

Fundamentals of Systematic Reflection in Practice: How Reflective Practice Effect Professional Identity Formation and Lifelong Learning

Stine Bylin Bundgaard & Nicolaj Johansson
University College of Northern Denmark
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Abstract

In a world characterized by constant change and complexity, the need for a strong professional identity and the ability to act as a reflective practitioner has become more crucial than ever. This article explores how systematic reflection can support lifelong learning and professional identity formation, focusing on a pilot study conducted in the Diploma in Leadership at UCN. The study involved the use of reflection portfolios as both a learning tool and empirical data, with students documenting their learning activities and reflections. Through semi-structured interviews and focused content analysis, the study aimed to develop and qualify a reflection model that highlights the connection between learning, reflection, and professional identity formation.

The reflection model presented includes four levels: learning moments, recognition, transformation, and professional identity. Each level is described in detail, with examples from the pilot study illustrating how students used the reflection levels to become aware of their learning and development. The model aims to scaffold the movement from initial aha moments to more conscious and transformative reflections, contributing to the formation of professional identity.

The findings suggest that systematic reflection can significantly impact students' reflective skills, awareness of their own learning, and professional identity formation. By integrating reflection as a central part of education, students can navigate a complex world with greater confidence, competence, and reflexivity. The article concludes with didactic

reflections on how the model can be used in higher education to support lifelong learning and professional identity formation.

Keywords

Reflective practice-based learning, Lifelong learning, Professional identity, Higher education, Portfolio

Introduction

In a world characterized by constant change and complexity, the need for a strong professional identity and the ability to act as a reflective practitioner has become more crucial than ever, placing significant pedagogical and didactic demands on educational institutions (Johansson & Bundgaard 2023). There is a greater need to develop students' reflexive skills through systematic reflection and awareness of their own learning as part of a lifelong learning process. These didactic approaches can support the handling of the complexity and demands they encounter in practice by allowing them to step back, analyze their actions and decisions, and understand the deeper implications of their thinking (Dewey 1910; Horn et al. 2020; Schön 1984). This is not just a theoretical exercise but a practical necessity to resonate with and navigate effectively in an accelerating society (Rosa 2021).

To gain insight into how educators can work didactically to develop reflective practitioners with a strong professional identity who can translate theory into practice and support lifelong learning, we conducted a pilot study on the Diploma in Leadership, specifically in the module 'Personal Leadership'. The students on this module represents several different professions such as teachers, pedagogues, nurses, social workers etc., which together with their foundational education, have shaped their current professional identity, and played a role when we established a reflective room for the development of a professional leadership identity. This necessitated the establishment of a structured scaffolding that both facilitated individual reflection aimed at cultivating a profession-oriented leadership identity and enabled collective knowledge exchange and critical reflection on the similarities and divergences among these identities.

In this module, students systematically worked with reflection levels through exercises designed based on the reflection model presented later

in the article. To collect the students' reflections as empirical data, we asked them to maintain reflection portfolios over all learning activities, allowing us to follow the model's applicability. Their reflection portfolios served as a transformative tool to document, analyze, and systematically reflect on their personalized learning, exemplarity, employability, enabling them to identify patterns, strengths, and areas for professional development and lifelong learning (Stefani, Mason & Pegler 2007).

The study provides insight into how students' systematic work with reflection portfolios impacts their reflexive skills, awareness of their own learning, and professional identity formation. By engaging in a systematic reflection process, students can develop a deeper understanding of their own values, thinking, beliefs, and actions, contributing to their personal growth and their ability to lead others with authenticity and integrity (Wahlgren et al. 2013). In a time when professionals often face complex challenges and rapid changes, reflection becomes a powerful tool to maintain high professionalism (Horn et al. 2020). It helps students to remain adaptable and resilient while maintaining a strong sense of professional identity and expertise. In our review we didn't find any reflection models that could scaffold and visualize the complex reflection process that can state learning and progression during and after education. Within this context, no existing model was found that could adequately structure and visualize the students' attention on prior experiences, their awareness of their own learning processes, and the qualification of their actions — aspects which, from our analytical perspective, may be understood as indicative of efforts to establish and operationalize reflective competence. Therefore, we developed a model, that could scaffold the students' ability to work systematic with reflections that can qualify and enhance their practice as leaders. The model is based on experience from many years of teaching practice in higher education with a focus on continuing education, but it can be seen as useful in any higher education that works with transformative learning and identity formation. It is developed with the hope that this visibility can contribute to students and instructors achieving an increased understanding of working reflexively with actions and recognitions during and after education.

