

PhD Research Proposal: How does Socratic Dialogue as developed by Nelson and Heckmann influence the reflective skills in student teachers?

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I intend to do an action research on how I can improve educating teachers by means of training them in reflective skills through Socratic Dialogue. In order to be able to meet demands posed to student teachers by the recently introduced changes in higher professional education in the Netherlands and also the didactics of *new learning* introduced at junior vocational education, they need to develop into Self-Directed Learners. We should help them equip themselves with more than just the necessary reflective skills. We should induce and facilitate the birth of genuine need to reflect. They should leave this education able to make justified choices for learning in their professional careers. And they should leave with a genuine curiosity and interest in other ways of thinking than their own. Having realized the importance and value of an open dialogue they will become self-conscious thinkers and practitioners who know how to learn to look and wonder about what they see. In the present situation, the students are asked to reflect on all sorts of items and situations connected with their study career and their school practice. Various models are offered to them (Korthagen, Hendriksen) in the hope that by reflecting, they will learn how to reflect. And they certainly do, to a certain extent. But what this extent is and how long it will be perpetrated after they leave the school is less certain. But the genuine need to reflect remains untouched upon. This can be done by means of training in Socratic Dialogue and training in facilitating one.

The Socratic Dialogue as developed by Nelson and Heckmann not only creates the opportunity for the participants to develop their critical thinking skills, but also by means of a social event makes the participants experience the value of an open dialogue. Not only one's personal assumptions and prejudices are explicated and refuted, but also our historically inherited prejudices are taken into account and scrutinised. The insistence of the dialogue to speak from one's own experience induces the participants to speak their mind. It forces them to freedom, to paraphrase Nelson (Saran, Niesser 2004 p. 139). They delve into their own minds by means of a joint venture in which they listen and are listened to and thus hear and are heard.

The Socratic Dialogue is a living tool for developing logical thinking and raising language awareness. It also provides room for critical examination of individual and collective values (Kemmis, 2005) and improves listening, enhances curiosity and develops ability to learn through experience. Moreover, it raises social awareness and, most importantly, develops appreciation of dialogue as a meeting place for creating new meanings. All these skills are indeed reflective skills, inevitable for good (self) reflection. Socratic Dialogue is a living exemplar of *Living Learning* (Jansen, 2005)

The contribution that my work will make to the field

The main contribution I expect this work will make to teacher education is make clear how Socratic Dialogue can awaken and nurse the need for genuine reflection in the development of a future teacher as a Self-Directed Learner. This action research also aims at showing how the process of training student teachers in Socratic Group Dialogue will influence the growth of their reflective skills. I will look at the development of my own reflective skills as a practitioner-researcher and at the reflective skills of my students. In respect to the latter, I will define reflective skills needed for the development of all the seven competences as stated by the Association for Professional Quality of Teachers, especially competence 7 (Reflection and Development).

My expectation is twofold: on the one hand, I expect to develop as a researcher and, on the other hand, I expect the resulting insights and conclusions to substantially contribute to the development of the Utrecht Model, in particular the Work-Experience-Reflection and Study Career lines.

I also expect this research will have implications for the concepts of Living Learning and new learning and thus make a contribution to the philosophy of education.

In pragmatic terms, this research will open doors to international exchange of expertise. For example with England. At the PRAR Conference in Utrecht this year, once again, I got a confirmation that Socratic Dialogue is hardly, if at all, known in England or elsewhere in the world, except Germany and the Netherlands. There have been experiments with Socratic Method and philosophy for children, but not Socratic Group Dialogue as such. This way, we could develop an expertise which we can then share with other countries.

The grounding provided by my previous study and experience

So far, in my practice as a Work-Experience-Reflection tutor and a Study Career teacher, I have found it very difficult to explain to my students how to improve their reflective ability, and I found it almost impossible to pinpoint the spots of their development. I have the reason to believe that my colleagues felt the same. In many conversations with them, they said they intuitively see that students cannot reflect, yet are at a loss to help their students in developing their reflective skills. I and my colleagues have continuously been experiencing the gap between expecting our students to be able to reflect and helping them to get there. There has been a missing link there. I am convinced that training students in Socratic Dialogue is the missing link.

About 9 years ago I did an action research in my teaching practice within the MA programme at the Greenwich University, England. The title of the final report I submitted in June, 1996 was *'Teaching EFL Grammar in the Context of Autonomous Learning'*. Since then I have got 8 years experience in teaching English in secondary education, of which 4 years in teaching Philosophy. In this period, I have realised that an autonomous learner is not automatically a Self-Directed Learner. A Self-Directed Learner needs to be a skilful, independent and self-conscious thinker in order to be able to reflect and deepen his or her reflective skills.

I have worked at this Teacher Training Institute for three and a half years now. For the past year I have worked on the general curriculum for the third and the fourth year. I have also been tutor to student teachers. Since September this year I have been teaching the minor 'Philosophy in Action' within which I have been training the students both in participating and facilitating Socratic Group Dialogue. All this work has time and again confronted me with poor reflective and thinking skills in a large number of our students. In effect, there are only a few students, perhaps one in fifty, who start with enough reflective skills to be able to reflect. But these students do not develop their reflective skills, because there is very little opportunity to do so.