

OLCK 2006 - Warwick

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COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT AND REFLECTIVITY OF VET PRACTITIONERS. A  
PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW

Rome, March 2006

## 1. Introduction

Relevant opportunities and threads have been recently characterising VET (Vocational Education and Training) contexts<sup>1</sup>. New reflective attitudes and capabilities are increasingly requested to the majority of VET practitioners as they are involved in remarkable change processes (in many respects more intense than those characterising teachers and other personnel engaged in school and university contexts).

VET as a whole, assumed as a social function aimed at developing work competencies at different levels in every activity sector, has been in fact facing major transformations while even more dramatic changes are forecasted for the years to come<sup>2</sup>. From being related to stable demand patterns from the productive sphere and from society in general, mainly oriented towards the provision of stable education and training programmes for young people, VET is dramatically requested to evolve in order to provide multilevel answers to the needs of employed and non employed adults on one side and to the exigencies of companies and organisations of different kinds on the other side (EC, EC, ..). More than ever the term “VET” appears a general label covering a broad variety of practices, ranging from those requested for technical preparation of highly skilled human resources in innovative hi-tech companies up to those linked to remedial training interventions for disadvantaged target groups representing the “have-nots” in the *European globalising learning economy*. The latter has been defined as the one in which what really matters is not formal knowledge per se, and in which, on the contrary, it is the capabilities to learn and adapt to new conditions that increasingly determine the opportunities for survival and development (Lundvall and Borrás, 1999).

Therefore experts and European decision-makers on VET have been recently putting the strategic focus on *learning* processes at the individual level, and at the organisational and regional level as well, more than on *teaching* as such. VET is increasingly considered as a function whose main goal, side by side the provision of technical-disciplinary knowledge through formal teaching activities, is

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a draft of an on-going research study within the “REFLECT” project (funded by the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme), whose main goal is the development and test of reflexive methodologies to be used within VET contexts.

<sup>2</sup> VET policies are among those considered in the in the forefront of economic and social change especially in the European approach developed after the well-know session of European Council held in Lisbon in which ambitious objectives were set concerning “Europe as the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world in the year 2010” (European Council, 2000).

the one of sustaining learning and competence development processes in different contexts, including the lifelong learning contexts in which different involved actors play a pulling role and whose complexity is increasingly high.

Due to the nature and width of its new goals VET as a whole tends to be increasingly characterised by an extra-ordinary variety of knowledge and competencies. Teaching competencies have been evolving significantly in order to include several different approaches and techniques (animation, simulation, group work, etc.) beyond the lesson-based dimensions and even beyond the practical demonstration dimensions that traditionally represent the bridge between VET and apprenticeship. Moreover, other non-teaching competencies are increasingly requested such as those related to activities (competence development, consultancy, support of innovation, technology transfer, etc..) generated by the new role of VET in innovation processes of firms and of other organisations and contexts outside the boundaries of the VET centres. In many contexts VET practitioners are confronted with the emergence of an *enlarged learning system* (Conceicao and Heitor, 2001) in which also other actors converge, such as managers, entrepreneurs, academicians, even involved learners expressing specific demands regarding their own competence development paths.

However, in many contexts the established activity patterns tend to be still related to more stable objectives linked to the institutional goal of producing titles according to given qualification frameworks and programmes. A remarkable contradiction seem to be in place between, on one side, the emerging innovative realities and the strategic imperatives related to them – as it is the case of the repeatedly stressed importance of “lifelong learning” – and, on the other side, the reinforcement of the regulatory functions attributed to VET (European Commission, 2000). This entails significant risks in terms of quality of VET practices, which could further incline towards generalised standardised patterns. Under the push of new and old regulations important aspects of VET practices could be severely diminished such as those concerning the involvement of VET practitioners in clients’ situations and needs, in the understanding of work situations, in the participation in organisation processes, etc., i.e. in all the kinds of activities which demand relational and creative skills and practices. A crucial risk is that bureaucratic-technocratic models of VET could be further reinforced, in an overall situation that, on the contrary, is characterised by individuals’ and organisations’ needs for a more client-oriented role of VET and by the priority of real competence development versus formal qualifications provision.

Given the above framework of opportunities and threads, the paper tries to explore some relevant concepts which are related at different levels to questions such as: “which are the meanings of

reflection, reflectivity and reflexivity that are more applicable for VET practitioners?"; "to what extent is it possible to support the development of reflective practices in VET?".

In the following sections different approaches to reflectivity are taken into account in a "micro" and organisation-oriented perspective. *Pragmatic, dialogical* and *critical* approaches from Dewey up to post-modern authors are examined with a particular emphasis on Schoen's theory of the "reflective practitioner". On such a basis a preliminary model is presented regarding relevant traits of effective reflective practices.

In the final section some practical experiences are briefly reported, regarding different methods for triggering reflexivity for purposes such as organisational development (involving middle-managers), young people treatment (involving social workers), self-assessment and professional change (for people in different work environments).

## 2. Relevant approaches to reflectivity<sup>3</sup>

2.1. The kind of perspective used in order to contextualise the theme of reflectivity/reflexivity within the so called *late modernity* or *high modernity*, originated by the works of Giddens and other relevant scholars, has a fundamentally sociological character and a very broad scope.

According to this macro view, social life in high modernity is characterised by reflexivity, assumed as a continuous scrutiny and reformulation of social practices following new acquisitions through the practices themselves and that alter their fundamental characteristics. "Modernity's reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity and material relation with nature, to chronic revisions in the light of new information and knowledge. "Such information or knowledge is not incidental to modern institutions, but is constitutive of them" (Giddens, 1991: 20). Moreover, reflexivity is characterised by the "radical doubt" concerning all forms of human knowledge. Such forms are provisional and, as a consequence, reflexivity is an ongoing and never ending process.

This way, thinking and acting are continuously refracting each other and provide the bases for a kind of reproduction of the social system which is not connected to traditional norms and rules anymore: routines are important components of individual behaviours but the transformation in routines of daily life is not intrinsically linked to the past except that what has already happened can be put in a positive relation with the acquired data (Giddens, 1990). In this perspective reflexivity

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper the terms "reflection", "reflectivity" and "reflexivity" are used according to the meanings attributed by different authors within analyses at the macro and micro level. Concerning the latter the difference between reflectivity and reflexivity seems effectively tackled within the critical and post-modern perspective (see pages 10-12).

is a continuous flow of individual and collective self-monitoring which accentuates the subjectivity of social behaviours and in some ways the prevalence of action on structure.

As already underlined in the discussion of JW's presentation in the opening session, what can be underlined as typical of late modernity is that the grip of formal rules and socially transmitted routines can be considered as increasingly loosening in modern societies. The more societies are modernised, the more agents ("subjects") acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence (Beck, 1994).

Late-modern societies produce a generalized need for capabilities of "double reflexivity" as individuals are both requested to perceive their cultures and societies as "socially constructed" and to proactively reflect on the choices and social world around them. As a consequence the processes of double-reflexivity produce "...a society of clever people" (Giddens 1994: 93).

These increased capabilities can be considered as fundamental causes of a creeping – although non homogeneous – prevalence of action on structure, or in other words of an "unleashing effect" whereby agencies are increasingly "freed" from structures (Lash, 1994).

2.2. However, such kinds of macro perspectives do not exhaust at all the theme. In some ways they could be even considered misleading for understanding – and intervening on – the reflective practices in VET contexts, as other concepts are needed of a more micro nature, at the crossroad of individual dispositions (including non-cognitive aspects) and social-organisational dynamics<sup>4</sup>. For Bourdieu (1977), for instance, reflexivity cannot be understood only in terms of a cognitive reflection on structure as it includes "unconscious" or "pre-reflexive" aspects. Moreover the dualism of structure v/s action is not so strict and should be replaced by a more hermeneutic orientation aimed at grasping the meanings of the interactions between structure and action.

According to Bourdieu, action is performed through the "habitus", i.e. the "system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions" (Bourdieu, 1977: 83). The habitus represents a dynamic intersection between structure and action, it both generates and shapes action, it is

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<sup>4</sup> This paper largely adopts in fact an organisational perspective. The underpinning hypothesis is that professional practices in VET contexts cannot be understood if they are not included in organisational realities, where different kinds of interactions take place between actors at the local level (included the "clients" or final users of VET services) and between local actors and other actors at higher level within institutional structures. This involves a notion of "practitioner" that goes far beyond the stereotypic profile of teacher/trainer and regards a number of other specialisations and competencies. Moreover it involves an attention to phenomena occurring in these context not limited to the teaching/training/developing activities but, on the contrary, extended to a wide range of situations involving sensemaking, decision taking, use of technologies, etc...

productive of individual and collective practices (which are themselves constitutive of the disposition of the habitus), it influences the specific social field in which it takes place. Reflexivity, in this perspective, arises when a lack of “fit” between habitus and field occurs, when there is a discord between the previous routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures, a difference between “the feel for the game”<sup>5</sup> and the game itself (produced inside the field). This way also unaware dispositions of subjects are called into play: reflexivity is not a fully cognitive act, as it mostly appears in Giddens’ theory, but is something embedded in individual and collective (community) practices, generated by specific, dissonant, dynamics of habitus and field.