The above considerations lead us to the following problem statement: *How can systematic reflection using our model 'Fundamentals of systematic reflection in practice' contribute to students' professional identity formation and awareness of learning?*

The pilot study on the Diploma in Leadership aims to emphasize that reflexive practice learning is not just an academic exercise but a practical approach that can have a profound impact on students' development and effectiveness (Horn et al. 2020). By integrating the didactical model '*Fundamentals of systematic reflection in practice*' as a central part of education, we can help students navigate a complex world with greater confidence, competence, and reflexivity, contributing to their lifelong curiosity and exploration of their own practice (Bundgaard 2024). The focus of this article is to analyze and discuss the relationship between reflexive practice learning and professional identity formation through the application of a reflection model designed to make reflection applicable and practice oriented.

Method

As described above, the use of reflection portfolios had two purposes in our pilot study. One purpose was as a learning tool, where students collect documentation and independently generate reflective writing about their learning process to create and maintain a written situated reflective practice that can stimulate clearer and deeper awareness of their own learning (Moon 2006; Zubizaretta 2004). The other purpose was to provide empirical data for our pilot study.

To closely follow the students' development throughout the module, with a particular focus on their reflections, experiences, and actions in practice, they were carefully instructed to collect all their notes, documents, reflections, and artifacts in their individual digital reflection portfolios. With written consent from all students participating on the module, we, as researchers, had access to their reflection portfolios, allowing us to continuously monitor their development and responses to the reflection tasks and learning activities they were given both in and outside of class. The purpose of using data from all the students' reflection portfolios is to provide a deep insight into their reflections, experiences, and actions from practice, which together form the foundation for their professional identity formation. To supplement our data from the 26 reflection portfolios, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with 4 of the students to gain a more nuanced insight into how each of them experienced working with the reflection portfolio and learning processes (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2020). These were selected with

the aim to secure the diversity of professions within the class, and were selected before the beginning of the module. To ensure direction in the interviews and elaborate on the themes that cross all students' reflection portfolios, we prepared an interview guide. It is important to note that the interview guide was used solely as a tool to maintain an overall direction in the interviews while allowing students to freely answer questions and explore new interesting perspectives in the conversation (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2020). As we investigate the relationship between students' systematic work with reflections and professional identity formation, we let the empirical data from the reflection portfolios and interviews be equally included in the following analysis.

The data analysis followed the principles of focused content analysis, which lies between open, exploratory content analysis and closed categorical content analysis by adopting an investigative yet focused approach to the empirical data (Hseih & Shannon 2005). The aim is to develop and qualify a reflection model that can contribute to making the connection between learning, reflection, and professional identity formation visible. The following analysis focuses on both semi-structured interviews and reflection portfolios as a reflection technology that can enhance students' deep learning skills (Brown 2002; Moon 2006). The analysis also aimed to clarify how the use of the reflection portfolio impacts students' awareness of their own learning and professional identity formation. The focused content analysis was thus based on an understanding of reflection portfolios as autobiographical texts intended to present learning from an individually situated experiential perspective. In processing our data, we anonymized the students, subsequently reviewed all reflection portfolios, and listened to the interviews multiple times to strengthen the insight and understanding of the generated data.

The content analysis is based on a reflection model (Fig.1) developed in relation to the pilot project as an analytical and didactic tool to support and develop students' awareness of their own learning and reflexive skills in practice. The reflection model contains four mutually constitutive levels with a temporal dimension. The levels are named: learning moments, recognition, transformation, and professional identity, which will be further described in the section '*Reflection and Professional Identity Formation*'.

The Importance of Reflection for Identity Formation During and After Education

Reflection plays a crucial role in the formation of professional identity, and when the professional decides to pursue a specific interest within a professional field. Whether it is when the educator evaluates conflict mediation between children in kindergarten, when the nurse finds the best and most caring way to insert an IV in a patient, or when the school leader creates the best conditions for children's learning by working qualified with teacher's team collaboration. In these examples, reflection occurs both before, during, and after the professional action, containing equal parts experiences, ideals, and actions, each of which can appear complex and difficult to handle.

In professional and continuing education as well as in higher education, there is no doubt that reflection contributes to qualifying professional judgment (Horn et al. 2020; Schön 1987). But as with many other phenomena, one often falls short when trying to create frameworks in which students can develop a sense of what reflection consists of and contributes to in professional practice.

