

Perspectives on Theory U: Insights from the Field

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The purpose of this chapter is to explore how Scharmer’s Theory U can support transformational learning in coaching sessions using the Core Reflection approach. Research studies on the use of this coaching approach have shown that it can promote deep learning and strengths-based performance. It could be concluded that this approach can effectively help people in transformational learning and promote a shift on the U methodology.

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Matt Statler, NYU Stern School of Business, USA

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Chapter 6

Promoting Presence in Professional Practice: A Core Reflection Approach for Moving through the U

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ABSTRACT

This contribution focuses on the connection between Scharmer's Theory U and individual coaching. How can Theory U be used in coaching for supporting transformational learning in coachees? First, the authors present an approach called Core Reflection. In this approach, Theory U is linked to specific levels of reflection and awareness, described by the so-called "onion model." Through the use of Core Reflection, the personal and professional aspects of both inner processes and performance become connected. Two research studies on the use of coaching based on Core Reflection with teachers show its strong impact on practitioners, clarifying how it can promote deep learning and strengths-based performance, even in situations experienced by the coachee as problematic. The authors conclude that the Core Reflection approach is a practical and effective method for helping people move through Scharmer's U model and for transformational learning. The research also sheds light on an overlooked area within Theory U: The illumination of people's core qualities.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent contributions on the theory of *presence* by Senge et al. (2004) and Scharmer's (2007) *Theory U* have drawn much attention within various professional domains. In this chapter, we discuss how Theory U can be connected to individual coaching aimed at supporting transformational learning in coachees. In a variety of professional domains it is common that during coaching, coachees bring in professional situations they experience as problematic. To date, Scharmer has not elaborated so much how a coach can promote a shift in the coachee from such problematic experiences to the bottom of the U, and then upwards. This paper will describe a concrete coaching approach that enhances such a shift and we will link this to Theory U. This coaching approach is based on the use of *Core Reflection* and applicable to all professions and many coaching situations. We will describe the theoretical foundations of the Core Reflection approach and two research studies that yield insight into the processes and outcomes resulting from coaching based on Core Reflection. In the final section of our paper we will argue that the Core Reflection approach is a practical and effective tool for helping people transition through the U, and develop the competence for transformational learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cognition, Emotion and Motivation

Theory U emphasizes the importance of "an open mind, an open heart and an open will" (Scharmer, 2007, p. 41) as the basis for reflection and action. This concurs with a variety of research studies from different fields showing that professional performance is not only grounded in rational thinking, but that affective and motivational fac-

tors also play an important role. In this section we will discuss the role that cognition, emotion, and motivation play in professional behavior.

A great deal of professional behavior is so-called *immediate behavior* (Dolk, 1997), that is, behavior that occurs as an immediate reaction to unexpected, non-routine situations. In such situations, there is often little time for reflection (Eraut, 1995; Schön, 1987), and 'downloading behavior' occurs, mediated by what the psychologist Epstein (1990) named the *experiential system* in human beings. In this experiential system, rapid information processing takes place, which is to a large degree based on emotions and images. This system is linked to physical responses and automatic processes. It is holistic, which means that the world is experienced in interconnected wholes, directing behavior in an often unconscious way (Lazarus, 1991). Many of these unconscious or only partly conscious behavioral tendencies, such as basic fight, flight and freeze responses, are patterns that have developed in the person at a young age (Rothschild, 2000). Epstein's theory emphasizes the connections between thinking, feeling and behavior within the experiential system. His theory is supported by neurophysiological research. Brain specialists such as Immordano-Yang and Damasio (2007) conclude that most human functioning takes place through processes in which thinking and feeling are strongly intertwined. We can conclude that not all sources of behavior are rational and conscious, but many are non-rational or unconscious.

In addition, it is important to note that not only feelings and emotions play an important role in directing behavior. In their *Self-Determination Theory*, Ryan and Deci (2002) emphasize that people's behavior is strongly influenced by their psychological needs, such as the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These are motivational factors, representing a somewhat different dimension than feelings and emotions.

Ideals and personal missions are other important aspects of this motivational dimension (Palmer, 1998).

In sum, and in line with Theory U, we distinguish between three important dimensions in the sources of professional behavior, namely the cognitive, emotional, and motivational dimension, or briefly: thinking, feeling, and wanting. Moreover, we conclude that these dimensions are often unconscious or only partly conscious to the actor, which concurs with Scharmer's notion of *downloading*: when people behave in an unconscious manner, they tend to 'download' routine behavioral approaches to solve practical situations. These downloaded approaches are grounded in an often unclear mixture of cognitive, emotional and motivational factors within the person.

Reflection

Becoming aware of such sources of behavior from a stance of openness and curiosity towards oneself may, as Scharmer (2007) clarifies, help to deepen one's awareness, and to make a better connection with one's inner potential. Hence, reflection is a pivotal instrument for enhancing professional development, as Van Woerkom (2003) showed in her research into professional behavior in a variety of professions. She found strong evidence that the ability to learn from one's own experiences through reflection is the most crucial aspect that explains the difference between strong and weaker professionals. However, there are different forms of reflection, and not every form is equally fruitful. Noteworthy is the research by Hoekstra (2007) and Mansvelder-Longayroux et al. (2007), who showed that professionals often use a superficial type of reflection. They limit their reflection to the question 'what can I do' (*behavior-oriented reflection*), whereas only *meaning-oriented reflection* has been shown to have a strong impact on professional learning. This brings us to the question of how professional reflection can be deepened.