2.3. Through such a sociological perspective it is possible to better tackle areas of current debate on reflexivity that are closer to the micro dimension and are also open to understanding reflectivity from an organisational point of view. An outstanding position in this area is still held by Donald Schoen and by his seminal *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983).

Schoen considered reflectivity as a function through which practitioners overcome the strictly technical forms of rationality attached to disciplinary and professional traditions and that support common problem-solving activities. Beside problem-solving, what really matters for Schoen is *problem setting*, the process by which “we define the decision to be made, the ends to be archived, the means which may be chosen” (Schoen, 1983: 38).

In such a perspective reflection is not separated but strictly intertwined with professional practices, in which problems do not appear as givens but must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling and uncertain. Practitioners have in fact usually to deal with uncertain situations in which they have to carry out sense-making exercises in order to develop viable solutions. “It is this entire process of reflection-in-action which is central to the ‘art’ by which practitioners sometimes deal well situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness...” (p. 50). *Reflection-in action*, as opposed to the traditional ex-post *reflecting-on action* is therefore an on-going process, logically close to the scientific “research” process. “When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate but defines them interactively when framing problematic situations. He does not separate thinking from doing” (p. 68). Through *reflecting-in-action* professionals can

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of “feel of the game” is very much akin to the one of “feel for the stuff” used by Schoen (see below). Both include an idea of skills embedded in action – at the same time practical, technical and even emotional – which is close to the well-known concept of “tacit knowledge”.

construct an understanding of a situation by drawing upon cumulative personal and organizational knowledge and engaging in “a reflective conversation with the situation “ (p. 242). Reflecting-in-action incorporates an experimental logic of exploration, moves hypothesis testing as a means of creating a better match between the professional’s strategies and situational conditions. Different repertoires of solutions can grow over time with the accumulation of experiences and contribute to further professional developments at the operational and at the learning level <sup>6</sup>.

Reflection-in-action is in many ways the median term of an important conceptual triad put forward by Schoen, whose other terms – equally important although not frequently quoted – are *knowing-in-action* and *reflecting-in-practice*. All are linked to the idea that “our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing” (p. 49).

Tacit *knowing-in-action* is in fact what the daily life of professionals depends on: expert professionals make innumerable judgments of quality for which they cannot exactly state the rules or procedures and these spontaneous judgments are continuously enmeshed with conscious uses of scientific or research-based theories. Knowing-in-action represents the practitioner’s intelligent behaviour, the characteristic mode of ordinary practical knowledge, the real locus of “learning by doing”. *Reflecting-in-action*, from this viewpoint, represents the aware side of “thinking while doing” and of the accumulation of tacit knowledge which constitutes the essence of *reflecting-in-practice*, i.e. the transfer of the reflection outcomes into the ever changing events of professional practice.

This way professional practice is seen from an active and contextualized perspective in which problem solving and problem setting mutually involve each other and in which the active subjectivity of the reflecting subject appears as placed in a continuum with the situation. Theoretical ideas, designs and plans are in a dialectical interplay with the conditions of the environment that they have to be fitting with. Instead of only applying methods (either based on abstract disciplinary principles, like in the “technical rationality” model or on conclusions of inquiries, like in the pragmatic problem-solving) the reflective practitioner is able to have the feeling of situations and to maintain open dialogues with the situation itself and with other actors playing a role in it (according to the metaphor of the jazz player, in a continuous dialogue with both the music and the other musicians).

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<sup>6</sup> There is not enough space for an in-depth discussion of the concept of “reflection-in-action”. In particular it should be compared with other relevant visions whereby it could represent a “*contradictio in terminis*”. For instance from the viewpoint of the Polany’s “personal knowledge” or “tacit knowledge” reflexivity can occur only after action. The distinction between “focal awareness” and “subsidiary awareness” put forward by Polany is crucial for understanding a perspective in which real-time reflexivity could easily be seen as something paralysing action.

2.4. The Schoen's "dialogical" reflectivity is not only of an individual nature: it is in many ways related with the collective dimension in which it takes place and strictly entangled with the conditions of specific organisational contexts which allow, or do not allow in many cases, the development of reflective practices. Such a collective dimension coincides with the area of opportunities for organisational learning.

The notion of *organisational learning* that Donald Schoen developed together with Chris Argyris (1978, 1996), and that is also included in the analysis of the *reflective practitioner's* behaviours, is crucial for understanding the ways in which reflection-in-practice takes place when – as the largest majority of cases – practitioners work within organised contexts. First of all, "organisational learning" is based on something that is intrinsically reflective, i.e. on the *inquiries* through which organisational actors try to detect the causes of "errors" occurring in the organisation flows of activities in order to either routinely correct such causes and thereby solve problems (single-loop learning) or, more rarely, to change the written and unwritten behavioural rules that are the real sources of errors themselves (double-loop learning). The *inquiry* is in fact the fundamental modality of the concept of "reflective thought" elaborated by Dewey (see next section) and further jointly developed by Argyris and Schoen through a creative crossing with the Bateson's theory of learning. The "organisational inquiry", based on a *surprise* for the occurrence of an error, represents the fundamental locus of organisational learning. It is intrinsically *reflective*, as each actor in the inquiry elaborates "individual images" of the organisational "theory" which is deemed to be operational, and such individual images have to be transformed into "collective maps" through processes whereby each one reflects (also in the sense of "mirrors") the others' images. Furthermore the organisational inquiry is *dialogical*, as the inquiry should take place within overt confrontations of ideas and hypotheses on suitable courses of action, avoiding opportunistic behaviours and defensive routines.

However, in real organisations (very often geared to function according to a more or less tight bureaucratic model) there are usually several different constraints to the deployment of reflection and organisational learning opportunities. As Schoen points out, "the more an organisation depends for its survival on innovation and adaptation to a changing environment, the more essential its interest in organisational learning. On the other hand, formal organisations also have powerful interest in the stability and predictability.... *Surprise, which is essential to learning, is inimical to smooth organisational functioning*" (Schoen, 1983: 327, italics added). Reflective practices (in which confusion and uncertainty can be encountered, and in which frames and theories are subject to change and criticisms) can be considered in some cases as positively contributing to innovation,



but also, in other cases, as a danger to the stability of rules and procedures. “...Ordinary bureaucracies tend to resist a professional’s attempt to move from technical expertise to reflective practice” (p. 328).

Pragmatic Behavioristic	→	Dialogical	→	Post-modern Critical
Reflective thought  Inquiry (surprise)  Transformational reflectivity  Experiential learning		Reflection <i>in</i> Action  Reflection in practice  Conversation with the situation		Reflexivity as intellectual and social practice  Reflectivity (“calculative thinking”) v/s reflexivity (“meditative thinking”)

Fig. 1 Evolution of theories on reflexivity

2.5. As above pointed out, Schoen’s “dialogical” approach to reflectivity represented a real conceptual leap at the time of its appearance. It overcame several previous views of the topic and incorporated several significant contents of them as well.

In many ways the dialogical view is a successful evolution of a previous paradigm that could be put under the headings of *pragmatism* and *behaviourism*, dominated by the figure of John Dewey who devoted much of his work to the concepts of reflection and “reflective thought”. The latter is defined by Dewey as “*active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends*” (Dewey, 1933: 118, italics in the original). The orientation to specific conclusions, or in other words, the push towards practical results is the crucial characteristic of the reflective thought, which is in fact depicted by Dewey as a circular process, articulated into different phases, including: the elaboration of *suggestions* for solutions in the face of a problem; the intellectualisation of the difficulty or perplexity felt regarding the problem; the use of *hypotheses* to initiate and guide observation and other operations in collection of factual material; the *reasoning*, as a part of the needed inference; and the *testing* of hypotheses by overt or imaginative action. Such a process is at

the basis of forms of reflectivity which tend to rigorous ways of thinking but that, nevertheless, are also aimed at making meanings appropriate to specific situations and require not an abstract position from the thinker but her participation in interactive processes with others and a personal drive towards (individual and collective) intellectual growth.

