



Reflect: An Interdisciplinary Framework for Meaningful Teaching-Learning Experiences in Complex Contexts

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Abstract

In the face of rapid global transformations, higher education and professional learning increasingly demand approaches that transcend linear teacher–learner models. REFLACT (reflect + act) is an interdisciplinary and systemic framework that integrates action and reflection into dynamic teaching-learning experiences. Rooted in systems theory, constructivism, cybernetics, organisational psychology, and learning organisation theory, REFLACT views learning as a co-created, relational process. Rather than positioning educators as transmitters of knowledge, REFLACT invites dialogue, collective sense-making, and embodied reflection. This paper develops the REFLACT approach in greater detail. It begins by contextualising the need for systemic and constructivist frameworks in higher education and lifelong learning, contrasting linear models of instruction with systemic paradigms that recognise uncertainty, interaction, and co-authorship. It then explores the theoretical foundations of REFLACT, drawing on systemic traditions from Heinz von Foerster, Paul Watzlawick, Steve de Shazer, and Peter Senge. The core of the paper presents the REFLACT Hoop, a choreography of nine iterative stages. Workshop experiences at academic and professional conferences—including the Paris Conference on Education 2025, the International Education Conference 2025, and the TURN Conference—illustrate how the framework is applied in practice. Finally, the paper emphasises REFLACT’s multidisciplinary nature. While designed for higher education, the framework has proven effective across diverse fields, including systemic coaching, leadership development, organisational learning, and interdisciplinary research collaborations. It enables faculty, practitioners, and learners to deal with complexity through processes that foster trust, motivation, and adaptability. We argue that REFLACT represents a paradigm shift towards participatory and systemic approaches to learning. Its combination of reflection and action provides a generative mindset that can be flexibly adapted across cultures and disciplines. This paper concludes with recommendations for educators, institutions, and researchers interested in advancing interdisciplinary and multidimensional learning in times of transformation.

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1. Introduction

The global educational landscape is undergoing rapid transformation. Knowledge is no longer scarce but ubiquitously accessible through digital platforms and artificial intelligence. At the same time, societal challenges—climate change, political instability, migration, and digital disruption—demand complex, interdisciplinary responses. Under such conditions, linear teaching models,

in which instructors transmit knowledge to passive learners, appear increasingly outdated.

In many universities, students report that their studies emphasise content absorption and assessment rather than genuine engagement and collaborative exploration. As several studies in the German-speaking higher education context confirm, systemic and constructivist didactic approaches remain the exception rather than the rule, despite decades of theoretical discussion. This gap between theoretical insight and pedagogical practice calls for innovative frameworks that translate systemic principles into lived teaching-learning experiences.

REFLECT—an acronym for reflect + act—emerged as a response to this challenge. Developed through more than ten years of practice in higher education and interdisciplinary workshops, the framework integrates reflection and action into a circular, participatory process. It is not a rigid method but a flexible choreography that allows learners to become co-authors of knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to outline the theoretical foundations of REFLECT, (2) to illustrate its practical application through workshop examples, and (3) to highlight its potential as an interdisciplinary and multidimensional framework applicable across educational and organisational contexts.

2. Theoretical Foundations

REFLECT draws on a variety of traditions that converge around systemic and constructivist thinking. Systems theory and second-order cybernetics, as articulated by Heinz von Foerster (1997), emphasise the role of the observer in constructing reality. From this perspective, education cannot be reduced to the transmission of knowledge but must always be understood as relational and contextual. Constructivist thinkers such as Ernst von Glasersfeld (1995)^[13] and Kersten Reich (1996)^[6] likewise argue that knowledge is not simply delivered but is constructed by learners within social contexts. Teaching, therefore, becomes the facilitation of conditions that allow students to develop their own understanding.

Insights from communication theory, particularly those of Paul Watzlawick (1985)^[14], further highlight that meaning arises in interaction rather than in isolated messages. REFLECT builds on this insight by placing emphasis on dialogue and co-created sense-making. The framework also resonates with solution-focused and systemic approaches advanced by practitioners such as Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (de Shazer, 2009)^[1], who stressed the importance of curiosity, a stance of “not-knowing,” and small, iterative steps toward change. In this spirit, REFLECT encourages participants to experiment, reflect, and adapt without being constrained by predetermined outcomes.