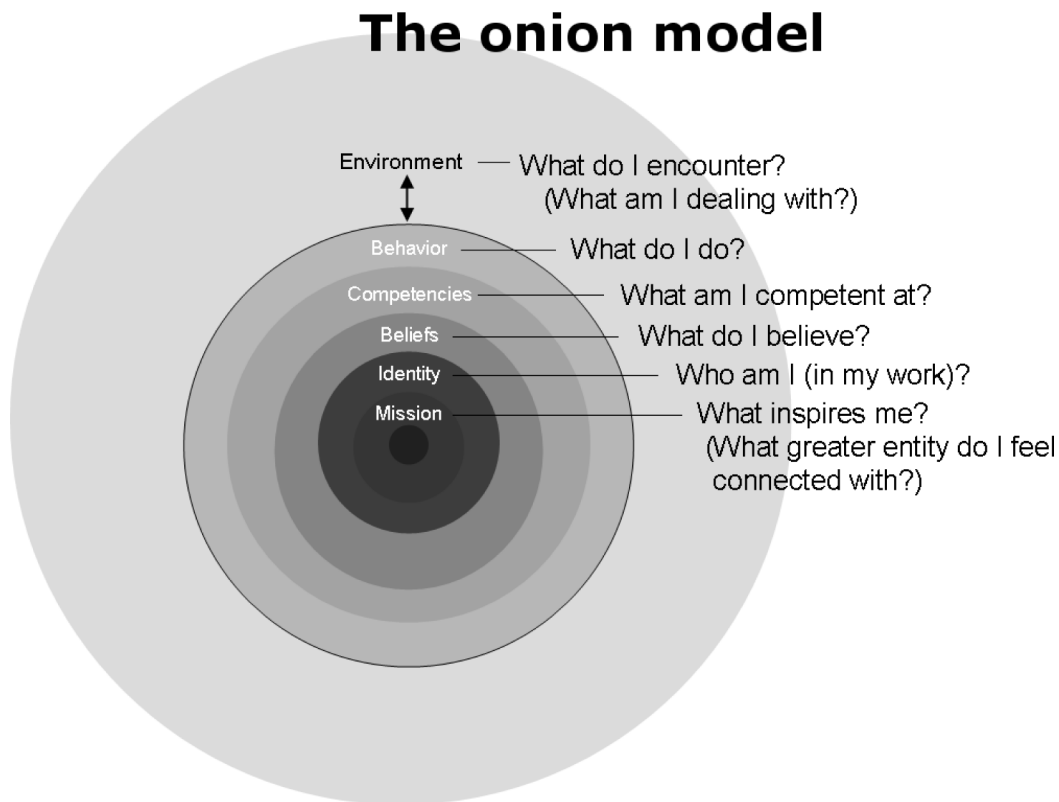
Core Reflection

The importance of promoting deep meaning-oriented reflection that includes cognition, emotion and motivation, was - during the early 1990s - the incentive for the development of the *Core Reflection approach*. The first publications on this approach were in Dutch, later followed by publications in English (e.g. Korthagen, 2004, Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005, Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010, Korthagen, Greene, & Kim, 2013). Although the Core Reflection approach has been developed previously to and separately from Theory U, the approach can be seen as a practical methodology for helping people (or oneself) make the U-movement. Fundamental to Core Reflection is not only the idea to make the unconscious dimensions of one's own functioning more conscious, but also the idea that there are different levels at which meaning-oriented reflection can take place. They are summarized in Figure 1 with the aid of *the model of levels in reflection*, briefly called *the onion model* (Korthagen, 2004; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). It shows the following levels: (1) environment, (2) behavior (performance), (3) competencies, (4) beliefs, (5) identity, and (6) mission. Figure 1 shows the basic questions related to each of **these six layers**.

The model focuses on the interaction of the individual with his or her environment. The idea is that *alignment* between the different layers is the key to effective performance. For example, if a professional has to deal with a difficult situation (layer 1), requiring a new kind of behavior (2), he needs the competencies to do so (3), and the belief (4) that a new approach will help. Without this belief and the right competencies, his behavior will often be ineffective. Still, he can only be successful if he also feels that this approach resonates with who he is (5) and with what he really strives for in his work (6).

Once the connection with the inner layers has been established (in our example: when the

Figure 1. The model of levels in reflection (the onion model)



person feels that the new approach is in line with his identity and mission), personal qualities in the practitioner are triggered, such as enthusiasm, curiosity, courage, decisiveness, openness, flexibility, and so forth. Following Ofman (2000), we call such qualities *core qualities*. In the literature, there is discussion about the question of whether such qualities are innate or the result of people's life histories (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Some qualities may be innate and others may be acquired through practice, although in general the answer is 'both': most qualities seem genetically determined, but need a supportive context in order to develop (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Interestingly, it is not really necessary to have final clarity about this issue if we wish to use the concept of core qualities for practical purposes, for example in coaching.

With the aid of the onion model, we can describe the inner layers a person goes through when moving through the U. The left-hand side of the U corresponds with an inward shift, from the outer to the inner layers in the person, where one's sense of self (identity), mission, and core qualities are located. Scharmer (2007, p. 246) calls this "connecting to Source" and relates it to the questions "Who is my Self?" (the identity level in the onion model) and "What is my Work?" (the mission level in the onion model). This is followed by an outward shift (corresponding with an upward movement in the U), which means that the person's behavior, or perhaps we should say the person's *being*, is grounded in an awareness of self (identity), mission (ideals, calling, inspiration), and core qualities. Hence, in Core

Reflection, many layers are taken into account simultaneously. Alignment among these different layers can promote a harmonious connection in a professional between the 'inside' (within the person) and the 'outside' (the environment), as we will show below.

Whereas Scharmer (2007) stresses the *process* of moving towards the bottom of the U and names this process *presencing*, other authors emphasize the special *state of being* the person arrives at, and call this state *presence* (e.g. Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Senge et al., 2004; Tremmel, 1993). This is no fundamental difference, but merely a different perspective on the same phenomenon.

Coaching Based on Core Reflection

Coaching based on Core Reflection is grounded in the following key principles (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010; Korthagen, Greene, & Kim, 2013):

1. Promoting awareness of ideals (layer of mission) and core qualities in the person related to the situation reflected on.
2. Identifying internal obstacles to the enactment of these ideals and core qualities (i.e. promoting awareness of any disharmony (frictions) between the onion layers).
3. Promoting awareness of the cognitive, emotional and motivational aspects (in other words: thinking, feeling and wanting) embedded in 1 and 2. This means stimulating a more *open mind*, *open heart*, and *open will*.
4. Promoting a state of presence in which the person is fully aware (cognitively and emotionally) of the discrepancy between 1 and 2, and the self-created nature of the internal obstacles.
5. Trust in the process taking place from within the person.
6. Supporting the use of the inner potential within the situation under reflection.
7. Promoting autonomy in Core Reflection.