Reflection, for Dewey, takes place within processes of rational problem solving: it is the main way through which the subject's mind understands what it is going to do when acting. Therefore reflection is mainly aimed at verifying the validity of action in relation to given problems within a hypothetic-deductive process, defined as *critical inquiry* and characterised not only in terms of results but also in clearer formulation of the assumptions that the action is grounded on<sup>7</sup>.

The concept of *inquiry* is in many ways the one the better explains the practical implementation of reflection. An inquiry generally proceeds from the "surprise" generated by realising that a given problem is emerged and a solution is required. Afterwards, inquiry takes the form of a "controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituents distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole" (p. 108). In order to do so, the inquirer has to follow paths that are not only logic but also social. The inquiry is by definition social or "communal", in the sense that its findings must be subject to scrutiny and testing by other inquirers: any inquirer in a given special field has to appeal to the experiences of the community of other fellows in the same field for confirmation and correction of results (Dewey, 1938).

2.6. Among the dozens of interpretations and reformulations of Dewey's thought, a relevant place seem occupied by the educationalist perspective of Mezirow and by his "transformative theory" of learning. Mezirow (1990) tried to develop the Deweyan meaning of reflection through a sharper distinction between reflecting on *contents* and *processes* and reflecting on *premises* and *assumptions*. The latter represents the kind of reflection which is related to the modification of assumptions and frames (i.e. the ways in which assumptions and frames are created, elaborated, reinforced, negated or transformed into problems). The reflection on premises brings about better formulated "meaning perspectives", more conceptually discriminative and open to experience. Therefore, the real "critical reflection", from this viewpoint, is the reflection on premises, assumed

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<sup>7</sup> As the philosopher Richard Rorty noted in his introduction to Dewey's *How We Think* the real value of such a definition is not in suggesting an easy formulation, which could be applied even to Medieval theologians, but in its openness to results that are contingent, subtracted to traditional and routinised thinking. According to this view, Dewey's approach could be considered much closer to the critical-dialogical views than to the behaviouristic ones. This seems an interesting theoretical perspective, to be developed within further contributions.

as something that has to do with *problem posing* and not with *problem solving*: what is to be reflected is not the solution to a given problem but the situation that originated to problem: a situation which very often is taken for granted and that, on the contrary, should be questioned as such. As a consequence, the possibilities of “reflective” and “transformative” learning – that Mezirow considers as the fundamental mission of adult education – stem from reflective practices as they originate new or transformed frames and perspectives.

2.7. Mezirow’s “transformative theory” is an interesting example of a non-mechanistic interpretation of Dewey’s reflective thought. On the contrary several other authors could be quoted in the “pragmatic-behaviouristic” area, at different levels of theoretical significance and practical impact, that took the Dewey’s model as an archetype for different kinds of methodologies in which a more or less marked contraposition of reflection and action (paralleling the one between theory and practice) is put into play. On one side reflection is the lieu of analysis, of scrupulous scrutiny of the situations, of impartial (self)-description and assessment; on the other side action is the moment in which such “mental” outputs are put in practice, in more or less mechanistic ways. Through this kind of dialectic it is deemed possible to activate virtuous, virtually infinite, cycles of improvement. For instance, the “experiential learning theory” proposed by Kolb (1981, 1984) (which can be considered as a prêt-a-porter vulgarisation of Dewey’s reflective thought) mechanistically juxtaposes four modes of action and reflection – concrete experience (“feeling”), reflective observation (“watching”), abstract conceptualisation (“thinking”) and active experimentation (“doing”).

Very little can be said from this kind of pragmatic-behaviouristic stance regarding the internal functioning of the fit between reflection action and vice versa, which is in fact largely taken for granted. Important aspects are missing, from this viewpoint, such as, for instance: the role of social interaction and inter-subjectivity in the dialectic reflection/action; the transformations induced by reflective practices on their own subjects; the shift of meanings generated by in-depth reflective practices; the effects of temporality in the becoming of reflection/action experiences. This kind of concerns are typical of the “dialogical” approach, that are particularly interested in the processes of knowledge formation through the interaction of actors, and of the more recent “critical” approaches, that are paving the way to a new understanding of reflexivity.

2.8. More than twenty years after *The Reflective Practitioner*, the debate on themes such as reflection and reflective practices is still largely open within the involved academic communities. Recent contributions to the debate show the appearance of increasingly innovative paradigms: new

visions are emerging which juxtapose reflectivity and reflexivity and, regarding the latter, emphasise its nature of both social and intellectual practice. In particular, the debate on reflexivity has been recently enriched by a number of works that reaffirm its centrality within organisation and management science and that theoretically stem from a background that could be defined as “critical”, in which *phenomenological, post-modern, constructivist* and *humanistic* approaches seem to converge. In these works reflexivity is assumed as a fundamental pillar of new ways of addressing organisation and management issues, largely outside the mechanistic interpretations of the nature and function of what is termed as “organisation”, i.e. outside the taylor-fordist tradition and its neo-tayloristic follow-up (of the *business processes re-engineering* kind) as well.

Critical approaches are based on the acknowledgement that human abilities for acting in complex situations do not derive from adherence to given models, technologies, or procedures, and descend, on the contrary, from the impetus of autonomous, contingent and even emotionally-driven forms of knowing and learning. Therefore reflexivity is the main way for developing (self-)understanding of human action within organisational contexts, a process through which actors can assess their own reality as a whole, including individual-personal and collective-organisational aspects.

This way reflexivity becomes a powerful view angle, at the junction between the ontological/factual and the cognitive dimensions of action. Reflexivity can be seen as the ultimate locus of knowing and learning in organisational contexts, adding deepness to factors that more diffused theories on knowledge in organisations tend to tackle only on the surface. In particular, in terms of reflexivity it becomes possible to explain how actors question the meanings of their actions along both a *synchronic* axis (in relation to already established goals, assumptions, etc..) and a *diachronic* axis, considering that actions are connected in temporality, in the becoming of the actors themselves and of their own organisational contexts and that actions generate over time outcomes which were previously unintended.

This “deep” nature of reflexivity is expressed through the opposition of reflectivity and reflexivity clearly put forward by recent works (Cunliffe and Jun, 2002; Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004). According to Cunliffe and colleagues these terms are often used synonymously but carry very different ontological assumptions and intellectual and social practice. In this perspective reflection is linked to the idea of a mirror image reflecting an objective reality which is simply “out there”.

For instance, the Schoen’s practitioner is seen as operating within a reflective epistemology that involves a certain degree of reductionism: she is seen as turned into a sort of object among the others, those for which she is searching for patterns, logic, and order. From this viewpoint, reflection – even self-reflection – is a disembodied process because the thinker is separating self

from the moment of existence (Cunliffe and Jun, 2002). But the real essence of reflection-in-action is, in the very end, the subjective experience, i.e. the “active subjectivity”, or the involvement in a world that the practitioner continuously contribute to create. In these terms, “reflective practice is distinguished from reflection because it questions and explores how we might contribute to the construction of social and organizational realities, how we relate with others, and how we construct our ways of being in the world” (Cunliffe and Jun, 2002).

The difference between reflection and reflexivity is connected to the one between Heidegger’s “calculative thinking” and “meditative thinking”: the former is represented by the movement of “going towards” the objects, i.e. understanding the objects through different kinds of closure, while the latter is a form of waiting, a releasing or opening ourselves up to the hidden nature of truth, putting attention to the ways we think and to our becoming in thinking.

Consoli (2005) develops such a difference pointing out that “reflection” regards an observer implied in the action through a “reflective conversation” with the action itself: although entailing a subjective experience (and sense-making), such a reflection is ontologically objectivist as the subject (her mind, tools, action) comes into the play as an object to be observed. On the contrary, reflexivity is a step forward, a way of making thinking and experience more complex, “underlining the doubts, contradictions, dilemmas and potentialities of the subject in her daily situation and practice” (Consoli, 2005: 1). Reflexivity mostly sheds light on action, which is part of an activity system and hence can hold much more than thought can express about.

In such a perspective, both reflection and reflexivity can be either individual or social-institutional, but in the former case *control* is the underpinning driver, while in terms of reflexivity *relations* are what really matter and the “conversations” significantly include not only the practitioner and the situation but, mostly, the practitioner and the others surrounding her.

The opposition between reflection and reflexivity brings about a significant emphasis on *self-reflexivity*, assumed as something that questions the bases of thinking, the taken-for-granted rules, the ways to think about practices and relations with others. The idea of self-reflexivity is linked to “an internal process wherein we examine ourselves, including our values, in the process of exercising critical consciousness”, “a process that depends on the idea of a transforming self, continuously emerging and changing as we interact with others, the environment, and the public” (Cunliffe, 2002). Another important category is the one of *practical reflexivity*, which is assumed as “a dialogical and relational activity” in many ways opposed to reflection, “generally characterised as a cognitive activity”. In such a perspective “..reflection involves giving order to situations; practical reflexivity means unsettling conventional practices” (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004).