In addition, Peter Senge’s (1994)^[10] concept of the learning organisation underscores the value of shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. REFLECT translates these organisational principles into the micro-settings of classrooms and workshops. Finally, contributions from educational psychology and neuroscience, including the work of Gerald Hüther (2020)^[3], remind us of the critical role of trust, safety, and emotional resonance in enabling sustainable learning. Accordingly, REFLECT workshops deliberately attend to atmosphere and group dynamics as integral components of the learning process.

By weaving together these diverse strands of theory,

REFLECT embodies a systemic constructivist paradigm in which learning is conceived as relational, circular, and adaptive.

3. The Reflect Hoop framework

At the heart of REFLECT lies the REFLECT Hoop, a nine-step choreography that provides both orientation and flexibility in designing meaningful teaching-learning experiences. Each step builds on systemic and constructivist principles and contributes to a circular process that integrates reflection and action.

Step 1: Prepare and Design Your Choreography

The process begins with careful preparation. The REFLECTing team approaches preparation with a strong emphasis on context sensitivity, recognising and responding to the lived realities of participants. Rather than imposing a rigid plan, the team engages in proactive and committed communication, designing a choreography that balances structure with openness. In doing so, the REFLECTing team demonstrates attentiveness to the specific context and co-creates a process that is responsive, relational, and inclusive.

Step 2: Create Contact

Establishing genuine contact is essential. This may involve a joint activity such as rearranging the learning space, engaging in a brief embodied exercise, or creating a shared ritual like a check-in. The aim is to consciously invite deceleration, foster presence, signal co-responsibility, and build a relational foundation for the session.

Step 3: Enable Rooms for Dialogue

Participants are invited into spaces of dialogue that go beyond traditional teacher–learner hierarchies. Systemic questioning, pair or group conversations, and collaborative exercises create opportunities for multiple perspectives to meet and resonate with one another.

Step 4: Anchor Everybody’s Learnings

To ensure that individual and collective insights are made explicit, the REFLECTing team anchors their learnings. This stage invites engagement on multiple levels: the self in relation to oneself, the self in relation to the topic, and the self in relation to the group. This can include journaling that allows for articulation and consolidation of what has emerged.

Step 5: Reflect Your Inner Attitude

REFLECT emphasises everybody’s self-reflection as a central dimension of the process. The REFLECTing team is invited to consider everybody’s own stance, assumptions, and emotional presence, recognising that their inner attitude significantly shapes the learning environment.

Step 6: Ensure Everybody’s Transfer

Learning only becomes sustainable when it can be transferred to everybody’s own contexts. In this step, attention is given to the practical application of insights, encouraging learners to identify next steps and integrate them into their academic, professional, or organisational settings in their own lived realities.

Step 7: Ask for Feedback

Feedback is not treated as a formality but as an integral part

of the REFLACT Hoop. Facilitators invite participants to share their reflections on the process, the atmosphere, and the impact of the session. This not only validates experiences but also creates opportunities for further learning.

Step 8: Design the Closure

Every process requires a conscious conclusion. The closure phase allows the group to gather, summarise, and bring the learning journey to a meaningful end. Rituals of closure—such as a final round, collective reflection, or symbolic gestures—reinforce the sense of completion.

Step 9: Guide Your Reflecting Continuously

REFLECT is not a one-off intervention but a mindset of ongoing reflection and action. Everybody is encouraged to guide themselves and others in continuous cycles of learning, adapting their practices, and refining the choreography over time.

Taken together, these nine steps form a coherent yet flexible hoop that integrates systemic principles into concrete teaching–learning practices. They provide educators and facilitators with a practical guide for creating spaces of trust, dialogue, and transfer, while also reminding them of their own reflective responsibility within the process.