In this article, we lean on a definition that highlights reflection as an active and conscious process (Dewey 1910), as well as a learning and changing process (Argyris & Schön 1978), which gives the individual the opportunity to adjust in action and through the next action (Schön 1987). It is thus a process that both internalizes and externalizes, where the individual depends on immediate feedback and experience formation as well as aspirational ideals and knowledge to improve the next action (double-loop learning) (Argyris & Schön 1978). In the following, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action will be particularly addressed as the basis for developing a model that can support reflexive practice learning during and after education.

Reflexive Practice Learning and Professional Identity

Education is often associated with transformative learning processes, as students – whether they are young individuals coming directly from high school or professionals with years of experience – aim at a specific field and educate themselves to become a qualified part of a professional community. The reflexive learning process is linked to professional identity formation, contributing with a focus on identity being formed

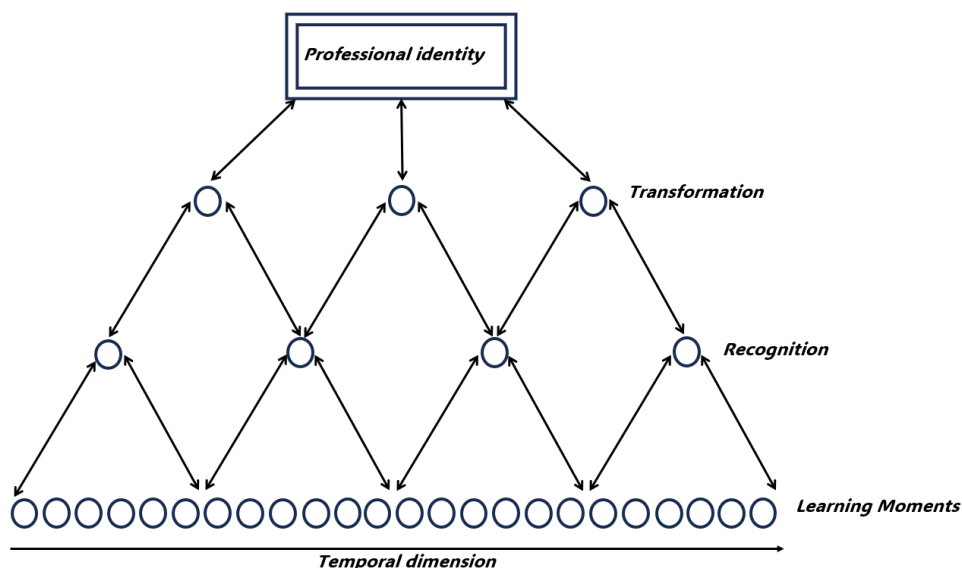
through individual and collective processes, navigating between different roles and perspectives (Caza & Creary 2021; Mezirow 1990). This attention is incorporated as the basis for developing a model that contributes to systematic reflection through thick descriptions of moments in which the individual has an increased sense of significant realizations (Manen 1990).

The following model is an attempt to scaffold the movement from the initial ‘aha’ moments to more conscious and transformative reflections that can be linked to professional identity formation processes. The model should be seen as a scaffold that can help capture momentary wonder or curiosity and, through reflexive work, incorporate these moments as tangible parts of a reflexive professional identity formation process.

Reflection and Professional Identity Formation

The model relates to the individual’s acquisition process and should thus be seen as a possible framework for the internalization of experience and learning, which can support both the taxonomic progression of teaching and education and professional reflection in a complex reality. Thus, the model seeks to capture reflection as a complexity-reducing process that can contribute to deep and qualifying insights into one’s own acting practice with a view to refining and changing it.

Figure 1: ‘Fundamentals of systematic reflection in practice’ by Bundgaard & Johansson



Fundamentally, the model incorporates movement in all points (arrows in both directions), aimed at making visible what I know now, what I want to know, or what I am curious about. The model should not be seen as static but as consisting of an eternal movement between action or moment and values and ideals as the essence of professional identity. Ideals are renegotiated or fall through actions in practice, after which they are qualified or new ones emerge.

In the following, we will analyze the model's four levels and provide examples of how students in the Diploma module Personal Leadership have used the reflection levels to become aware of their own learning and development throughout the course. Each level is qualified with a theoretical learning perspective.