2.9. Such a “critical” view entails a radical shift in relation to the traditional notion of reflexivity insofar as it overturns the relations – even at the epistemological level – between the dialogical-narrative dimension of reflecting and the reality that dialogues and narrations are referred to. In many ways the critical view of reflexivity is highly coherent with the *meta-reflexivity* that characterises the post-modern organisational analysis. In the latter case what is at stake is the possibility itself of objectively analysing entities which are called “organisations” and realities that are “constructed” not only by their own actors through different kinds of narrations but also, in particular, by researchers and scholars who claim to refer about such realities and narrations according to scientific presuppositions and theoretical frameworks (Chia, 1996). Post-modern organisational theorists try to transcend the “being realism” paradigm, which is typical of traditional social science, referred to “facts” to be interpreted/represented through theories. They tend to shift towards a “becoming realism” paradigm referred to “processes” that cannot be represented but, at best, narrated. Reality, from this viewpoint, “is in perpetual flux and transformation and hence unrepresentable through any static conceptual framework or paradigm of thought” (Chia, 1996: 46). Different constructs have been generated according to this view, like – as reported by Chia – “relational materialism” (Law) interested in the materially heterogeneous nature of social processes, and “infra-reflexivity” committed to recovering the concreteness of “brute” experiences as they emerge (Latour). Instead of the traditional representations of organisations through researching and theorising the post-modern schools tend to examine the relational processes, i.e. the micro-practices of organising and representing through *story telling*. In the post-representational approach “we are engaging in ‘story-telling’ more than in ‘truth telling’”. But this does not imply that we are creating ‘mere’ stories. Although we are ‘telling stories’ we are telling them not about ourselves, but also about something else more illusive and not easily specifiable” (Chia, 1996: 51). The interrelation between the post-modern and the critical views seem to lay in their common interest for narratives which reflect given realities but allude to more complex issues that the narrating subject is involved in <sup>8</sup>. The role of reflection through narratives is crucial from this viewpoint: it is at the heart of a

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<sup>8</sup> The “second order” reflexivity of researchers and the “first order” ones, produced by direct actors, can have some interesting points in common. However, in this short contribution the focus is on reflexivity of actors while the one of researchers/academic is not dealt with. The latter regards the ways in which the collection, treatment and interpretation of evidences from the field (in particular the narratives of actors within different kinds of qualitative research) take place, as well as the ways in which the researcher/scientist/author self-evaluate her own role in relation to such activities. Such kind of reflexivity has attracted much attention from authors especially within the post-modern stream. It also deserved serious criticisms; for instance, as a simple conclusion to a dense contribution aimed at encouraging conversation about the ways in which reflexivity can strengthen understanding, Karl Weick wrote: “My suggestion for reflection on our craft is a modest one. It is that we remind ourselves that we [the researchers] are *not* the point. In the name of

post-modern concept of science which is at the same time narrative and tending to incompleteness as it is referred not to a pre-existing truth but to partial accounts of social actors. “If we are aware of the partiality of our accounts, then we need to find out in what ways we are partial, how our accounts incorporate assumptions of which we are not ordinarily aware – we need, in other words, to reflect on our reflections; we need to be reflexive” (Antonacopoulos and Tsoukas, 2002: 858).

2.10. Recent approaches add new interesting theoretical entries to the issues of reflexivity and reflective practices pointing out the relations between *reflection and emotions* and the resonances of such relations at the dialogical and critical level. The attempts in such a direction tend to fill an evident void as the relations between reflection and emotions are important but have been so far largely neglected by the literature in this field. “This is perhaps not surprising – as underlined by Swan and Bailey – given the belief that reflection is a cognitive activity, and that cognition and rationality are usually seen as outside of, or superior to, emotions, and the wider influence of cognitivism in learning theories” (Swan and Bailey, 2004: 106). Recent contributions, quoted by the same authors, show that the “emotionalisation” and the “therapeutisation” of the public sphere, including the workplace, are dealt with more than the emotions as such, due to the considerable extension of places and spaces in which emotions are allowed or even fostered. After examining some cases of reflection on emotional behaviours in different organisations, the authors conclude that the collective reflection on emotions should not be avoided but that, at the same time, the models through which the mobilisation of emotions takes place should be subject to critical analysis.

From another viewpoint, examining the dynamics of learning and change in organisations, Antonacopoulou (2004) underlines that emotions are “part of the dynamic flow of interacting social and political forces” and that bringing them to the fore “we are able to better appreciate the organising processes of reflection that underpin the way individuals make sense of the experiences they encounter in their working environment” (p. 48). Empirical research related to this kind of hypotheses shows that it is not at all an easy task to identify the final contribution of emotions to specific behaviours which generate learning and change; however “our efforts to understand and support reflective practices may be better served by a greater appreciation of the underlying dynamics, which support such practices” (p. 61). In particular the role of the organisational *feed-*

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reflexivity, many of us tend to be more interested in our own practices than in those of anybody else. That is not reflexivity. That is non-reflective narcissism. Surely we can do better than that” (Weick, 2002: 898).

*back systems* which allow, or do not allow in many cases, the recognition of emotions has to be carefully considered.

The issue of the links between reflexivity and emotions is of a very complex nature. In order to fully develop it, it would be important to take more into account the more general problem of the relationships between knowledge and emotions<sup>9</sup>.

At this regard seminal ideas have been put forward by Michael Polany (1962, 1965) in terms of “personal knowledge” and “intellectual passion”. The emotional involvement in scientific activities – and, by extension of Polany’s thought, in different kinds of organisational activities at medium-high skill levels – cannot be assumed as a mere psychological by-product. Such involvement has a *logical* function in the activity development and the search for continuous self-development. Therefore understanding how the cognitive and the emotional dimensions are closely intertwined is a major issue in research in this field and in the development of reflective practices as well.

### 3. Interventions for the implementation of reflective practice in VET contexts

3.1. After being considered for a long time as the privileged locus of problem-solving, in the light of the dialogical and critical perspectives reflexivity appears as an individual and collective multifaceted *meta-competence*, i.e. a way of being-in-the-world implying an enduring interest for our own being within complex practice situations, heedful abilities for “conversations” with such situations and active engagement with others in order to learn and change.

Such a meta-competence, which in many ways represents a basic requisite for participation of late-modern citizens in processes that reproduce the conditions of social survival and development<sup>10</sup>, can be considered as very crucial objective for VET systems.

From one hand VET systems should include the diffusion of such meta-competence in their own basic mission, due to the crucial role that it plays in lifelong learning and work-based learning

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<sup>9</sup> Such a link is not at all unknown in organisation studies. Weick, for instance, underlined the crucial function of emotional ties in situations where disruptive events must be kept under control through shared knowledge and understanding. Nonaka and Takeuchi theorised “tacit knowledge” as intrinsically rooted in both individuals’ action and experience and in embraced ideals, values and emotions. Gherardi emphasised the function of emotionality and aesthetics in learning-in-organising. Wenger defined the glue that keeps together new forms of communities of practice in terms of *passion* for knowledge and problem-solving. Even the Senge’s “learning organisation” has several degrees of parenthood with the Goleman’s “emotional intelligence” in working daily life.

<sup>10</sup> Some issues dealing with the relations between learning and citizenship – in terms of organisational learning and organisational citizenship phenomena encountered in empirical research studies in large European companies – are tackled in Tomassini (forthcoming).



activities, increasingly considered as the most significant tasks of VET. On the other hand, the latter can effectively handle such difficult tasks only undergoing deep internal changes, regarding not only structures and policies but also – even at a more challenging level – social relations, mindsets, behaviours and attitudes. This seem to imply an increasing support to the diffusion of reflective practices within VET contexts by all subjects concerned (social partners, political decision-makers, etc..) and a growing interest for different forms of intervention which can foster such diffusion of reflective practices.

The above review allows to consider that effective reflective practices should be generally characterised by at least four important traits.

The first of them can be identified in the essential co-relation between *reflexivity and practice*. “Practice” has to be assumed in a much more extended meaning than the one of mere “doing”. Practice is in fact a doing that takes place in a given historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what people do in their contexts. Therefore practice “is always social practice” (Wenger, 1998: 47) in which a strict co-implication exists between action and structure (in many ways analogous to the Giddens’s *structuration*) and in which doing and reflecting on doing are also continuously requested. Practice appears as the fundamental locus of knowing and learning in organised contexts: practice and knowing are two faces of the same phenomenon, continuously implying each other and *situated* in specific contexts (Gherardi, 2000).