So far, we have discussed the theoretical insights and the basic principles underlying the Core Reflection approach, and the connection with Theory U. Since the early 1990s, we have trained a large number of coaches in the use of the approach, and the need was felt to investigate the processes and outcomes related to coaching based on Core Reflection (i.e. Core Coaching). We will now discuss two in-depth case studies that have been carried out in this area. These studies were done in the Netherlands, and the results were published in international peer-reviewed journals. We will discuss the highlights of these studies here.

RESEARCH STUDY 1: PRESENCE WHILE TEACHING

In the first study (Meijer, Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2009) one teacher, Paulien, who was in her first year in the profession, was studied during seven individual Core Coaching sessions. Qualitative and quantitative instruments were used, including transcriptions of audio-recorded coaching sessions, Paulien's journals, five interviews with Paulien and the coach, and the Questionnaire on Core Qualities (Evelein, 2005). The most important outcomes of the Core Coaching were that the teacher became more fully present while teaching, used her personal qualities more effectively, and performed in her role more effectively. In terms of Theory U, the teacher's consciousness moved towards the 'bottom' of the U (presencing), and then moved 'upward' through the U to initiate effective behavior in her professional practice. We will illustrate Paulien's learning process by describing some excerpts from the coaching process, and by providing quotes from Paulien's journals and the interviews.

The Coaching Process

The coaching took place in the form of seven sessions with a coach who was one of the developers

of the Core Reflection approach. At the start of the trajectory, Paulien describes her problem as follows: “I just can’t seem to focus on the essence of a lesson. It’s too chaotic: in class as well as in my head.” During the first session, the coach notices her tendency to ignore the value of successes, and to focus all of her attention on problems and the related negative feelings. He decides to apply key principle 1 of Core Reflection:

- **Coach:** ... I notice that the moment I give you positive feedback, you seem not to receive this, you seem not to let it get through to you. You seem to back away from it. [...] I find it interesting to address your essential qualities or core qualities here: I see a lot of playfulness, excitement in you as you are talking about the students and how you stimulate them, and I see how you enjoy their motivation at that very moment. These are some of the qualities that I notice. And as we are talking about what exactly happens at that moment in that classroom, then I see you provoke humor in these students. That’s an important core quality. I also see the quality of involvement: everybody is extremely involved in the task and the assignments you give them. So now I’m curious: what does it do to you to see these qualities in yourself and in your students? In the lesson you give, you know how to evoke and activate these qualities, in yourself as well as in your students!
- **Paulien:** Well, yes, now you mention this, I knew of course, as I said earlier, that the lesson just went well, and I was thinking how can I hold on to this. And the fact that you now label this, I think, well, it seems to become a bit more tangible or understandable. [...] Apparently, I’ve done something that made it go that way, but what? I understand that a bit better now. It also reassures

me a bit. Apparently it’s not a coincidence if it should happen again. Maybe I can even prepare myself for it.

- **Coach:** So we might say that it is important to perceive and recognize these qualities? To be able to differentiate between them, label them, analyze them and reflect on them? Isn’t this important?
- **Paulien:** Yes, I feel so now, yes. Apparently, it is. Even though I told so many people about what happened. But I now think *this* is what happened, yes. And I like this, I mean, I can think about the situation from a different angle, I like that.

Here we can see a shift taking place in Paulien, from a limited and somewhat negative perception of the situation towards an attitude of an ‘open mind, open heart, open will.’ She is now “seeing with fresh eyes” (Scharmer, 2007, p. 38). During this coaching session, Paulien becomes more aware of the importance of recognizing and appreciating her core qualities and the influence of this awareness on her students. It also becomes clear that, although she can recognize some of her core qualities during the coaching and after the teaching experience, at this stage she is not aware of these qualities while teaching. In fact, *during* her lessons Paulien is not very aware of herself at all, but she does become aware of this phenomenon *after* her teaching, as shown by the following journal excerpt:

One way or another, I seem not to be in the center of my teaching, I wait for what’s going to happen, let it happen to me as it were. Why do I do it like this? [...] I seem to more or less “protect” myself... Apparently I don’t have the guts to be completely in my lesson?

Paulien’s awareness of herself *not* being present in the here-and-now promotes her desire to be more fully present. During the next days, she

continues ‘to move down the U’: through a more open mind, open heart, and open will, she develops more awareness of herself, her ideals and her core qualities. However, although she is now “seeing with fresh eyes”, this also creates confusion and anxiety. She wonders: “If I start to feel more, can I still function well?” Here she encounters what Scharmer (2007, p. 43) calls “The Voice of Fear”. During the next coaching session, it becomes clear that this is a fundamental obstacle: Paulien is afraid to become aware of her feelings, as she believes that if she opens herself fully to her feelings, she might be overwhelmed by these feelings (she even fears she might faint), and thus tends to stick to rational thinking. After this obstacle has been explored during the coaching through *thinking* about it, becoming more aware of the *feelings* around the theme, and focusing on *wanting* (how does Paulien really want to be), a breakthrough is visible in Paulien’s journal:

When Merel [a student] told me last week that the lesson was chaotic, I tried at that moment to feel my feelings in the here-and-now. I managed to do so for a moment, but I immediately felt dizzy, very unpleasant. Apparently, the mechanism to protect myself is there for a reason. What did I protect myself from? Let me recall the situation... if my feeling is right, I think I wanted to protect myself from a feeling of being rejected... Yes, that’s it, that’s how I felt. Strange, when I think this through, this is kind of weird. Merel did not reject me (as a person) at all, she only judged part of my behavior, namely my not acting when there is chaos in the classroom... Insight! Oh, this feels great, I feel much calmer now. Why do I do this only five days later? Why can’t I do this any sooner? Even during the lesson, as the coach would like me to? Yes, yes, uncertainty, fear to get hurt... but if I hadn’t done this little exercise now, I would have entered the classroom a lot more negatively tomorrow, I think. I don’t have to change as a person, I “just” have to learn some behavioral stuff. Well, this sounds a lot less threatening...

