

Dynamic reflection with the four-chair model

■ Corma Ruijgrok

Abstract

In this article I describe the power of the four-chair model as a playful, physical and interactive way of learning. Reflecting in education often happens individually and focuses most of the time on thinking instead of feeling, wanting, being conscious and creating a bond. In addition, the pitfall is to focus too much on the problem instead of development or successes. Also by focussing too much on the context instead of internal barriers or on a better way to handle (solutions) then to give meaning. In this perspective I formulated a guide to draw up the physical and interactive aspect of reflection in which feeling is more addressed. The input of others is explicitly used. By applying the methodology of dynamic reflecting using 'the four-chair model', different perspectives are visible to everyone involved in the reflection. In Riga, enthusiasm about the 'simplicity' and effectiveness of Dynamic Reflection was shared.

Introduction

Riga: August 2022. Summer University ANSE. I feel honoured that I was able to contribute to the theme: "Power dynamics and human Empowerment in an environment of elevated uncertainty" by introducing a workshop in dynamic reflection. Thanks to the willingness and openness of the participants, thoughts and emotions were shared. While reflecting with the four-chair model all participants contributed to the serene atmosphere of attentive and active listening. The part of sharing authentic reactions

after the narrator telling his story on the chairs, created a safe space of common humanity. In this article I would like to share some background information about Dynamic reflection (Ruijgrok & Kortas, 2010). With this article I want to clarify and prove the power of applying the Dynamic Reflection Model to the educational and supervision context. I also would like to demonstrate the importance of the inner dialogue for professionals in the light of high quality education. When I talk about 'he' or 'his (dialogue)', I explicitly address women as well.

The Dynamic Reflection Model can be used to visualize the inner dialogue. The model uses four chairs that reflect the four different positions a person can take in the inter-



nal dialogue: **thinking, feeling, broadened thinking and deepened feeling** In the following paragraph (2) I will give an illustration of this principle using a few examples of thoughts and feelings that may occur in the educational context. I will (3) continue by explaining how you can be the director of your own thoughts and feelings by using the Dynamic Reflection Model. This can easily be transferred (4) to other professional context. Then I will describe (5) the workshop, as I did in Riga, followed by a (6) conclusion and (7) "practice makes perfect".

Examples of thoughts and feelings in the educational context

With the Dynamic Reflection Model (Ruijgrok & Kortas, 2010) you visualize your inner dialogue, which enables you to direct yourself. You can simply put four chairs next

to each other and start talking about something that is on your mind. When you notice you are speaking based on your thoughts, you sit down on the chair that represents the thinking position. When you are talking about feelings, you take a seat on the chair of the feeling position. When you are deliberately asking questions or putting things in perspective, you can take place on the chair of broadened thinking. And when you take a moment to breathe calmly and relax, you sit down on the chair of deepened feeling.

Every day we are constantly thinking and experiencing feelings. In the case of a teacher, one of the thoughts could be: 'my students are not motivated and don't respect me.' Along with this thought you might feel emotions like irritation, helplessness and frustration. As a result you do not feel appreciated and valued as a teacher (professional), despite your good intentions.

Other common thoughts of teachers are: 'they are testing me', which can elicit feelings of uncertainty, or 'they are not looking forward to my lessons', which can give the teacher a feeling of uneasiness and might decrease his desire to teach. These automatic, negative thoughts cause automatic, negative feelings, which in turn lead to anxiety on the part of the teacher.

However, the student needs a teacher with a positive disposition of acceptance and trust. If a teacher radiates anxiety and negativity, a student with a lack of self-confidence does not have a person to stimulate him to look forward to class and to behave like the teacher desires. Back to the chairs of the internal dialog. Chair number 3 and 4 represent broadened thinking and expanded feeling. It's clear that the previous examples of thoughts and feelings have a limiting effect, both internally for the teacher and externally for the student. For both parties it

seems to limit the learning and the ability to act effectively. So the question is how the teacher can broaden his internal dialogue, and therefore handle the situation successfully. When you picture the four chairs in your mind, you can get up from the chair of normal, automatic thinking and sit down on the chair of broadened thinking.

The position of **broadened thinking** implies that you put things in perspective, use humor, ask yourself questions and limit your own negative and probably unrealistic thoughts. In the example mentioned above, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I use adequate knowledge and skills to present the material in a way that is meaningful and stimulating to my students?
- What seems to be the problem with my students? Why do they act so indifferently towards the teaching content and this education program? And why do I feel so angry?
- What kind of feelings do students have when they enter the classroom? Towards me, as well as their fellow students, and the profession they will be training for?
- Does that apparently indifferent attitude have anything to do with me, or is it about something that the student hasn't resolved internally? In other words: Should I be upset because of the negativity I witness in students? Is it actually about me?
- Do I truly show interest in my students?
- Which knowledge do I actually have about this target group?