4. Experiences in Practice

REFLECT has been applied in a wide range of academic and professional contexts. At the Paris Conference on Education 2025, for instance, a 50-minute workshop with international participants demonstrated how even a short session can shift dynamics. Despite challenging conditions such as the heat and a late-afternoon schedule, participants reported increased attentiveness, trust, and motivation. A similar potential became visible at the International Education Conference 2025 in Germany, where the framework was embedded in the “Lehren” project to foster cross-disciplinary dialogue between digital learning experts, educators, and students. Here, participants emphasised how REFLACT helped create shared understanding across institutional boundaries. The TURN Conference offered another example: workshops focused on how systemic frameworks can support teaching innovation in higher education, and faculty members from different universities collaboratively developed new approaches to curriculum design. Beyond conferences, REFLACT has also been integrated into everyday higher education classrooms, including courses in business administration, social sciences, and interdisciplinary modules. Student feedback consistently highlights the framework’s capacity to create trust, encouragement, and motivation—even in the context of exam preparation. Taken together, these examples illustrate REFLACT’s scalability, ranging from large international conferences to small seminars and from academic audiences to organisational workshops.

5. Multidisciplinary and Interdisciplinary Applications

While REFLACT originated in higher education, its systemic design makes it applicable across a wide range of disciplines and sectors. In the educational field, it enhances participatory teaching, fosters student ownership, and bridges disciplinary divides. Within organisational development, it provides a framework for team reflection, trust-building, and adaptive responses to change. Leadership development also benefits

from the approach, as it enables leaders to practice reflection-in-action, navigate complexity, and cultivate collective intelligence. In counselling and coaching, REFLACT integrates systemic questioning with reflective practices, thereby creating a bridge between theory and practice. Furthermore, in interdisciplinary research settings, the framework offers a structured yet flexible process through which scholars from different fields can align perspectives and develop shared understanding. In this sense, REFLACT is not confined to a single domain or discipline but functions as a genuinely multidisciplinary framework adaptable to diverse contexts.

6. Discussion

Feedback from numerous workshops consistently points to several strengths of the REFLACT framework. Participants frequently emphasise the sense of safety and trust it fosters, which proves to be essential for meaningful learning. In addition, they highlight its capacity to increase motivation and engagement, even in formal academic settings and in contexts that traditionally focus on assessments. Another frequently mentioned strength is its generativity, as the framework allows new ideas and collaborations to emerge spontaneously.

At the same time, the application of REFLACT is not without challenges. Its effective use requires systemic competence on the part of facilitators, including self-reflection and the ability to work productively with uncertainty. Institutional constraints, particularly academic structures that prioritise efficiency and standardisation, may also hinder the adoption of dialogical approaches. Moreover, while qualitative feedback from participants is consistently strong, systematic empirical studies are still needed to demonstrate the framework’s long-term impact. Taken together, these observations indicate that REFLACT represents both an opportunity and a challenge: it is a promising approach that simultaneously requires cultural change and institutional support.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

REFLECT offers a systemic, relational, and interdisciplinary framework for meaningful learning in complex contexts. By integrating reflection and action, it provides a generative alternative to linear models of teaching and learning.

For educators, the framework encourages experimentation with dialogical formats, embodied reflection, and shared responsibility in learning spaces. Institutions are invited to create the conditions for pedagogical innovation, to reward collaborative teaching, and to integrate systemic frameworks into faculty development. Researchers, in turn, are encouraged to study REFLACT longitudinally across different disciplines in order to better understand its impact on motivation, trust, and learning outcomes.

Ultimately, REFLACT is not a fixed method but a mindset—open, adaptive, and responsive to complexity. It invites both educators and learners to co-create meaningful experiences and to embrace the uncertainties of a rapidly changing world.

8. Thank-You Note

The development of REFLACT and all related publications would not have been possible without those who have experienced the framework in practice. Over the past years, countless students, executives, and human resource professionals have embraced REFLACT—whether in their

university studies with us or in their organisational processes. This article is dedicated to them, in gratitude for their openness, curiosity, and co-authorship in shaping this journey.

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