What is apparent in this journal fragment is that Paulien starts to connect *thinking* about her experiences with really *feeling her feelings*, and that she also becomes more aware of what she *wants* (key principle 3). In other words, she becomes more autonomous in balancing her cognitive, emotional as well as motivational awareness.

During the coaching, the coach helps her to further develop her awareness of both her ideal of being fully present in the here-and-now, in touch with her core qualities, and her inhibiting pattern of ‘not feeling’. This promotes what Scharmer (2007, p. 38) calls “sensing from the field”, with an open mind, open heart and open will:

- **Coach:** So what would it be like if you would not believe this thought of “I might faint” anymore? But instead see the thought just as it is: an assumption that is definitely wrong, a misconception. The whole idea that you might faint because of certain feelings is just ... a misconception, which only has an effect if you believe in it.
- **Paulien:** It would mean that I would have confidence in... just in me. That I would know I wouldn’t faint in those kind of moments. That I would manage. That it would be okay.
- **Coach:** If you just stick to that, how would that be? What do you feel?
- **Paulien:** Yes, that’s an extremely happy feeling. That’s really... it really makes me happy.
- **Coach:** What exactly triggers that happy feeling?
- **Paulien:** The idea that I do not have to be afraid.

Now Paulien entered a phase of “creating new thinking and principles”, as Scharmer (2007, p. 29) names it. He speaks about “crystallizing vision and intention - envisioning the new from the future that wants to emerge” (p. 39). This is enhanced by the application of key principle 4 of

Core Reflection, which means promoting awareness of both the ideal and the inner obstacle. This creates a tension within the human organism and a natural desire for reducing this tension. This helps to create a breakthrough and a transition to the phase of “letting come” (Scharmer, 2007, p. 43).

Now Paulien starts to differentiate herself from her feelings: she experiences that she *has* feelings, but also that she is *more than her feelings*, a principle formulated by Assagioli (1965). Again and again expressing his trust in the process (key principle 5), the coach helps Paulien recognize her potential of being fully present in the here-and-now as being more fundamental than both her mental constructs and the emotional effects of these constructs (key principle 6). Through this awareness, her capacity to stay in the here-and-now, while really feeling her feelings, is growing:

- **Paulien:** I feel kind of pleased that I allow myself ...[to feel]. I AM allowed to not like certain things!
- **Coach:** That sounds very accepting! “I AM allowed to not like certain things.”
- **Paulien:** Yes!!
- **Paulien:** It’s allowed! [...] In fact, it would be rather strange if I didn’t feel it that way!
- **Coach:** Great! You’re beaming with joy!
- **Paulien:** I’m really happy, yes! (laughs) Yes, you know, when I think this over, and feeling like this, it’s not just me for which it’s much more pleasant, but also for my students.

Here we can see the right-hand side of the U take shape. In Paulien’s journal, key words are “self-acceptance” and “I am not my feelings”. One week later, her journal shows that she gradually starts daring “to be herself” while teaching:

I notice on all fronts that I’m feeling more “me” among the students. I felt great and totally “present”. [...] I was aware that I felt relaxed. And that

precisely this relaxed feeling made me feel really “free” in my actions in class. I noticed that this felt relaxed and “natural”.

A couple of weeks later, she writes:

I feel stronger every minute, it feels like I’m more and more in charge of what we are doing in class, while on the other hand I feel I’m more and more letting students take charge as well.

During the final coaching sessions, the coach supports Paulien’s autonomy in applying Core Reflection (key principle 7) and her ability to remain in a state of presence, by (1) promoting reflection on the meaning of presence, (2) stimulating Paulien to imagine what it would be like to always be fully present in the classroom, (3) helping her to deconstruct inhibiting beliefs that suppress the experience of presence, and (4) making the Core Reflection approach explicit. This leads to conversations such as the following:

- **Paulien:** I do believe that I am much more, that more and more I learn to genuinely be. It gives such a happy feeling [laughs]. It specifically comes to me in sudden realizations. Then there is this sudden insight and then BANG, I am. Something like that. Then I’m very aware of ..., well, yes, of ME!
- **Coach:** And what does this mean to you, when you teach from this sense of being, or, being a teacher who’s able to teach from her inner sense of being? Imagine you would always be able to teach from your sense of being, your inner self? What would this mean?
- **Paulien:** Well, it would save so much of your energy. If you’re really yourself – I know it’s strange, but it’s really hard to be yourself – but if you finally succeed in being yourself, everything just comes natu-

rally. But I find it very difficult, when I lose touch with myself, to reconnect with myself.

- **Coach:** It's just an imaginary construction in your mind. At such a moment, first you have to recognize it, then you have to name it, reflect on it, and then you have to connect to it. Then the process will start from the inside, from yourself.
- **Paulien:** So, what you're actually saying is that this feeling that nothing really touches me, this dissociating that I'm doing, that this is just something I created myself?!
- **Coach:** Yes, you were not born that way, you acquired it.
- **Paulien:** O well, then I immediately want to get rid of it, it's so irritating! It's very annoying.
- **Coach:** It's very annoying indeed. And you don't want it.
- **Paulien:** No!

In an interview by one of the researchers involved in the study of Paulien's process, Paulien describes her newly developed potential for presence:

- **Paulien:** Well, yes, for example, during a lesson in which I forget to be myself so to speak, I notice this during the lesson, and I can do something about it.
- **Interviewer:** Could you describe this? I find that interesting. How do you notice this? What is this "noticing"?
- **Paulien:** Well, that I hear myself talking. I hear myself and then I think something like "how would she finish this sentence?" Like I'm thinking about myself in the third person, something like that.
- **Interviewer:** So you notice that this is happening, and what happens then?
- **Paulien:** Then I don't panic like I used to.
- **Interviewer:** You don't panic.