By asking yourself such questions, you create room for viewing the issue in a different light. This way you will be able to think of different steps and actions you can take, instead of the ones you would be inclined to take if you would act on your first thoughts. For example: 'When I

realize that these teenagers are mainly dealing with themselves and with their uncertain position in the classroom and in the world, I can stop thinking that they have negative intentions towards me as a teacher.

The position of **deepened feeling** implies that as a teacher you breathe calmly, relax, and view the other and yourself with a sense of tranquility and confidence. In the position of deepened feeling you accept every feeling in yourself or the reality around you. You are allowed to be who you are, you don't have to ignore or change your feelings, and you feel compassion for yourself and the students. When you accept your feelings instead of fighting them, you clear the air of the dominant, sometimes oppressing feelings. This also leads you to think of new and possibly successful actions.

When we return to the example, it could mean that you will feel compassion for those tough boys and girls, for

Every day we are constantly thinking and experiencing feelings. In the case of a teacher, one of the thoughts could be: 'my students are not motivated and don't respect me.' Along with this thought you might feel emotions like irritation, helplessness and frustration.

their search, the difficulties they experience in (school) life. The students need your understanding and support to help them move forward.

Maybe the next lesson you can try to empathically connect and show them warmth. For example by starting to express interest, by asking questions. You radiate positivity, confidence, and enthusiasm to help them function better in society.

Be your own director: increase self-direction

With the Dynamic Reflection Model you can raise the quality of your internal dialogue by tackling something within yourself that you initially described as a problem (from the position of narrowed thinking and feeling) with relevant questions, relaxation, a sense of peace and confidence.

By intentionally changing chairs while talking, you activate a different position within yourself. You are your own director, and this will most likely result in being a more effective director in dealing with other persons as well!

The pyramid of personal leadership (Vandamme, 2014) distinguishes five levels of self-direction. The level of the automatic pilot, feeling victim, fighting, learning and the level of “being” can be connected to the ‘four chair model’. The first three levels can be related to the position of thinking and feeling. The levels of learning and being can be connected to broadened thinking and deepened feeling. In relation to this I want to point to the theory of ego states like it is described in the Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1958) The tendency to take the position of a parent, child or adult is often based on experience in someone’s past. For example, unconscious patterns in the interaction influence the tendency to act from the state of a Critical or Nurturing Parent, or to react out of the powerlessness of the Compliant Child. In the process

of reflecting with the four chairs a more positive and adult position can be discovered, the automatic pilot, victim or fighting position can transform in a learning and more self-being position.

When a teacher takes a position of autonomous positivity, this will create a safe environment in which students can further develop themselves and feel invited to ask themselves questions, to see themselves in a different light, to relax, and to develop confidence and tranquility. The mastery and application of the LOLL-competencies for professionals as formulated in the *LOLL-competency card* (Ruijgrok, 2009) play a crucial role in this. Examples are ‘descriptive representation of facts’, ‘radiating a positive attitude of acceptance and trust’, ‘conveying that learning is something that takes place continuously and that failure does not exist, you can always learn from previous positive and negative experiences.’

What does the knowledge of dynamic reflection mean for the transfer to other situations for example learning processes and career choices?

The narrator has experienced in person how to speak open and self-directing about the situation using feelings and thoughts that keep him busy. Because the participants are listening to him and he is listening to himself, the inner space and the consciousness about possible choices increases. By separating feelings and thoughts, clarity arises through investigation on the spot, the essence becomes clear quite quickly. By expressing what is going on and being validated by the other participants, acceptance arises. In the following situations it could be easier to choose to act differently and more in line with who the person is. The narrator develops intrapersonal skills which he can use to approach any situation in an optimal constructive way. By practicing self-compassion, the participants feel more competent and more willing to learn and show constructive behaviour. Reflecting with the four-

chair model advances practicing self-compassion. Through sharing authentically with each other, the development at that moment becomes visible and the “presence” of the participant increases. All participants (after the narrator ends his story) mutually show their vulnerability, honesty and open up. This creates visibility because the inner dialogues are often recognized by the other participants which ensures commonality and validation.

