of values) of “personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others” (Rodgers, 2002, p.845).

In other, more current, reviews of literature focusing on teachers, reflection is understood to be a source of inspiration that leads to increased understanding and extension of professional activity and provides new insights for practice by reflecting on teacher’s problems (Marcos, Miguel & Tillema, 2009). Professional reflection is a conscious thought about actions taken by the teachers themselves (Kuntze-Fechner, A. 2012, 17-19).

To the new application method of RT as an evaluation/learning instrument for self-reflection of teachers, psychological and pedagogical literature was reviewed. The basic concept has been developed by Tom Andersen in his book titled “The Reflecting Team – Dialogues and Dialogues about the Dialogues”, which later has been subsequently adapted to various fields of practice in numerous pedagogical works. Based on his research including interviews with patients, Andersen is convinced that new ideas grow reluctantly, especially if they are not part of the system and are imposed from the outside. In this way, the teachers learn that our systemic thinking must also include ourselves and our relationships with other experts (Andersen,

1996). Regarding the application of RT to the context of teachers and their work, the following principles or foundation statements need to be considered:

1. Principles of systemic-constructivist pedagogy: The aim of the education is to consider all three levels (psychological, social and biological), to strengthen and develop internal skills of a person or group for self-organization and individual self-control in learning, in terms of content relationship building (Williams, 2008).
2. Principles of general didactics: Teaching and learning takes place in the three stages of planning, implementation and evaluation. It is about the theory of teaching and the transmission of the implicit and explicit construction modes, which determine the learning of people in institutions (Bönsch, 2006).

Since the mid-1990s, there has been an increase in the research dealing with “the new teaching-learning cultures”. RT also belongs to “the new teaching and learning cultures”, which has found its application in the evaluation of teacher self-reflection. The term “teaching-learning culture” includes:

1. Teacher as supporter/consultant: This coincides with elements of traditional didactics, but also relates to individual and social appreciation, which are both associated with certain content and qualifications. The “new” teacher not only transmits knowledge, but also coordinates access to knowledge and supports the learner in the development of relevant knowledge patterns (the new role of the teacher as supporter and learning consultant). The teacher can only fulfill these new roles effectively, if reflection on the teaching performance occurs.
2. Construction of knowledge: The recognized teaching and learning methods, along with the manners, the culture of conflict and the spectrum of allowed conversations. This includes such terms as Metacognition, change of perspective, emotionality of the teachers or emotional relief, circular questions, humor, interpretation pattern approach (e.g., latency, continuity perspective). These terms form the RT regarding the evaluation of teacher self-reflection.
3. Lifelong learning through self-control/self-controlled learning or self-controlled learning teaching/self-efficacy (empowerment /self-empowerment): The teacher can assess their strengths and weaknesses, and possess a positive self-image. The teacher develops an observational ability of reality (selectivity of the perceived). Afterwards, critical evaluation of the teachers’ work occurs. Self-efficacy is a major focus of this critical reflection (Siebert, 2012, 68-248). Self-controlled learning is successful when the “accompanying” emotions of the teaching are perceived and evaluated. The evaluation means that the teacher’s own feelings are in a work process (e.g., with pupils after a supporting or inhibitory function check) (Siebert, 2009, 23-43). The teacher is engaged in the process of self-evaluation and self-regulation, whereby self-evaluation is an important element of quality assurance (Kuntze-Fechner, A. 2012, 17-19). The RT can be a very supportive tool for teachers in their self-controlled learning and reflection. Used correctly, it provides the interviewer with appropriate questions according to specific rules (see Table 2). Examples of such questions include: Are there topics, leading to permanent avoidance reactions with myself during lessons? Are there biographical causes? How can this resistance be reduced or dismantled? Is it at all useful to dismantle these resistances? (Siebert, 2009, 23-43). In this way teachers show willingness to be self-critical of their own teaching. Yet, at the same time, RT emphasizes the difference between willingness and ability to reflect and the aspect of self-criticism (Kuntze-Fechner, A. 2012, 17-19).

The RT offers the teacher some points of orientation in the context of self-observation, self-reflection and self-development, which his competence as a specialist or coach strives to increase and to complete. These include the following:

- Depends upon movement from communication to differentiation,
- Understanding of the observational dependency of reality (selectivity and self-referentiality of the perceived)
- Understanding of the expert necessity of self- and external observation
- Self-reflective, critical handling of one’s own professional role and one’s own field of action (responsible for everything and everyone; helper syndrome),

- Improvement of communicative competence (metacommunication),
- Improvement of the ability to change perspectives (self-observation),
- Development of alternative interpretation – specimen, possibility of constructions (viability),
- Emotional alleviation, avoidance of stress (Lambers, 2014, 164-182).