- **Paulien:** No, then I'm thinking "oh, here I'm doing it again." And then I immediately think "well, I don't want this, and I don't need to, it's nonsense". And then I turn around as it were... then I start focusing on the fact that I don't want this, and sometimes I need some time to do so, but that's okay, I do take that time now. Earlier, I felt "well, I need to finish this sentence no matter what, or I need to finish my story", a very stressful feeling, but now I will think "okay, I need some rest now". And then I can call this 'being present' to the fore really easily. It just comes. In the beginning I needed some deep breaths to do so, and to focus on my stomach... I know this sounds strange, but that's how it goes for me.

During a final interview, Paulien was asked what she felt the essence of the whole learning process was; she said:

What I felt to be the most crucial aspect of my process of becoming a teacher was a sense of being-while-teaching

Summary

A close analysis of the coaching sessions by the researchers revealed six stages in Paulien's learning process, described in Table 1, together with a summary of the key principles of Core reflection and the most important coaching interventions.

RESEARCH STUDY 2: ELICITING THE INNER POTENTIAL OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

In a second, longitudinal, mixed-method case study by Hoekstra and Korthagen (2011), the learning of 32 Dutch teachers was documented in a year in which they received no systematic support, but

Table 1. Stages in the coaching process, key principles of coaching based on Core reflection, and interventions

Stages	Key Principles of Coaching Based on Core Reflection	Significant Coaching Interventions
Stage 1: Chaos and a fixation on problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting awareness of ideals and core qualities (key principle 1 of Core Reflection) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focusing on acceptance of problems and empathic understanding Focusing on positive experiences and strengths
Stage 2: Deepened awareness; confusion and fears	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting awareness of cognitive, emotional and motivational aspects with an open mind, open heart and open will (key principle 3). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focusing on balanced attention for feeling, wanting and thinking Self-exposure Being present
Stage 3: Open mind, open heart, open will. Reflection at the identity layer and confrontation with an existential tension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying internal obstacles to act upon ideals and core qualities (principle 2) Promoting a state of presence in which the person is fully aware (principle 4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explaining focusing on feelings Exploring the limiting belief Focus on staying present with the limiting belief Empowerment by focusing on emerging core qualities
Stage 4: Experiencing presence and deconstructing core beliefs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust in the process taking place from within the person (principle 5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on core qualities Focus on feeling the feelings Support for the state of presence
Stage 5: Deepening presence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting a state of presence in which the person is fully aware (cognitively and emotionally) of the discrepancy between an ideal and an obstacle (a limiting belief) and of the self-created nature of internal obstacles (principle 4) Trust in the process taking place from within the person (principle 5) Support of acting upon the inner potential within the situation under reflection (principle 6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressing trust Modeling presence
Stage 6: Autonomy in Core Reflection and maintaining presence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting autonomy in Core Reflection (principle 7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explaining the process of Core Reflection Use of imagination Listening and accepting

had to adjust themselves to a national education innovation, which focused on promoting more active and self-regulated learning in students. While the teachers engaged in efforts to adapt themselves to this reform, reliable and validated quantitative instruments showed only limited changes in beliefs and behavior during the year. One of the 32 teachers, Nicole, who expressed that she would appreciate some support in her learning process, was offered individual coaching based on Core Reflection (by a different coach than the one who

coached Paulien) in exchange for her participation in a follow-up study. Nicole was a 55-year old biology teacher with 22 years of teaching experience. During the period in which she was being coached, the teacher became aware of beliefs and patterns that had previously inhibited change. As a result, her level of presence grew, enabling her to act on the basis of her inner potential, as we will describe below. While the validated research instruments did not show any significant changes in beliefs or behavior during the previous year of

unsupported learning, the data collected after the coaching trajectory showed significant changes, as we will also discuss below.

Nicole's Movement through the U

Nicole was enthusiastic about the educational reform, and in her classes she tried out many active learning strategies. For example, she regularly let her students work in groups. She had a vision of an ideal classroom, where students would work enthusiastically on the basis of their intrinsic motivation. The reality was, however, that Nicole became worried when she felt she could no longer control the learning of her students. Her “Voice of Fear” (Scharmer, 2007, p. 34) then seemed to take the lead. When this fear came up, Nicole tended to ‘download’ her old teaching strategy of concisely presenting the content matter to the students and providing them with the right structure, especially when students appeared to be uncertain. For example, Nicole interfered in students’ own attempts to make sense of the subject matter, by taking the floor and concisely presenting the topic. After such an event, she reported the following during an initial interview:

It felt some undetermined uncertainty. (...) So I thought I needed to present an overview of this theory quickly and strongly, because they said they did not see the structure anymore. I was consciously aware of my thoughts. I wanted to put the subject matter back on track, so that they'd leave the classroom with a good feeling, like ‘oh is that what we're doing’. That was my intention. ... [I thought] now I have to make sure that they know exactly what to expect. (...)

In this quotation, we see a mixture of thinking, **wanting and feeling**. Nicole *thought* about the students losing overview of the topic, she *felt* somewhat uncertain, and *wanted* to reduce students’ sense of uncertainty so that they could leave the class with a good feeling. However,

by downloading her old habit of taking over the floor, Nicole prevented the students from learning how to make sense of the topic themselves. She seemed to have the implicit belief that students should not feel uncertain and did not seem to realize that uncertainty is a natural part of new steps in a learning process.

The Coaching Process

Early in the coaching, the coach started to give full attention to Nicole’s core qualities, for example her strong commitment to her work and her enthusiasm (application of key principle 1 of Core Reflection). In the video recording of this part of the coaching, we can see Nicole’s strong emotional involvement. Supported by the positive feedback from her coach, she starts to talk freely about her worries:

I always want to be innovative in my teaching. But my underlying premise is that students need to be willing to learn, and need to discover things by themselves. (...) But I have to be careful that I'm not too ambitious. Sometimes students just really don't feel like doing anything.