In Schoen’s terms practice is the natural application field of reflexivity, considering that the term *practice* conveys a double meaning, referred either to the “performance in a range of specific situations” (like in the case of a lawyer’s practice, regarding the things he does, her clients, the range of cases he is called upon to handle) or to the “preparation for performance” (like in the case of practicing the piano). According to this double meaning, practice implies a certain dose of repetition. In their activities professionals develop repertoires of expectations, images, techniques; they learn what to look and for and how to respond to what they find (Schoen, 1983). “Reflecting-in-practice” is in many ways an antidote to the repetition and an important tool for self-evaluation”. From this viewpoint, reflexivity means self-evaluation of the activity as a whole, trying to identify from time to time the effects of knowing-in-action and to compare the accumulation of experience with the corpus of knowledge that the practice formally rely on.

More in general, reflexivity as an on-going process of (self-)understanding of the implications between doing and learning – involving individuals and organisational aggregations as well – is intrinsic to any activity context, although frequently not consciously cultivated and adequately

fostered. Therefore effective reflective practices are strictly linked to their context: no real reflective practice can be attempted at a distance from the activity context that the actors belong to.

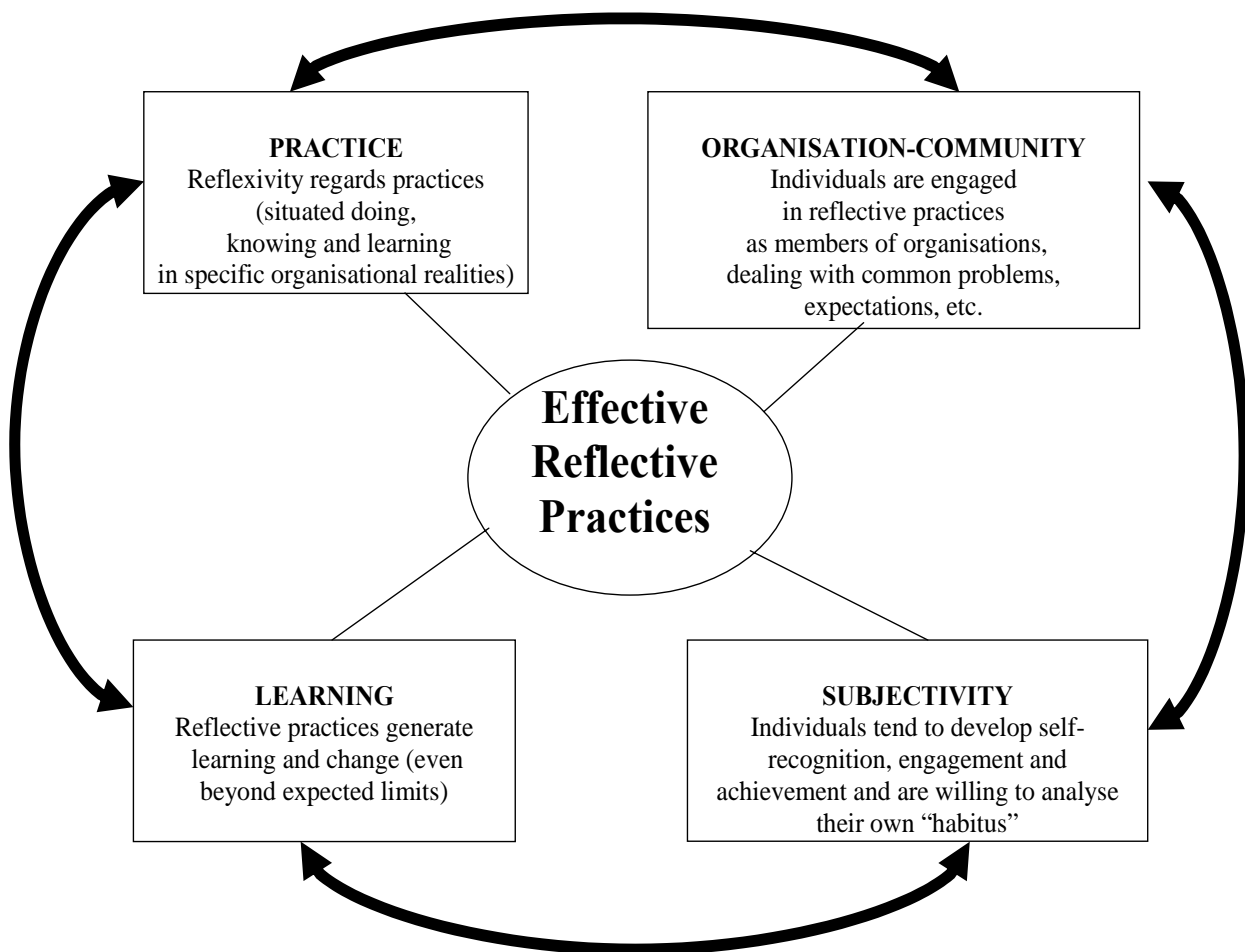


Fig. 2 Relevant traits of effective reflective practices

The second relevant trait consists in the not merely individual but *social* and *organisational* nature of effective reflective practices. Reflexivity is significant insofar as it overcomes the individual, “mental”, dimension and involve the interactions between actors who have common interests and are open to change themselves in social reflexive processes. Reflexivity – as already underlined – is highly *situated* in social and organisational contexts.

At this regard, Vince (2004) points out the need to shift the focus from reflection as a task of individuals to collective and organisationally focused process for reflection. The phrase “organising reflection” represents a perspective towards “a socially situated, relational, political and collective process” which can allow both theoretical and practical advantages. Reflexivity, in this perspective, is integral to working situations, where it plays a very crucial role for the establishment of accepted organisational knowledge: reflection interrupts in fact the common experience flows and can determine something that has a status of institutionalised knowledge in that specific organisation

(Gherardi and Nicolini, 2001). In very simple terms, “in most situations the individual alone cannot address or solve meta-organisational problems... a restricted view of learning can neutralise the capacity to produce learning and change... individualised, private reflection is at risk of being a sterile effort given that individuals alone are seldom in a position to make substantial organisational changes” (Nicolini et al., 2004: 81).

A very significant aspect which can be included under the social-organisational label, has to do with the dimension of the *communities of practice*: these micro-contexts are crucial insofar as “organised reflexivity” (Welsh and Dehler, 2004) mostly takes place within them. According to current theories of CoPs, they represent spontaneous aggregations based on shared forms of learning and doing whereby a sense of common enterprise is developed, mutual learning is a normal feature of interpersonal relations and a collective repertoire of linguistic and cultural construct is nurtured over time (Wenger, 1998). As an evolution of this theory CoPs are seen as aggregations (even scattered inter-organisational aggregations) based on a passion for specific themes and kept together by the willingness of professional improvements (Wenger et al., 2002). Significant case studies (e.g. the well-known case of the Xerox photocopiers repairs, Brown and Duguid, 1989) show how collective reflexivity is an important part of CoPs *raison d’être* and how articulated are the ways in which CoPs members reflect and re-create their organisational sense-making. These kinds of processes could be understood in terms “organised reflection” when a “critical” dimension is added to collective reflexivity and the capacity for such an organised reflection is seen as the effect of processes by which members of CoPs “share, elaborate and ultimately combine and reconcile their causal maps of the ‘social and political taken-for-granted’ ...” (Welsh and Dehler, 2004: 16).

Even an “ethical” dimension can be advocated at this regard, considering that excellent organisations should foster forms of communities of practice which radically avoid the risk of re-introducing elements of external control *sub specie* of reflexivity and which, on the contrary, assume the latter as founded on shared convictions about the values associated with excellence (Nyhan, 2004).

In sum, effective reflective practices mainly regard groups and communities interested in jointly developing their own capabilities at all levels and the effectiveness of their working processes as well, in a perspective of shared understanding of common paths.

The third trait of the effective reflective practices seems constituted by the close link between *reflexivity, learning and change*. Reflexivity is a really worth activity when it takes the form of an open exercise aimed not at repeating already institutionalised courses of action but at introducing something deemed as new and useful in relation to the exigencies of people in a given context. The

dynamics of reflective practices must be traced considering “reflexivity is a dynamic interaction between reflection and action with an intention to learn and change” (Antonacopoulou, 2004).