Learning Moments

Learning moments are based on Illeris' definition of learning as “any process that leads to psychological changes of relatively lasting character, which are not due to biological-genetic factors such as maturation or aging” (Illeris 2009 p.32). Moments are thus an attempt to capture students' experiences through activity or action as the first immediate signs of

learning and an occasion for reflection (Dewey 1938). They can further be described as what Jerome Bruner calls critical moments, which contribute to increased curiosity, without necessarily having other contexts than being a sense of an 'aha' or a new understanding (Bruner 1971). It is thus the student's first sense of moving consciously, without necessarily having a sense of why, where, and how, and what larger context this can be placed in.

It is important for learning moments that they are not necessarily significant in themselves and that they are only given value when they are given context and direction through reflection. Examples of these moments include notes for reading and teaching, as well as exercises aimed at linking theory and practice. This form of moments is individual and spontaneously arising, as they depend on the individual's experience and theoretical knowledge.

Another example is the consciously scaffolded moments, which can be seen as an occasion to create collective awareness of learning and development. In the Diploma module Personal Leadership, the overall goal is to: *"Develop leadership identity and practice personal and professional leadership professionally through reflection, communication, and action in relation to the organization's needs and task resolution"* (UCN Study Plan 2025). As one of the first activities, students were introduced to an exercise where we asked them to set an intention for the development of their leadership identity and plant a seed in a paper cup. The seed was to be watered and cared for during the module and finally brought as a picture and as an occasion for a concluding and summarizing reflection. Several students mentioned during the course that this small action seemed a bit silly at the moment, but by being forced to care for the plant, they were also forced to revisit their starting point, which gradually developed into a guideline for the development of leadership identity and a reminder of where their journey began. In reflection and revisiting, this collective learning moment provided an opportunity to become aware of their own development and initiated transformation into becoming leaders.

Recognition

The recognition level contributes with a view of the coherence or lack thereof of learning moments. Through reflection and analysis of the moments, students assess their budding signs of learning and development with a how and why. This with a view to creating meaning and under-

standing of the learning moments and becoming aware of what changes are beginning to take shape. Here, Bruner's description of recognition as a dynamic and continuous process, where knowledge is formed by discovering and understanding the information contained in experiences (Bruner 1971), is related. Additionally, this layer is related to reflection-on-action, which contributes to creating deeper meaning and knowledge about actions (Argyris & Schön 1978; Schön 1987). This layer creates curiosity about the intentionality of learning, and reflection contributes to meaningfulness and knowledge formation, and thus selection of what is relevant now, what should be further investigated or explored through the next actions.

A student captures the recognition level here as an observation of conversations in the room and the knowledge she has acquired through the course:

"My experience is that it is important for the individual – some more than others – to point out the values that we each have. It is also something incredibly tangible, as it is something that, for most, has followed them for large parts of their lives. At the same time, I listen to the fact that values are the cornerstones of who we are and the way we act, but at the same time, there is an understanding that values and their practice are dynamic and are adjusted according to the situation one may be in." (Reflection portfolio – Inge 2025)

In this example, recognition is framed as an analysis of learning moments and an attempt to construct knowledge about the significance of values for leadership, as both something static and something flexible and dynamic. The student is in the process of establishing a new understanding of the theory and its significance for her leadership identity. She then directs her attention to a desire to expand her knowledge: *"I need to know more about the theoretical background and the right tools to act based on different scenarios that I may encounter on my way in the future and with the tasks I handle daily."* (Reflection portfolio, Inge 2025). Thus, there is a need to explore new learning moments for this student to explore how she connects her theory with qualified actions in her practice.

Transformation

This level refers to the critical reflection on actions and recognitions that lead to deeper learning, affecting the student's underlying assumptions, values, and ideals (Mezirow 1991). From here, new and more fundamental changes in action and development opportunities can be defined. While Mezirow describes transformation because of a disorienting dilemma, the understanding here is closely linked with reflection-on-action(s) or recognitions, which lie in the model's preceding layer. This layer refers to deeper reflection (triple-loop learning), which prompts questioning the fundamental values and assumptions that characterize and shape the actions made visible through learning moments and recognitions (Argyris & Schön 1978).

An example of the transformative level is a student's reflection on the recognitions that resulted from conducting interviews with colleagues about their own leadership style.