The coach helped Nicole to become aware of her thought patterns and the inner obstacles involved: her tendency to give up, and her habit of reflecting on what went wrong and what to do next time (behavior-oriented reflection). Nicole began to see that in this way, she actually obstructed herself in reaching her ideal classroom. Building on Nicole’s ideal (key principle 1), the coach asked Nicole how it would be if the students were able to become aware of what happened inside them at such a moment, as part of the process **of self-directed learners**. The coach said:

In moments that students seem to give up, you have the tendency to solve this for them, by encouraging them to keep working. (...) Would it be possible that students themselves could learn to see within

themselves what is happening to them? And that they think about whether they want to continue like this? You may explain to them that if they don't learn how to do this and motivate themselves, they may fail at school. That way you would be coaching them in how to be self-directed learners.

This vision immediately made Nicole enthusiastic, and she talked excitedly about a recent situation in which she had helped a student reflect on the fact that her lack of motivation for a school task was related to her lack of preparation at home. The coach explained the distinction between thinking, feeling, and wanting, as well as the notion that people do not change by thinking alone. He made Nicole aware of the fact that he used this distinction in his own coaching, and that Nicole might also use it in the guidance of her students.

- **Nicole:** So, actually, I would have to say to them: 'When I am saying this to you, how do you feel?'

Contrary to her previous tendency to label situations as "failures", she now started to see new possibilities for helping the students learn how to deal with their emotions and motivation. She exclaims:

Okay, okay! Yeah, I really like this!

In this phase of the coaching process, 'multi-level learning' took place, for now Nicole began to define her role and ideals as a teacher differently, which implies that the layers of identity and mission were touched upon and started to change. In retrospect, in the final interview, Nicole explains:

My enthusiasm itself also inhibited me. My enthusiasm was aimed at creating new assignments to promote active learning, rather than on whether

the students would like different methods. (...) Instead, I learned that I can shape my enthusiasm for the subject matter in several ways.

The coaching helped Nicole discover that, through her behavior of taking over control from the students and her tendency to label situations as failures (based on what Scharmer calls the "Voice of Cynicism"), she hampered herself in reaching her ideal classroom. In other words, the coach helped Nicole to identify internal obstacles to enacting her ideal (key principle 2). To heighten Nicole's awareness of the conflict between her ideal and her tendency to give up as soon as she experienced failure, the coach used the metaphor of building a house. He asked her:

If one brick falls down, do you go on building, or do you start to reflect on this failure and stop building, based on a negative evaluation of the situation?

Nicole was impressed by the new insights into her habitual patterns, and felt emotionally touched. A strong desire developed in her to deal with her own ineffective patterns (key principle 3). Hence, Nicole became aware, of the self-created obstacles to her ideal (key principle 4), and started to open up for new possibilities (open will).

When in the second session, the coach asked Nicole to reflect on her learning process during and after the first session, Nicole again focused on problematic experiences, and not on successes. The coach supported Nicole in naming the positive things in the situations she brought forward. In this phase, Nicole again tended to *think* about her experiences, and did not include her *feelings* or her ideals (her *wanting*) in her reflection. The coach helped Nicole to reflect on how she felt in the interaction with the students, and on how these feelings influenced her classroom behavior.

Promoting Presence in Professional Practice

The coach also asked her what an ideal situation would have looked like (using key principle 1 of Core Reflection).

- **Nicole:** In an ideal situation, the students would have returned to their work and changed their behavior. And one student, Jack, actually said that.
- **Coach:** Oh? So in this situation, Jack acts in the ideal way, but you are also faced with a problem, and you choose to focus on that problem?

The coach now supported Nicole in feeling the friction between her ideal and her actual behavior (thus following key principle 4). This is the stage in which a *state of presence* is promoted, *for being with this inner tension* without immediately wanting to *solve* it; this falls under the important phase of ‘suspension’ (Scharmer, 2007, p. 36). Nicole put her forehead in her hands resting on the table.

- **Coach:** I see you do this [he imitates Nicole’s gesture]... What is happening,?

He mirrored Nicole’s gesture, thus supporting her to stay in a state of presence in which she would be fully aware of what was happening inside her.

- **Nicole Sighed and Said:** Oh how stupid, this makes so much sense.
- **Coach:** We are all, especially in education, so used to looking at problems, not at strengths and opportunities. You could have asked Jack to explain himself, and the other students would have heard the opinion from a peer.

Nicole claps her hands and laughs, saying:

What a lost opportunity! I am indeed inclined to look at the problem areas and treat them as problems! [After a reflective pause] I am now

starting to see all those moments that have triggered me to address problems, instead of focusing on what goes well.

Here we see what Scharmer (2007, p. 39) calls “crystallizing vision and intention - envisioning the new from the future that wants to emerge”. It is the start of the upward movement through the right-hand side of the U. Nicole shows emotion as she begins to realize that she was obstructing not only her own, but also her students’ potential. In the final interview, Nicole said about this part of the **supervision** that it was a very confrontational moment for her.

As Nicole emphasized in the final research interview, this learning experience deeply impressed Nicole and contributed to a profound and lasting shift in the way she approached students in the classroom.

In the next stage, the coach helped Nicole to formulate her new insights and her new view of her role and mission as a teacher (Scharmer’s phase of *crystallizing*), thus aiming at a fundamental identity change. He also started to focus more on supporting behavioral changes in Nicole that concurred with her new insights (Scharmer’s phase of *prototyping*). Nicole learned how to focus on students’ core qualities instead of problems, to share her ideals with her students, and to support them more effectively in becoming self-directed learners. A quote from this part of the coaching illustrates her learning:

- **Nicole:** I will concentrate on what a student can do, and not on what he or she does or cannot do. Students will then better recognize their own strengths and focus on them.

In the final coaching session she reported:

As soon as you show students their strengths, they become more aware of them. And that is a positive energy I give them (...) And as soon as you


do that, you see their eyes light up, and you see streams of positive energy. I never did that before.

In the remainder of the coaching sessions the same issues that surfaced in the first sessions returned, but were now reflected on in more depth. Much attention was devoted to supporting Nicole in *staying in a state of presence* in which she was fully aware of her mission and her core qualities, and of her tendency to fall back into limiting patterns. At this stage, the coach *explicitly modeled* interventions such as focusing on thinking, feeling, and wanting, focusing on successes rather than problems, and sharing an ideal with the learner, thus supporting the actualization of Nicole's inner potential (key principle 6). Nicole and the coach regularly spoke about these interventions, about how they influenced Nicole in the here-and-now, and about how Nicole could use similar interventions in her classes. In this manner, the coaching started to affect not only Nicole herself, but also her students. In the final interview, Nicole reported:

I learned that if you point out their feelings when you see how the student is doing [emotionally], and when you point that out, that part of her [the student's] frustration disappears, because I acknowledge those feelings. I learned that from my coach when he sometimes said: "that must have been depressing for you". (...) Because it is recognized, that is so extremely important, I learned that. And when you do that with students, then they feel recognized, which happens much too little at school.

In the final sessions, the coach and Nicole did several role-plays aimed at strengthening the transfer to Nicole's practices (Scharmer would probably call this *prototyping* and *embodying*). These sessions also aimed at stimulating Nicole's further self-directed professional learning. Over and over again, the coach expressed his trust in Nicole's potential to change (key principle 5). In

the final interview Nicole reported that she had fundamentally grown as a professional:

My vision is very much alive in my head, and it is what keeps me going. I used to have the hope or idea that there would be flow [in my classes] and that my behavior conformed to my vision, and I realized that at wasn't true. And now I realize that it does start to flow from my vision to my behavior. I notice that each moment in the classroom when I say 'I do not see you do anything, what are you doing?' or 'why aren't you doing anything?' or 'what could you be doing right now?' or 'how come you are not doing anything?' that I find all these are related to my vision. And also, that this will have its effect in the long run, instead of [what I used to think] expecting an immediate effect in the student.

In the final sessions, the coach helped Nicole to take responsibility for and organize her own learning (key principle 7). He encouraged her to reflect independently with the aid of the Core Reflection principles. Gradually, Nicole changed her superficial 'does work/does not work' evaluation of teaching strategies (behavior-oriented reflection) into more meaning-oriented reflection. Moreover, Nicole learned how to recognize and deal with students' emotions and strengths.

Final Outcomes

Nicole's learning outcomes were evident in the questionnaire data, which showed that her beliefs regarding students' self-regulated learning had indeed changed significantly ($p < 0.05$). According to the student questionnaire, which measured the actual teacher's performance, Nicole's behavior in the classroom changed significantly as well, particularly the kind of behavior that fosters students' own reflection ($p < 0.05$) and their active involvement in their learning ($p < 0.05$). This is especially noteworthy because during the previous

year, when Nicole received no systematic support, we used the same instruments for tracking her development, but then we found no changes during the year. (For methodological details, see Hoekstra & Korthagen, 2011)

After the coaching, Nicole not only kept directing her own development, but she also successfully transformed her workplace. Two years later, she confirmed that she was still using the newly acquired insights and skills:

I also keep working on new ideas to support students to become more responsible and active learners and I achieve great results with minor interventions.

Nicole had even realized changes at the school level:

After I became aware of how I wanted to enact my vision, I realized that there was little support for this kind of learning within my school. (...) I started my own teacher team.

She appeared to have taken training courses in Core Reflection and applied Core Reflection in the coaching of student teachers who did their practicum in her classes. When she read the first research paper that we wrote about her learning process, she exclaimed:

My God, I learned a lot. It hit the core of my being.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Both studies show how the principles of Core Reflection can be used in coaching to help people move through a U-shaped learning process, in which they arrive at a state of presence and gain the competence and confidence to act from this state. We showed how, even if a coachee is strug-

gling with a serious problem, Core Reflection can create a shift from the problematic experience towards ‘presencing’.

We believe that the significance of both studies transcends the field of education, as the essence of what we found has to do with *connecting professional and personal growth* (Korthagen, 2010; Meijer, Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2009). The second study also shows that the teacher involved not only learned how to move through the U herself and become more present to her own potential. She also learned how to support her students’ potential to go through the U and to stay in a state of presence, also when faced with problems. Hence, the coaching process affected two levels at the same time: the learning of Nicole and the learning of her students. This shows that coaching based on Core Reflection can make Theory U applicable to education and other helping professions both at the level of the practitioner and client.

Transformational Learning

As Poutiatine (2009) states, the Core Reflection approach seems to offer a key instrument in *transformational learning*, that is, learning in which we experience “dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live” (Merriam et al., 2007; Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2003). Through the promotion of Core Reflection, changes can take place that go beyond gradual adjustments in professional behavior (“first-order change”). What we can observe in the stories of Paulien and Nicole are “second-order changes”, defined by Levy and Mary (1986) as “transformative change”. They state that “second-order change is a multidimensional, multi-level, qualitative, discontinuous, radical organizational change involving a paradigmatic shift” (p. 5). Indeed, in both the examples of Paulien and Nicole all levels of the onion model are included in the change process and were brought into alignment.

Hence, what we have described in this chapter is a type of coaching aimed at deep forms of learning, but not in the traditional sense in which most therapeutic approaches conceptualize ‘going deep’, such as focusing on traumatic childhood experiences. On the contrary, in the Core Reflection approach ‘going deeper’ refers to the joyful adventure of awakening to the richness of the present reality, discovering new possibilities, and focusing on the positive feelings connected with one’s inner potential, and one’s inner sources of inspiration. As Korthagen and Vasalos (2010) note, such strong positive feelings and fresh insights are usually not triggered when the learning process only focuses on the outer levels of the onion model, where first-order change is the goal.

