Management education as a mirror. A comparison of renaissance mirrors for princes and current management education
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The notion of reflexivity is key in a discussion of rigour and relevance in relation to management education. Reflexivity (reflection, reflectivity, reflecting, critical reflection…) is in scientific papers on management education/development often treated as the activity which makes the rigorous scientific knowledge relevant for practice. Currently, reflection is a positive word guiding educational activities in relation to leadership development. It is seen as the activity which connects theories with experience, remembering, and new challenges. It is described as a kind of mediator, a connector which makes rigorous academic knowledge relevant (Quinn 2013, Gosling and Mintzberg 2006, Cunliffe 2009, Cutter and Cullen 2012). There are different notions of reflexivity, but most authors seem to share the assumption that reflexivity is something desirable. It is about reflection on practice (Schön) or on oneself in a critical self reflection (Mezirow). ‘How to develop the reflective manager’ and ‘what is reflectivity’ are the two most dominant questions in relation to reflectivity.

Reflection has been treated as something we should have more of, or different types of reflection have been depicted. But what has not gained much attention is the fact that reflection in itself also needs a medium and that the particular media determine how the manager can become visible to herself. This paper suggests that we define reflection more formally as the process by which a self establishes a relation to itself (Luhmann 1991: 100). This process is typically facilitated by media. Such media we may call media of reflection or management mirrors. Such media of reflection are needed as the pure selfreflection is in risk of running in circles. As Hahn has expressed it in relation to the emergence of Christian rituals of confession in the Middle Ages “The look of the individual into himself would soon come to an end, if he was not given a map of his inner landscape.” (1982: 412). The self needs a social language in which it can reflect itself and its activity. This also goes for the ‘reflective manager’ who needs media (in the form of concepts, ideals, visions, proverbs, knowledge, narratives…) which can facilitate his self-reflection. The manager needs external media in order to become visible to herself. Today, management education is merely one way out of many in which the manager can become visible to herself. For instance 360° management evaluation, appraisal interviews, coaching sessions and mentoring are current examples of different types of institutionalized reflexivity.

1 “Reflexivity as a keystone of mid-career education can ensure that public managers develop integrative, investigative and innovative capacities.”
2 As Quin states: “The remainder of this article examines how links between learning and reflecting have evolved and why the fostering of reflexivity should be a vital and valued element of mid-career education for public managers.” (Quinn 2013: 8)
Different media of reflection facilitate different types of reflection and make different self-relations possible. If the relation to oneself is facilitated by a Christian consciousness of sin, one gets a different self than if the relation to oneself is established in the frames of affirmative therapy. It is the purpose of this paper to contribute to the understanding of how different media of reflection offer different possibilities for those who are mirrored in them.

Media of reflection tend to be invisible while they make other things visible. When you look into the mirror you see yourself, not the mirror. In order to be able to reflect the reflection we have to create distance to the specific media. In this paper I do this by means of a historical comparison of two different media of reflection, namely what is called ‘mirrors for princes’ and research based executive management educations. Mirrors for princes (speculum morale regium, speculum regum…) were handwritten as well as printed texts with an educational aim. The genre does not have clear boundaries neither when it comes to style, content or historical epoch. There are treads back to Antiquity, just as we find Arab as well as West-European examples. But the mirrors are mainly associated with the Middle Ages and the renaissance. 15-1600 were the heydays of the mirrors. The mirrors were the management handbooks of that time. As the management educations do today, the mirrors formed the media for the reflection of the managers.

In the comparison of the mirrors and education media I ask two questions a) what do the managers see when they look in the mirror? b) which societal/organizational problems can the media be seen as answers to? Reflection is nothing new (even though one can get that impression from research papers promoting reflection), so what I suggest is to study the changes in the media of reflection, especially in the relation between media and societal background.

References

Gosling and Mintzberg (2006): Management Education as if Both Matter