Different remarks are possible at this level, all related to the *limits of learning* that reflexivity should try to identify (not expecting to fully overcome them). In particular, it seems useful to point out that important limits can be found on the axis intentions-outcomes. Reflexivity, as a processing of the meanings of experience and as a basic step for future action planning, is really effective insofar as it develops specific abilities in uncovering and making explicit achievements and discoveries regarding practice. An important part of such discoveries regard the *unintended outcomes* of actions, i.e. the unique features of results which were not at all – or only partly – foreseen and whose effects go beyond the range of formal plans or estimates.

“Every process of reflexivity – Consoli writes (2005) – increases the awareness regarding action and triggers extremely effective learning processes. But it can bring about unintended and undesired outcomes, especially when the involved subjects actually act in ‘blocked’ working situations” (p. 12). Collective reflexivity can play a very important role in uncovering the crossing complicities that keep untouched the “theories-in use” in specific contexts; on the contrary, if new knowledge is not generated, accepted and socially recognised there can be risks of frustration and burnout for those involved in such situations.

In other words, reflective practices can trigger learning and change but specific conditions have to be put in place for such positive outcomes to occur. These conditions are usually identified with management models and styles inclined towards learning and allowing the development of reflective practices (and, when needed, providing authoritative support to initiatives fostering such development). Here it seems useful to underline that positive conditions should be first of all found among interested actors, as elements of a “desire” of change and a “passion” for knowing and learning that can be especially typical of organisational aggregations of the *community of practice* kind. Another fundamental issue at this regard – following the Consoli’s view – is represented by the involvement of the “client”, i.e. by the opportunity offered to the final users of services (e.g. the VET) of being included in reflective practices. This way fundamental inputs for change can be added, from a position (the “client”) which is structurally not taken into account in traditional perspectives.

The fourth trait of effective reflective practices has to do with *subjectivity* features. One can properly speak about reflexivity and not just learning or “learning from doing” when the subjective dimension of reflectors is involved, not only on a merely cognitive level but also entailing personal and even emotional features. Reflexivity from this viewpoint can be considered the locus of

important phenomena like self-recognition, engagement and achievement. The most likely “reflectors” should be identified among people that feel themselves not at all detached from their contexts but positively engrained in them; open to forms of change – as seen before – which could help them in reinforcing their capabilities of acting as autonomous practitioners. Effective reflective practices are therefore those which involve people having at least some degrees of readiness regarding the reconsideration of their own professional identities, not afraid of analysing the components of their own “habitus” and routines, able to narrate their own stories and to dialogue with peers and superiors about relevant issues of engagement and change.

Of course conflicts can emerge in different situations because of the development of reflective practices, especially within bureaucratic settings: reflexivity can be the locus for the identification of suitable ways of dealing with such conflicts, trying to solve them in a step by step mood, showing for instance how repeated routines can become dysfunctional over time and it is not useful to put the blame on this or that person or group. In other words reflective practice can entail getting in touch with “political” matters: reflexivity should not be expressly focused on them, as it is well known that they can paralyse any attempt for transformation, but at the same time it should not ignore them.

3.2. Several *action methodologies* (AMs) can be used in order to trigger the development of reflective practices in different contexts, or at least of reflective attitudes of actors within them, more or less coherently with the four above identified fundamental traits.

Raelin (1999) provides a very exhaustive review for in-depth understanding and comparison of the AM field. The approaches mentioned in the review are: (i) *action research*, a process wherein researchers participate in studies both as subjects and objects with the explicit intention of bringing about change through the research process. (ii) *participatory research*, a form of collaboration for knowledge development in social change perspective; (iii) *action learning*, an intervention method based on the notion that people learn most effectively when working on real time problems occurring in their own work settings, (iv) *action science*, an intervention method based on the idea that people can improve their interpersonal and organizational effectiveness by exploring the hidden beliefs that drive their actions, (v) *developmental action inquiry*, the systematic attempt to enrich a person’s, group’s, organization’s or society’s awareness of the interplay among transpersonal awareness, subjective interpretations and strategies, inter-subjective practices and politics, and objective data and effects, (vi) *cooperative inquiry*, research in which all those involved are both co-researchers – generating ideas and designing and managing the project – and co-subjects – participating in the activity that is being researched.

*Action research*, which is frequently considered as something like “the methodology of the action methodologies” consists in an intervention guided by a team of researchers-consultants who interact with organization members on the basis of cyclical steps including planning, action, and evaluating the result of action. Starting from a specific problem to be solved in the given context, the experts continually encourage actions (data collecting, interviewing, etc..) and reflections on actions (through self-observation, discussion, etc..) by the organization members. The activities carried out at each step are monitored in order to adjust as needed (Dickens and Watkins, 1999).

The idea of research is also present in the original approach to *action learning* (AL), but in this case the emphasis is more on the development of people involved in the intervention, in particular managers engaged in continuous problem-solving: “the subjective aspects of searching the unfamiliar, or of learning to pose useful and discriminating questions in conditions of ignorance, risk and confusion, must become as well understood, and as effectively employed, by managers as are all the syllabuses of programmed instruction. Action Learning takes up from the start the need to help managers – and all others who engage in management – acquire this insight into the posing of questions by the simple device of setting them to tackle real problems that have so far defied solutions” (Revans, 1978; 1998: 4).

It is worth to underline that a number of interpretations and variants of AL have been elaborated over time. Marsick and O’Neil (1999) distinguish at least three different schools in the field of AL, labeled as “scientific”, “experiential” and “critical reflection”. The “scientific” school, directly based on Revan’s work, is seen as focused on situational analyses and on keen collections of data, while the “experiential” is more open to learning from mistakes and personal skill growths. The “critical reflection”, school on its turn, is seen in some way as linked to the Mezirow’s view of reflection and therefore very much interested in reflections about assumptions and beliefs shaping practices.

In *action science*, research is more finalized to knowledge deriving from experiences of participants. The main aim is the one of “seeking knowledge that serves action”. In general, the action scientist tries to create the conditions for valid inquiry in the context of practical deliberation by members of client systems. The target is mainly constituted by “enacting communities of inquiry in communities of social practice” (Argyris et al., 1985). Action Science tends to allow space to personal feelings and more in general to the psycho-sociological variables that constitute the

background conditions for the evolution of individuals and organisations towards higher forms of learning.

Recent developments of this approach have been presented in terms of *action design*, whose aim is the one of “helping individuals and groups in organizations develop their capability for inquiry, choice, and action on their most difficult issues” ([www.actiondesign.com](http://www.actiondesign.com)).

The previous list – and synthetic explanations limited to the three of the principal AMs – do not cover the whole field of AMs. For instance, somebody speaks also about *transformative action research* (Bonnet et al., 2000) while in a previous important mapping exercise of the field Chisholm and Elden (1993) mention *appreciative inquiry* and *interactive holistic research* as further examples of this kind of activities, which all are assumed as alternative paradigms to normal science.

More recently important results have been reached by the *Change Laboratory* approach developed by Y. Engeström in Finland and the US. The “Change Laboratory” is a new method for developing work practices by the practitioners based on different types of meetings conduct in expert work places. First of all, the laboratory sessions focus on *concrete cases* that represent significant objects of work undergoing transformation. Secondly, the laboratory sessions *cross boundaries* by including practitioners from multiple organizational units and domains of expertise. Thirdly, the sessions use shared *conceptual tools of activity theory* to analyze the historical evolution of the work practice as well as its current contradictions, disturbances, and change potentials. Fourthly, the meetings are often *attended in person by clients* whose case is being discussed, backed up by *documents and videotaped excerpts* from previous interactions around the object. Fifthly, in laboratory sessions the participants envision and draft strongly *future-oriented new models of work and concrete changes* to be embarked upon. “Thus, the laboratory sessions represent a blend of elements familiar from existing practices and new elements brought in by the researchers” (Engeström, 2004:10).

The evolutionary traits that all the above AMs have in common consists in their differentiation from the model of “action research” originally established by K. Lewin in the Forties (Tomassini, 2001). This model is nothing more than a cyclical inquiry process that involves diagnosing a problem situation, planning action steps, and implementing and evaluation outcomes. The real fundamental difference from the original Lewinian model and the various forms of AR and other kinds of AM which have been created in the last decades is that the latter “no longer emphasize the hypothesis testing in the positivist tradition found in Lewin’s work” (Dickens and Watkins, 1999:139). Put

another way, the cyclical participative inquiry process that represents the essence of Lewin's model is now assumed as having an open starting point and no absolute final goal (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). In this perspective, the Lewin's concept of social change is considered overcome, being based of a notion of stable social states which is no more coherent with present hyper-competitive scenarios for companies development and with accelerated pace of change in all the field of social life. Lewin's inquiry takes place in situation in which it is possible to clearly identify the social state to be changed, the specific actions to be undertaken, the criteria for evaluation of such actions. On the contrary, recent AM approaches – although with remarkable internal differences – tend to more long-term and multi-purpose aims linked to the development of useful new knowledge and learning in specific contextual situations. The emphasis in all AM approaches is on relationships between enactment and feed-back in real time; the common purpose is developing more valid social knowledge, more effective social action and greater alignment among self-knowledge, action and knowledge-of-others (Raelin, 1999).