"I think what has affected me the most in relation to my leadership identity is the interviews. The mirror that was held up to me is quite impactful. Trying to find weak and strong sides of oneself as a leader when you haven't been in the field for long is quite a bumpy ride." (Interview – Naja 2025)

Naja mentions the interviews as an occasion for recognition and the formation of meaningful patterns that partly explain her position as a new leader and partly give her insight into the foundation her leadership stands on. She continues her reflection with a description of the core values she has become aware of, which lead to new and more focused actions in practice. *"I can feel that I am now moving differently in my leadership. I am concerned with how my values can become visible in my work as a leader and how I can use them to navigate paradoxes and conflicts."* (Interview – Naja 2025). In this, Naja refers to several learning moments, which include both the data she has collected as part of the module's activities and the reflection on the module's theoretical framework, where value-based leadership and paradoxical leadership have been introduced.

Another student reflects on transformation based on actions in practice. *"I can feel that I am practicing taking more responsibility. Dare to speak my mind. I am becoming more aware of my values in my life and my work life, and how I want to use them in a (perhaps) future leadership position."* (Interview – Hans 2025). Here, the impact of deeper reflection

on the desire to explore one's own practice based on values is highlighted. Thus, this deeper form of learning can prompt the student to define curiosity and motivation for exploration. This level also opens for the visibility that the student begins to act and behave reflexively (Horn et al. 2020).

Professional Identity

The final level represents the formation of professional identity, which covers the student's self-understanding and perception of themselves as a professional actor within a specific profession (Eteläpelto et al. 2014; Tajfel 1978). Through continuous reflection on recognition and transformation, the student develops a strong sense of their professional identity, integrating their knowledge, skills, values, and ideals. Here lies access to a deeper understanding of the professional self and the actions that become meaningful in a specific context. This level, like the other layers, consists of both internalization and externalization, directed towards the context the student is part of, and which the actions must be adjusted to, despite the newly increased knowledge of one's own abilities and curiosity (Wenger 1998). The awareness of professional identity allows the student to engage in professional communities with an increased understanding of what can be contributed. Here, attention is also increased on the drive to explore new areas and knowledge with a deep understanding of which ideals should form the basis for qualified exploration of new actions and experience formation.

A student touches on this level with the following reflection in their reflection portfolio:

“Balance – is another value that has been ingrained in my memory from my upbringing, where possessing balance is equated with opportunities and a normal and good life. It is also something I have carried with me in life on both a personal and professional level, where the balance between work/family is crucial for whether I function in everyday life.” (Reflection Portfolio – Grete 2025)

In this example, it becomes clear how the student takes the time to reflect on fundamental assumptions and values through a reflection on the phenomenon of balance. Here, it relates not only to learning and development through the module but also includes experience from upbringing

and professional and personal development. The example underscores how working at this level is not everyday reflection but functions as a meta-reflective and in-depth analytical level that provides insight into the larger contexts.

This level opens for increased awareness of the meeting between ideals and action, thus creating the potential for ideals in this meeting to fall and new ones to arise as guiding principles for new actions. A process that often seems frustrating and complex, as its purpose is to influence the individual's fundamental perception of themselves, the world, and their professional actions therein. Thus, this is related as a nuanced layer of the transformative level, where learning contributes to changes in professional identity.

In the education of future leaders as reflective practitioners, this level is reflected through a subordinate competence goal: *“The student can identify their own learning needs and plan their own competence development to strengthen personal and professional leadership”* (UCN Study Plan 2025). In teaching, this is scaffolded through the students' development of a leadership foundation, which aims to capture their meta-reflection on their professional identity as leaders.

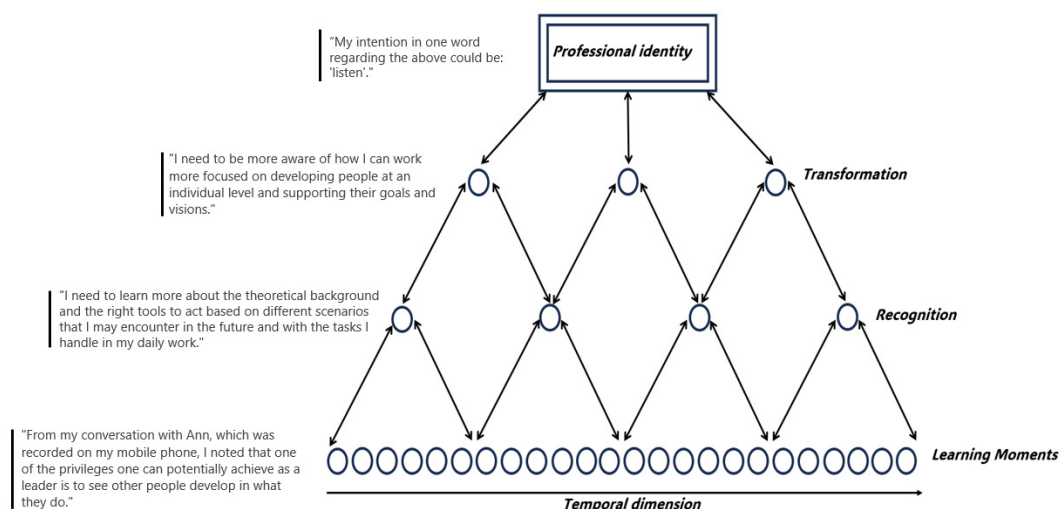
“My leadership foundation's primary purpose is to create harmony between people and the organization in the goal of creating a common direction where there is also room for development, a good working environment, and ambitions. [...] I intend to have integrity in what I do and what I expect from others. I will treat my fellow human beings with respect and expect the counterpart to respect my choices and the direction I set. In this way, it should ensure that my team – and the organization – optimize the basis of existence and that employee well-being is in balance.” (Leadership Foundation – Andreas 2025)

