



BETWEEN THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING: SELF-WRITING AS A TRAINING DEVICE IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

ENTRE A DIMENSÃO FORMAL E INFORMAL DO APRENDIZADO: A ESCRITA DE SI COMO DISPOSITIVO DE FORMAÇÃO NO CONTEXTO UNIVERSITÁRIO

ENTRE LAS DIMENSIONES FORMAL E INFORMAL DEL APRENDIZAJE: LA ESCRITURA DEL YO COMO DISPOSITIVO DE FORMACIÓN EN EL CONTEXTO UNIVERSITARIO

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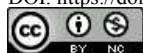
ABSTRACT: The present article presents the results of a reflective narrative production work, carried out with second-year undergraduate students of the educational sciences course, of a Parisian public university. This work was carried out between the years 2016 to 2018, in the scope of the course "text writing", whose aim is to improve the students' writing skills in the face of certain difficulties and blockages identified in them. To this end, a device named "outside-personal" journal was implemented, whose function was to serve as a support for students to explore the daily life of their lives through regular narrative records throughout the months of the course. From a content analysis of the journal records, it was possible to understand the difficulties experienced by the students, the strategies of appropriation of the journal and its positive effects on the formal and informal formation processes experienced at the university.

KEYWORDS: Narration. Experience. Writing of self. Experiential learning.

RESUMO: O presente artigo apresenta os resultados de um trabalho de produção narrativa reflexiva, realizado com estudantes do segundo ano de graduação do curso de ciências da educação, de uma universidade pública parisiense. Este trabalho foi realizado entre os anos de 2016 a 2018, no escopo do curso "redação de textos", cujo objetivo é melhorar a capacidade de escrita dos estudantes face a certas dificuldades e bloqueios identificadas nos mesmos. Para tanto, foi implantado um dispositivo nomeado de diário "exterior-pessoal", cuja função era servir de suporte aos alunos para exploração do cotidiano de suas vidas através de registros narrativos regulares ao longo dos meses de duração do curso. A partir de um trabalho de análise de conteúdo dos registros dos jornais, foi possível compreender as dificuldades vividas pelos alunos, as estratégias de apropriação do diário e os efeitos positivos do mesmo nos processos de formação formal e informal vivido na universidade.

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Narração. Experiência. Escrita de si. Aprendizagem experiencial.*

RESUMEN: *Este artículo presenta los resultados de un trabajo de producción narrativa reflexiva, realizado con estudiantes de segundo año del curso de ciencias de la educación, de una universidad pública parisina. Este trabajo se llevó a cabo entre los años 2016 a 2018, en el ámbito de la asignatura "escritura de textos", cuyo objetivo es mejorar la capacidad de escritura de los alumnos ante ciertas dificultades y bloqueos identificados en ellos. