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Looping Up Professional Reflection in Honours Programmes

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LOOPING UP

Within the Saxion Universities in the Netherlands, a profile of the “Reflective Professional” comprises a number of competencies that the honours programmes are designed to develop and support. The process of developing these competencies involves three loops of learning, characterized by three sets of reflective questions so that, as a whole, they loop up professional reflection. The goal is to inspire students and their coaches to consider the phases of learning with conscious awareness and focus.

BEFORE THE LOOP

In the first year of the traditional four-year bachelor’s programme, freshman students experience new ways of thinking and learning within the professions they have chosen. Along with peers who have similar interests and goals, students enter into a preprogrammed, industrially organized setting in which they may feel happy, overwhelmed, or bored. The latter case is the starting point for the Reflective Professional. During the first year of the bachelor’s programme, students who are impatient with the regular programme and looking for extra challenges will discover the possibility of choosing from sixteen honours programmes, which begin during the second year of the traditional four-year bachelor’s programme, continue for three years, and run alongside but independently from the regular bachelor’s programmes.

THE FIRST LOOP

The first year of the honours programme is the first loop in the learning process, triggered by reflective questions like the following:

- Who am I?
- What am I going to be?

- What am I taught to be?
- What do I want to be?
- How do I think?
- How am I taught to think?
- Do I want to think like that?
- How do I want to think?

In the honours programme, students are drawn from their comfort zone and learn how to think critically; they explore new disciplines and professions; they develop their own personal ideas about professional thought and behavior; and they inevitably become curious about the personal and professional identities of their fellow students as well as themselves.

THE SECOND LOOP

The second year of the honours programme is the second loop, when students not just explore but get personally involved in a multidisciplinary professional context. Students share knowledge about their chosen professions and learn about other disciplines to broaden their personal and professional knowledge. Reflection now focuses on new kinds of questions:

- What is the purpose of my profession in this country?
- What are the new developments and big questions within my profession?
- What is the phase of my professional profile?
- What is the purpose of my professional identity in the present setting?
- How can my professionalism be made valuable to my fellow professionals, now my team and later my organization?
- How can I be of professional value to my fellow students from different disciplines and professions?
- What do I need from my fellow professionals from other disciplines and what do I have to offer them?
- Where has my critical thinking brought me, and where do I want it to take me?

In addressing these questions, students build an invigorating network of professionals who tend to inspire each other and to transplant new ideas into each other's professional gardens; the professional student gardener meets with mutually reflective professionals and now experiences gardening as a process that includes management, accounting, learning, literary inspiration, painting, healing, water conservation, architecture, sustainability, safety, and security—incorporating all these new elements into their art of gardening.

THE THIRD LOOP

The final year of the honours programme is the third loop, when students focus on developing the ability to reprogram the profession and create a new enterprise, business formula or profession. Being a reflective professional, the student develops the ability to take a profession to a new phase. A major point for concern is how to build consensus for a new phenomenon in a traditional world. Within the network of creative and inspiring reflective professionals, the major questions are the following:

- What are the questions my profession will have to cope with in the coming generation?
- What will potential scenarios lead to?
- How can other disciplines contribute creatively to the challenges my profession will face?
- If I hear a story from a successful professional in another discipline, how can I understand the thinking behind it and how I can apply it to my profession?
- How will my profession be redefined, and how can this definition be communicated?
- How can I help build consensus for innovation?
- How can I make new ideas feasible and put them in practice?
- How can a new right solution lead to a new and better profession?

Stick to the simple metaphor of the supposed student gardener, let's elaborate upon it and imagine a reflective professional student from the Saxion Universities of Applied Sciences who is situated within a high-tech environment that includes nanotechnology, creative technology, and engineering. Combining the various schools of thinking, the reflective professional gardener might develop a continually-redesign-your-new-garden concept which incorporates the various disciplines into a product that might be natural, virtual, or three-dimensional.

AFTER THE LOOP

The challenge of the reflection coach is to inspire and guide students with careful communication and implementation of new concepts. Models from older schools of thought that focus on the interaction between practitioner and client and improvements in professional interactions are typically of limited use; old schools of thought are helpful when positioning disciplines in their present phase of development but not beyond. What completes the loop

of learning in the development of both individuals and teams reflective professionals is a leap into meta-questions like these:

- What does my team, organization, or profession need?
- What is my professional mission?
- What is new in the school of thought of other disciplines?
- What can be creatively applied or combined into new concepts?
- What new formula for our profession can be co-created with fellow reflective professionals?

Once a potential idea is born, it needs careful nursing and communication. The reflective professional still lives in a traditional world in which refinement of old ideas, all within bounds of the predictable, is graded *cum laude*. New schools of thought may not fit logically into regular systems and thus may not be appreciated.

An extraordinary idea from a reflective professional student, even when supported by her or his reflection coach, may not correspond to traditional paradigms, so reflective professionals cannot be graded by traditional measures. The challenge we face in the honours programmes of the Saxion Universities of Applied Sciences is to design, explain, and implement a new set of measurements that both allow and encourage students to make the leap beyond the loop into new paradigms. The series of graduated questions we ask our students to consider as they progress through their three years in the honours programme prepare them to make such a leap.

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