In the above excerpt from a Leadership Foundation, the student's reflections on their professional identity as defining for actions in practice are made visible.

As the analysis has shown, the four levels provide an opportunity to develop, stimulate, and nuance reflection and actions among students, which also strengthens and develops their professional identity formation. Using the model didactically in education can support students'

ability to independently systematize and develop their reflexive practice and thus strengthen the focus on lifelong learning. In the figure below, we have included quotes from one of Anette's coherent reflections from her reflection portfolio.

Figure 2: Quotes from Anette's reflection portfolio



In her reflections, she systematically uses all four levels, enabling her to identify what she should focus on to develop and sharpen her professional practice and actions. By increasing awareness of how the levels contribute to the exploration of practice and the development of professional identity, the model can also help students like Anette use the model as an opportunity to approach their work life reflexively after completing their education.

Didactic Reflections

By giving reflection a materiality, students become more aware of the potential of identity work and thus how reflection can contribute to awareness of agency and the development of practice. The model is an attempt to make the connection between learning, reflection, and professional identity formation visible and thus a proposal to become aware of what it takes to use reflection as an identity-forming element throughout life.

Here, it is essential that the instructor actively participates in the application and activation of the model through tasks, feedback, and reflection tools that make it possible to create a system around the reflection work and help the student find their own way in what contributes to meaningful and useful reflection. The model thus provides a basis for creating a system where the student must find their individual way of working with the different reflection levels.

In the didactic considerations of the reflection model, the instructor must have a particular focus on making the levels relatable and applicable. Here, it can be useful to use the following questions as a reflection framework, which gives rise to moving thinking from level to level. The following questions are designed to internalize processes from observation to reflection and externalizing processes that create coherence between reflection and action.

Table 1: Levels of reflection (Bundgaard & Johanson 2025)

Reflection Level	Questions
Learning Moments	What are you focused on? What gives rise to an 'aha' moment? What do you want to know more about?
Recognition	What connections do you see when you look at learning moments within a defined period? What knowledge can you use to understand the connections in your recognitions? What do you want to change or do more of?
Transformation	What concepts and perspectives underlie your recognitions? What do your recognitions tell you about your way of learning and developing? What do you want to explore more and act on?
Professional Identity	What values characterize your professional identity when you look at your learning and development over the last period? What ideals inspire you in your professional work when you look at your professional engagement? What do you want to do more of or seek more knowledge about?

Concluding Remarks

When discussing reflection in an educational context, it often becomes unclear approaches, which can make it difficult to define what actions are needed to make reflection a qualifying process. This model stems from a curiosity about how reflection can be made more tangible and accessible as a tool that supports education and the formation of a professional identity and can be a way to maintain reflexivity and curiosity about one's own practice after completing education. Thus, it could be interesting to further investigate how the model can support reflexivity with a focus on identity formation and lifelong learning after education or on the way to the next education.

In the study, we have become aware that the reflection model works best when it is didactically activated through scaffolding with a focus on clarifying the significance of the different levels for reflexive practice. We tried to accommodate this experience by giving all students access to Class Notebook with a predefined system in which they could work with the reflection model. However, it proved challenging as the IT system was not stable and sometimes deleted the students' material. The model invites the instructor to work exploratively with scaffolding the different levels and can thus be an invitation to develop an exploratory, reflexive practice around their instructor identity.

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