3.3. Action Methodologies seem to contain a vast repertoire of solutions for the development of reflective practices. Such a repertoire can be flexibly exploited in relation to specific emerging exigencies of VET contexts and to the availability of specialised resources.

In some cases, for example, actors in VET organisations could feel the grip of traditional technically rational mindsets and tools as too conditioning for their own activity and could consider their need for self-development as “reflective practitioners” as a primary exigency of professional growth. In other cases the possibility of better self-understanding could emerge as a relevant priority, even tackling the emotional drivers of actions and interactions. In other cases the implementation of methodologies of different kinds could be envisaged as a suitable opportunity for solving intra-organisational conflicts either, for example, within an educational institution or within a client organisation. In many cases a better understanding of reflexivity and a specific preparation even on technicalities of reflective practices could be assumed as a significant trait of professional updating in relation to challenging situations to be faced and/or to new offers for clients.

All these examples allude to a general need of innovation of VET systems whereby the bureaucratic models have to be replaced by more flexible and tailor-made action frames and, co-relatively, important changes have to be introduced in the ways in which these systems are managed and even their ultimate goals are designed. Following Schoen, the traditional “theory of knowledge” that is current in educational systems is based on the metaphors of “nutrition” and of “transmission”: clients are requested to digest measured doses of knowledge and to give evidences of the success of such digestion on the basis of established programmes and curricula. In parallel, specific systems of



control – as much as possible of an “objective” nature – are geared to verify to what extent the knowledge transmission has been successful and to evaluate the performances of both learners and educators/trainers.

On the other hand, a new theory of knowledge, coherent with the “dialogical” perspective, should tend to overcome the standardisation in learning. A shift is needed “from the search for centrally administered, objective measures ...towards independent qualitative judgements and narrative accounts of experience of learning and teaching” (Schoen, 1983: 334). In the dialogical perspective, practitioners operating at different levels in the field of learning should tend to question the definition of the tasks, the performance measures, the elements of the organisational knowledge structure in which their functions are embedded. Instead of a bureaucratic attitude to professional activities, referred to the “expert” vision of the world, the reflective practitioner in VET should tend to implement an open vision characterised by aspects such as questioning current assumptions, experimenting new courses of action, involving clients in decisions, self-analysing the effects of professional actions on personal life. Of course all these aspects imply significant resonances on social-organisational equilibria and tend to challenge several traditional assumptions in management and organisation.

3.4. Some references to specific field experience can help in understanding the many ways in which different interventions based on action methodologies can support the emergence of enduring reflective practices in different contexts. Three different examples are here briefly quoted, from realities at different scales: a “system” scale, where the problems tackled by the intervention regards a plurality of local organisational settings inside a larger organisation; a “community” scale, where a single professional community is involved in a process of self-improvement; an “individual” scale, where single managers are helped in reflexively focusing their organisational problems.

3.4.1. The “system” experience is the one developed by a research/consultancy group of the Tavistock Institute within a UK local Health Authority (Nicolini, et al., 2004)<sup>11</sup>. The group was appointed for designing and implementing an initiative aimed at supporting middle-managers to

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<sup>11</sup> This example can be particularly significant in relation to VET systems, which deal with objectives that are of course different from those of the Health systems and nevertheless have some common structural features (different units within the same large organisation, ultimate goals referred to highly valued social activities, highly differentiated client/users, etc.). Furthermore some social, cultural and environmental similarities can be found, considering for example how the following comment about the Health system could be easily applied to the VET system in many situations (... “..the highly politicised context of NHS generates a self-perpetuating process in which continuous crises and panics lead to endemic short-termism and over-reaction that generate yet more crises, Nicolini, et al., 2004: 84).

cope with impending changes and turn to the difficulties they were experiencing into opportunities for personal and organisational learning. The methodology of the intervention (“Cross Boundary Management Development Initiative”), applied in different phases over a three-year period of time, was created as an hybrid between different approaches (“action learning”, critical reflective practices and *organisational development*). It consisted in a sequence of “Reflection Action Learning Sets” (RALs), i.e. structured working groups of senior members of the Health System, belonging to different organisational units. The RALs were facilitated through ad hoc techniques in order to allow the reflection on experiences of change and on the establishment of ways for exchanging learning and experiences. According to the methodological architecture, such meetings were preceded by initial diagnostic activities carried out by through “consultation syndicates” (initial meetings with senior managers aimed at testing the validity of the approach) and paralleled by an extended system of participatory evaluation and large “change conferences” devoted to the legitimation of the initiative and to the sanctioning of its results. This experience illustrates well how reflection can become effectively something more than an individual activity: the reflection practices put in place in the reported project combined, in fact, individually-focussed learning activities, critical organisational reflection and collective questioning of organisational assumptions. A “structure that reflect”, as defined by the authors, appears as the one that may contribute to expanding the capabilities of its agents in term of cross-boundary engagement but at the same time may help them in constantly being aware that “innovative and flexible ideals and expectations regarding the meaning of ‘engagement’ need to be embraced” (p. 101). In the overall economy of the initiative this meant to gradually shift from goals mainly oriented towards personal empowerment of single managers to other goals linked to structural organisational aspects, in particular concerning the difficulties and contradictions in the cross-boundary inter-relations between different units inside the same organisation.

A point of strength of the intervention was represented by the functioning of the “Reflective Action Learning Sets” (RALs). Such working groups met several times during the time span of the intervention. Every meeting was subdivided into three or four time slots and ran according to agendas agreed at the start of each meeting. “The presence of facilitators was combined to create ‘safe environments’ in which participants were able to report on their practical management and organisational issues and make sense of them by engaging in conversation with the other Set members” (p. 91). The RALs offered at the same time “spaces to reflect”, “resources for reflection”, “spaces to act” and “tools for action”. As *spaces to reflect* RALs allowed the involved managers to more clearly realise the extent to which their everyday working lives were affected by cross-boundaries issues; this implied an often painful understanding of several different difficulties in the

inter-organisational relations and of new ways of establishing connections with colleagues in other departments. This also allowed forms of mutual understanding between managers in different areas, that brought about “new non-judgemental, non-competitive arenas” and the discovery of new ways of acting. RALs allowed members to enact processes reflecting values, expectations and assumptions of their organisations and to surface tacit assumptions. Under this viewpoint they have been considered as *resources for reflection* (and opportunities for learning as well). Even unexpected events (like the misunderstandings concerning the intervention engagements) were exploited in order to help people in realising their hidden beliefs and feelings.

The Sets have been also considered as *spaces to act*, as they were used for supporting, devising, monitoring and reviewing personal action plans. The intervention was conducted in a way which excluded a direct involvement in specific decisions and activities, and nevertheless participants had chances of personal and organisational innovation which constituted arguments for discussions. Experiences were taken to the fore and made available for learning to all interested colleagues. At a further level the Sets became *tools for action*, for instance when participants to a given set had the opportunity of reflecting together on the same problem from different organisational standpoint and of discovering previously ignored solutions.

	<i>“Cross Boundary Management Development Initiative”</i>	<i>“Narrations on Education”</i>	<i>“Critique of Practice”</i>
<i>Reference methodology</i>	Action Learning	Educational Action Research	Educational Action Research; Critical Action Learning
<i>Main aim</i>	Reflecting on empowerment of managers and inter-departmental functionality	Reflecting on relations between mindsets and practices of social workers	Reflecting on relevant aspects of professional life of people in different activity sectors

<i>Level</i>	Organisational	Community	Community/ Individual
<i>Purpose</i>	Organisational development	Awareness of assumptions on work activities	Education (part of an academic MA course)
<i>Relevant outcomes</i>	Discovery of previously overlooked common problems in different departments	Increased self-understanding and empathy towards clients	Self-understanding of dynamics of decisions and behaviours

*Fig 3. Examples of interventions aimed at triggering effective reflective practices*

3.4.2. The case about the “community” scale regards an intervention dealing with “Narratives on Education” (Colombo, 2003) developed with a team of social workers inside an Italian residential community for adolescent in which nationals and immigrants are both present. The example witnesses how the interest for the narrative side of inter-subjectivity in organisational dynamics can provide the basis for an intervention inspired to the principles of Action Research. The intervention was aimed at verifying “how narratives may be reflexively used at different stages of the research process as a tool to access the interpretative frameworks that actors are using to construct their accounts of events and to make sense of their action” (p. 4). In this case study “reflexivity is used both to clarify how accounts are constructed (identifying concepts and categories used by participants to make sense of their action) and to allow different forms of knowledge being developed by participants.