Core Qualities and Presence

The essence of Core Reflection is the promotion of a transformational shift in awareness from problems encountered in practice towards more awareness of personal strengths (core qualities), and towards the potential for presence. This is an interesting connection that offers a refinement of Theory U: *A state of presence corresponds with awareness of and the enactment of core qualities.* In other words, through presencing the person becomes more connected with the ‘inner core’, depicted as a white circle in Figure 1. In terms of the Core Reflection theory, the U-movement corresponds with a shift from the outer layers of the onion model towards the core, and then back to the outer layers of behavior and environment.

This insight has an important practical implication for the use of Theory U in coaching: *presencing is promoted by focusing on core qualities.* The promotion of awareness of core qualities is thus a pivotal element in Core Coaching. The principle can also be applied to self-reflection: if one encounters a problematic situation, a focus on one’s core qualities with an open mind, open heart and open will, can enhance a shift towards a state of presence. The actual use of one’s core

qualities in the situation corresponds with the upward movement at the right side of the U.

A focus on personal qualities concurs with recent development within psychology. A whole new branch of psychology, *positive psychology*, emphasizes the need to focus more on personal strengths and on positive experiences than on failures and deficiencies (Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Researchers in this field have found empirical evidence that awareness of one’s core qualities (which positive psychologists call *character strengths*) promotes creativity and personal effectiveness (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). This finding is in line with Theory U, and is confirmed by the empirical studies discussed in this chapter. Both Paulien and Nicole developed professional behavior that was both appropriate to the environment and personally fulfilling. Our studies reveal the details of the processes and stages involved, and provide evidence of significant outcomes in performance. They also reveal a number of other interesting issues that we will present below.

From a Focus on the Past to a Focus on the Future

Kierkegaard stated: “Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.” His famous message seems self-evident, and indeed, the idea is very common that we can only develop an understanding about ourselves and our environment by looking back on our experiences. However, although we do not want to suggest that it is not important to learn from past experiences, it is also relevant to see that this common view of reflection always creates some distance between the here-and-now and the reflective process: in fact what we normally reflect on, is something that happened in the past, even though this ‘past’ may have taken place a few seconds ago (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2010). This creates the risk that our awareness is limited by the past experience and its features, for as Osberg and Biesta (2007) de-

scribe, we tend to view reality from the specific perspective of what has happened. Especially when the past situation has triggered negative emotions, a kind of ‘tunnel thinking’ may occur, as positive psychologist Fredrickson (2002) has shown. Fredrickson has also found that this often leads to a ‘reactive’ way of dealing with reality (i.e. downloading), and thus, a lack of creativity. In such situations, we often lose the connection with our personal strengths and our core qualities.

The Core Reflection principle of giving more attention to ideals instead of problems helps to foster positive feelings and more creativity, thus avoiding the downloading trap. The cases described above show that it is not always necessary to first analyze the problematic features of a situation in full depth. Reflection on one’s ideal may often be a much more effective way of understanding the essence of the problem the person encounters (Meijer et al., 2009; Korthagen, Greene & Kim, 2013). Ideals often resonate with the most inner level of mission: they have to do with our deepest desires, our sense of meaning in life, and thus with our core, our full potential as human beings. This sheds a positive light on our problems: they can be viewed as opportunities to get in touch with our deepest potential, a potential that is already emerging. This view concurs with the subtitle of Scharmer’s (2007) book: “Leading from the future as it emerges”.

Presence and Full Awareness of the Here-and-Now

Thus, an important shift in coaching and in any professional learning process is the shift from reflection on the past towards awareness of our ideal future, as a means of getting in touch with personal strengths, and of overcoming tunnel thinking or the obstacles preventing people from realizing their ideals. Yet an even more crucial step is to shift from both reflecting on the past or the

future to a focus on the *here-and-now*. What we are talking about is overcoming not only the gap between the here-and-now and the past, but even the gap between the here-and-now and the future, and to realize our full potential in the here-and-now. This implies a shift from the notion of reflection to *full awareness*, of both the inner and the outer world as they present themselves *now*. This crucial step has been illustrated by the descriptions of the processes the two teachers, Paulien and Nicole, went through. At the bottom of the U their full human potential started to unfold.

As Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006, p. 271) explain, the key to presence is being present to oneself and the environment simultaneously. Interestingly, our contact with the outside world is strengthened through a deeper awareness of ourselves (Almaas, 1986, 2008; Senge et al., 2004). As Korthagen and Vasalos (2010) state, this is how the connection between the professional and the personal element in professional behavior is made (Intrator and Kunzman, 2006). This connection is crucial to optimal functioning, since many authors emphasize that a strong divide between the personal and the professional can lead to ineffective inner frictions (Beijaard et al., 2004; Nias, 1989). Palmer (2004) states that it is essential for professionals to “live divided no more”. This is exactly what Core Reflection has to offer. As Kim and Greene (2011, p. 114) put it:

[Core Reflection] is about the opportunity to be who you really are or really want to be. Some people might call it self-actualization. Some people might call it authenticity, some might call it flow, but I’m not sure it’s any of those things exactly. I think it’s about being human, being very natural in responses, and being very present.

Indeed, Core Reflection offers the instruments to overcome the division between how you work as a professional and who you are as a human

being, and appears to be a fruitful coaching approach supporting Scharmer's Theory U, while at the same time refining it.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Awareness: The ability to perceive events, objects, or sensory patterns. Awareness does not necessarily imply understanding or the use of concepts.

Core Qualities: Personal qualities, such as enthusiasm, curiosity, courage, decisiveness, openness, and flexibility.

Core Reflection: An approach to reflection that includes attention for (professional) identity, mission (e.g. one's ideals) and personal qualities, as well as the inner obstacles to enacting one's full potential.

Onion Model: A model describing levels of reflection (or levels of change), namely (1) environment, (2) behavior, (3) competencies, (4) beliefs, (5) (professional) identity, and (6) mission.

Positive Psychology: A relatively new branch of psychology that puts much emphasis on positive emotions and personal strengths.

Presence: A state of being in which one is fully aware of what is happening in the here-and-now, both in one's environment and within oneself.

Transformational Learning: Learning in which a person experiences a dramatic, fundamental change in the way s/he sees him/herself and the world in which s/he lives.

ENDNOTES

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