The workshop: steps to take

1. All participants of the group write down a situation that (still) concerns them.
2. One participant talks about the inner dialogue associated with the written case. He takes a seat on (some of) the four chairs: when describing the facts or what you think, you take a seat on the chair that represents thinking; when describing feelings or perceptions you take a seat of the chair that represents feeling; when you ask yourself questions, putting things into perspective, using humour or limiting your thoughts, you take the seat that represents broadened thinking and when there is relaxation and trust, acceptance and peace (by relaxed breathing) to relate to the situation and your inner dialogue you take the seat that represent expanded feeling.
3. The other group members are asked to focus on engaged listening from attentive silence. They are asked to be aware of their inner dialogue, they are allowed to write down keywords and determine what the story (the inner dialogue and self-disclosure of the other) does to them. They are also asked to focus on the development in the present.
4. Everyone waits until the narrator finishes the story in a self-directed manner, which makes the use of the amount of chairs visible.
5. The narrator is thanked for being open and everyone says: ‘you are in the lead!’. From this moment the

narrator is allowed to ask the other members of the group what the story and self-disclosure does to them

How is the interaction used?

- The narrator is in the lead and collects the reactions, while changing chairs: he takes place on the chair that represents what happens on the inside in response to the authentic reaction of the group member.
- All of the present group members may now use a few sentences to say what is going on inside of them. They are invited to describe their own feelings and thoughts, into an authentic reaction, explicitly not to analyse or give a possible solution. They are allowed to use one or a maximum of three sentences to say what is on their mind.
- The supervisor or possibly other participants link the observed development back to the narrator. After each reaction the narrator consciously takes a seat on the chair that represents what he feels or thinks and shows in the present the effect on his inner dialogue to the authentic reaction of each group member. This reaction is given nonverbal, by body language in choosing a chair.
- The dialogue is used to express what is going on, validation of all facets of the inner dialogue arises. The presence of the other group members, giving feedback on the development and connection created by the commonality of all human feelings and thoughts form a base of recognition and to investigate the inner dialogue.
- Finally the narrator is asked to express his inner dialogue in sharing a conclusion about what he is conscious of right now.

Conclusion

Reflecting in education often happens individually and focuses most of the time on thinking instead of feeling, wanting, being conscious and creating a bond. In addition, the pitfalls focus too much on the problem instead of development or successes. Also by focussing too much on the context instead of internal barriers or on a better way to handle (solutions) then to give meaning. In this perspective I formulated a guide to draw up the physical and interactive aspect of reflection in which feeling is more addressed. The input of others is explicitly used. By applying the methodology of dynamic reflecting using 'the four-chair model', different perspectives are visible to everyone involved in the reflection. In Riga, enthusiasm about the 'simplicity' and effectiveness of Dynamic Reflection was shared.

Practice makes perfect

Dynamic reflecting requires training and integration of various skills from the supervisor of this reflection process. For an extensive overview, I would like to refer to the LOLL competency card, developed by Ruijgrok (2009) and "the quality of the inner dialogue as a basis for good education" written by Ruijgrok & Kortas (2013)'. Use this link (<https://dynamischreflecteren.nl/vierstoelenmodel/>) or email Corma@dynamischreflecteren.nl. ■

References

- Broersen, A. & Ruijgrok, C. (2019). De docent als relatie-specialist en het nut van het vierstoelenmodel hierbij. In: *Remediaal*, 2019, 6.
- Ruijgrok, C. (2018). De Invloed van Speels, Fysiek en Interactief Reflecteren op Zelfcompassie bij Studenten in de Lerarenopleiding Instituut Archimedes (Master Thesis).
- Ruijgrok, C. (2009). *LOLL-vaardighedenkaart voor docenten*. Hogeschool Utrecht.

- Ruijgrok, C. & Kortas, J. (2013). Het vierstoelenmodel. De kwaliteit van de innerlijke dialoog als basis voor goed onderwijs. Utrecht, Instituut Archimedes, Hogeschool Utrecht, interne publicatie.
- Vandamme, R. C. (2014). *Handboek ontwikkelingsgericht coachen: het Vorkmodel als leidraad*. Gent, Het Ontwikkelingsinstituut bvba.



Corma Ruijgrok MEd (1962) is a senior lecturer at the university of applied sciences, Utrecht, the Netherlands. Since 1993 she is teacher educator in social skills, group-dynamics, the pedagogy of teaching and coaching based on dynamic reflection with the four-chair model. Her focus is strengthening personal leadership of professionals in a sustainable and inclusive society. Trained as a teacher in communication and being a body-oriented therapist and supervisor for both individuals and groups, she was inspired to integrate the essence of this knowledge in teacher education. The outcome was the four-chair model and the LOLL-competency card and masterclasses dynamic reflection since 2006. In co-creation with colleagues Corma has written several articles about the quality of the inner dialogue and its influence on professional behavior and the interaction in groups.