The intervention tended to explore both the crucial role of *narratives* through which actors in social settings make sense of their actions and the linguistic nature of reflexivity, whereby language is not a mere mediator of information exchanged by actors but the constituent structure of social dynamics.

The methodology was based on techniques of involvement of participants in questioning and self-questioning during the entire process (which lasted for approximately one year and articulated in a total of about ten meetings). Participants were stimulated in exploring their own explicit and implicit representations, which orient and make sense of their action, through accounts of episodes and events connected both to life in the community and to other personal experiences. This way the intervention went through a reality in which declared goals are often expressed in general terms (“re-educate”, “rehabilitate”, “treat”, etc..) and no specific instruments are established in order to measure the formal attainment of such goals. Moreover researchers found that the professional tasks of participants were based on contradictory assumptions, referred on one hand to the “control” of deviance factors of adolescents and on the other hand to the stimulation of “growing up” attitudes and behaviours.

The initial phases of the research-intervention allowed researchers to find a dominant narration in the accounts of social workers, based on the idea that “education” is an ensemble of activities basically oriented to “transmitting positive values”. Then such idea was reflexively balanced by other meanings such as those of “helping people to acquire new skills and capabilities”, of “accompanying the acquisition of greater autonomy” and even of “developing abilities for critical thinking”. Over time the intervention allowed participants to recognise that several implicit (step by step made explicit) theories of education have in fact to do with practices, i.e. with educational strategies and actions of social workers put in practice with adolescents. The role of the educator was also questioned, even allowing the emergence of emotions which underlie an activity of personal identity construction and the projective patterns of the educational relation: some levels of identification with adolescents were discovered in young social workers that, like their clients, have not yet overcome precarious positions in work and life. The generation of reflective “stories” turned out to be a central feature in the process, in which the experiential stories of participants were continuously crossing the theoretical stories narrated by researchers/interventionists. As a whole the analysis of narrative accounts triggered reflective process allowing participants to construct new interpretations of the meaning of their own actions.

3.4.3. An example of reflective practices referred to real working practices in organisational environments but focused on individuals is provided by the “critique of practice” methodology developed by Hartog (2004) within an MA course in Personal and Organisational Development in the US. The latter attracts “people who through their mutual engagement in the collective learning process brought the practice of extending democracy to life through their individual and collective journeys” (p. 159). The course is connected to the established academic way but it is at the same

time distinguished from it as it claims to be part of a growing movement of practice that takes a critical stance towards education and is engaged “in finding new ways of doing things” in professional contexts.

According to the principles of Critical Action learning (“a problem-posing approach” – opposite to problem-solving – “that involves a constant unveiling of reality”, p. 164) and following a process of the AL Set type, students are engaged in sessions aimed at discussing live real work-based issues starting from “trigger headings” (like for instance “Individual Learning and Support Strategy” or “Organisational Learning”). This way the students, the facilitator and the entire set are stimulated in behaving as a “critical learning community” “where people are willing to challenge one another and to directly experience even emotional aspects of involvement in work issues.

In one of the case studies, the involved participant, an Operation Director for a business unit of a multinational bank, is reported as engaged in understanding the reasons of dissatisfaction of his colleagues (500 subordinates), revealed by a recent internal survey, and in understanding the ways for creating a supportive culture of employment during the coming years. His personal reflection starts looking back at his first experiences with the bank and the steps of his perceived transition from manager to leader. He realises that his early promotions were due to his obedience to a rule-based and autocratic culture: “This did not create the space for individual growth and personal development amongst my team, or perhaps for me as an individual”. Then he shifted towards a more “democratic, pace-setting and affiliate style”. In managing a phase of redundancies cutting he realised the importance of “a leadership style that supports coaching and personal development, so that in the event of future changes those employees are more equipped to find alternative employment inside or outside the bank”. He now recognises himself as much more open to human and democratic values. And nevertheless reflection in the set helps him in understanding that his “participative leadership” is still too close to an idea of “consulting with an employee about his plans” while a more open “two ways process of engagement” would be needed.

In another case, a nurse by profession and a qualified Health Visitor, is reported going through her dissatisfaction for a system that severely cut the resources for visiting, this way creating huge problems and eventually pushing her to resign (just before entering the course). The reflective set helps her in reinforcing her present “voice” position towards the health systems – opposed to the previous “silenced” role – and provides her further energies and tools for a mobilising activity she is carrying on with her colleagues.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

This paper, which represents an early work-in-progress of an on-going research activity, has tended to focus some issues regarding reflexivity and reflective practices in view of future actions aimed at diffusing reflective practices in VET contexts.

Adopting Giddens' approach as an overarching conceptual framework for placing reflexivity in broad social dynamics, reflexivity can be assumed as a continuous flow of individual and collective self-monitoring. However, when looking at the topic from the viewpoint of VET exigencies, a more "micro" and organisation-oriented stance on reflexivity is needed. Therefore fundamental contributions can be found in pragmatic, dialogical and critical approaches. Dewey's pragmatism, through concepts such as "reflective thought" and "inquiry", allows to view reflexivity essentially as a recursive problem-solving activity in which thinking and acting are continuously matching together. Several subsequent interpretations tended to develop either the critical side of Deweyan approach, underlining the importance of reflecting on basic assumptions which generate both the problems and the ways of getting to solutions (Mezirow), or the experiential side of the entanglements between thinking and acting (Kolb). The seminal work of Donald Schoen generated a "dialogical" view of reflexivity in professional practices, which goes beyond technical rationality whereby reflection brings about continuous reshaping of the practitioners' fields of action and their own being in them. More recent "critical" and "post-modern" approaches criticised Schoen's concept of "reflection-in-action", claiming that it does not cover the most subjective aspects of reflexivity, and introduced notions such as the one of "practical reflexivity", aimed at unsettling conventional practices more than giving order to situations (Cunliffe).

Such an overview, in the light of emerging exigencies in VET contexts, allows to put forward a concept of reflexivity as an individual and collective multifaceted *meta-competence*, i.e. a way of being-in-the-world implying an enduring interest for our own being within complex practice situations, heedful abilities for "conversations" with such situations and active engagement with others in order to learn and change. Such a meta-competence, which in many ways represents a basic requisite for participation of late-modern citizens in processes that reproduce the conditions of social survival and development, can be considered as very crucial objective for VET systems. From one hand VET systems should include the diffusion of such meta-competence in their own basic mission, due to the crucial role that it plays in lifelong learning and work-based learning activities, increasingly considered as the most significant tasks of VET. On the other hand, VET systems can effectively handle such difficult tasks only undergoing deep internal changes, regarding not only structures and policies but also – even at a more challenging level – social relations,

mindsets, behaviours and attitudes. This seem to imply an increasing support to the diffusion of reflective practices within VET contexts by all subjects concerned (social partners, political decision-makers, etc..) and a growing interest for different forms of intervention which can foster the diffusion of reflective practices.

In such a perspective, effective reflective practices are seen as generally characterised by at least four important traits: 1. close links to work practices; 2. involvement not only of single individuals but also of communities of practice and broader organisational aggregations; 3. clear orientation towards learning and change; 4. subjective engagement.

Several *action methodologies* (AMs) can be used in order to trigger the development of reflective practices in different contexts, or at least of reflective attitudes of actors within them, more or less coherently with the four above identified fundamental traits. In particular, different interventions can be carried out within the framework of approaches such as Action Research, Action Learning, Change Laboratory.

Experiences based on different AM approaches, briefly reported in the final sections of this paper, show that interesting results can be reached, triggering reflexivity for purposes such as organisational development (involving middle-managers), young people treatment (involving social workers), self-assessment and professional change (for people in different work environments).

Significant opportunities are open for social investments aimed at promoting reflective practices in VET contexts. However, some pre-conditions should be taken into account for the development of policies in this field. First of all a specific attention should be put to innovation exigencies which require not only normative and structural adjustments but also, as already underlined, the fostering of new forms of relations, mindsets and cultural habits. In this perspective the self-organising capabilities and resources should be promoted in a logic of bottom-up development. The willingness for self-development, in many cases showed by practitioners in these fields, could provide the fuel for this kind of development.

Of course these opportunities also require top-down strategies, regarding for instance the allocation of some resources within programmes of the “training of trainers” kind to new initiative aimed at familiarising VET practitioners with reflective practice and action methodologies. New research projects (designed and carried out in a logic of “interactive social science”) could positively support such strategies.



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