The procedure of the method in the new context has been revised and adapted (Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1. Person-Participation in the process of the RT Method

Participants		
1 Advice seeker (teacher) as e.g., Coach, Pedagogue	1 Interviewer and also Time-Controller and Recorder	3 Persons in Reflecting Team (RT)

Conversation phases:

1. Introduction to the method: Introducing the participants, explanation of the conversation, the reason for the conversation – 20 min.
2. Case presentation: Interviewer makes a conversation with the advice seeker about his problem. The RT just listens and asks no questions – 15 min.
3. Reflecting Team: The interviewer asks the advice seeker if he is interested in the thoughts and ideas of the others (RT) and wants to hear them. The RT physically turns slightly away. The interviewer and advice seeker are only listeners. The RT becomes active and begins an appreciative reflection of the process – 20 min.
4. Feedback/ decision making (10 min.): The advice seeker will be given the opportunity to give the RT a feedback on the mentioned idea for its problem. At the same time, this step is used for decision-making. The advice seeker gives information on the following questions:
 - What was important to me?
 - What ideas and suggestions might please me?
 - What impulses can I realize?
 - What do I want to think about?
5. Agree upon documentation of the conversation: The protocol should be agreed upon with the research seeker. It contains:
 - Topics addressed
 - Goals
 - Resources
 - Jointly agreed upon concrete steps (Bresgott, 2014), (Ewert & Karmann, 2015)

Figure 1. The process of the RT-Method in the new context (Bresgott, 2014, 44)

The rules for the Reflecting Team, as presented in Table 2, have been edited and adapted from the original description, which describes the use of RT within the context of family counseling, as following (Vega, 2008):

“The family chooses the topic they wish to talk about. It is imperative for the therapist to not interrupt clients while they are expressing themselves. Clients should be allowed to express their thoughts at their own pace. This rule also applies to other participants in the room. If people cannot keep themselves from interrupting the speaker, they might be encouraged to not join the meetings until they can listen respectfully” (Andersen, 1993). As the reflecting team listens to the conversation in the other room, the team begins to create their own ideas. It should be quiet in the reflecting room, in order to respect each observer’s ideas. After listening to the conversation, the team or interviewer suggests the option of listening to the reflecting team’s discussion. If the family agrees, the lights and sounds are switched off in the two rooms. The family and the interviewer now listen to the reflecting team’s discussion about the family’s conversation. This reflecting period can last anywhere from 2 to 15 minutes. Andersen (1992) states the therapist must let the clients know that this simply is an offer and not something they must take as the only option. It is crucial to give the listener the opportunity of declining the advice, if it makes them feel uncomfortable. The clients must understand they have the option to say no. When offering reflections, it is very important to use tentative language, for the client to view the reflection as an offering and not the sole answer. Teams are also warned not to mention the family’s nonverbal exchanges. These issues could be topics the family does not wish to discuss (Andersen, 1987). In addition, it is safer for the team to raise a question about something they heard in the conversation, as opposed to their own interpretation of what they heard (Andersen, 1993). When the team has finished reflecting, the light and sound are switched back on to their original positions. At this time, the interviewer questions the family and tries to determine if there was something in the team’s conversation that the family would like to discuss, comment on, or correct. The interviewer might also have some questions to ask the family, while listening to the feedback from the team. It is important for the interviewer to ask if there were things that they disliked or that were of no interest to them because typically, clients will not want to say negative things about the reflecting team, knowing that they are in their presence. This type of feedback will give the reflecting team an idea of whether they were discussing topics within the family’s limits or if they were covering things too far off the family’s path” (Andersen, 1987).

In the Table 2 the eleven rules for the RT are listed, which are absolutely necessary in the method of the RT in the new application within teaching and learning contexts:

Table 2. Rules in the Reflecting Team (RT) with advice seeker, (Reich, 2006)

11 Rules in RT	
As long as the reflective team is listening, it does not interrupt the interviewer.	Questions should be careful and in a conjunctive way for example, “Is it possible that...?”
During reflection, the RT is exchanging their thoughts exclusively among themselves. It does not keep any contact with the interview system, not even eye contact.	Nonverbal patterns should also be discussed.
Reflection of thoughts is about the variety of possible perspectives, and not what idea is the best.	The ideas expressed should encourage reflection, but must still be comprehensible and applicable to the advice searcher, and so “reasonably unusual”.
The appreciation the advice seeker stands in the foreground.	The topics the advice seeker does not want to discuss are not mentioned.
No instructive advice is given.	Only what is directly related to the interview is spoken about.
As long as the reflective team is listening, it does not interrupt the interviewer.	

Results

The aim of the study was to investigate whether the Reflecting Team is an effective new application as an evaluation/learning instrument for the self-reflection of the teachers. We see here a new form of social shaping of learning processes, in which the teacher (advice seeker) uses the RT as the evaluation/learning instrument of self-reflection. As a result of the present study, the figure below (Figure 2) has been developed.

Figure 2 shows RT in the entirely new application as an evaluation/learning instrument for the self-reflection of teachers.

Figure 2. The Reflecting Team in a new context (Bartels, 2006)

Conclusions

The RT provides a good learning tool for the self-reflection of teachers and educators in the work process with learners, clients and participants because it can give the teachers the following advantages:

1. The experience of self-efficacy (empowerment/self-sufficiency).
2. Approaches for better/more appropriate solutions, extended perspectives
3. Participation/co-determination and transparency in the process by accepting responsibility, acceptance, identity and cooperation
4. Possibility to change own working methods.
5. Recognition of individuality.
6. Improved stress management.
7. Expansion of professional competencies via improved self-observation, self-reflection and self-development.
8. Strengthening self-perception through the extended metacommunication (Bresgott, 2014).
9. Weaknesses and strengths can be identified by valuing feedback, and thus, converted into a beneficial measure (Beeler, Gentili & Turkawka, 2007).

But there are some criticisms of the RT:

1. Not time-efficient.
2. The roles of the observee and the observer must constantly change, so that the perspective shifts can develop a long-term effect in the competency of observer.
3. It is to be discussed, what is observed, and not that, what the observers might think to be desirable (Reich, 2006).

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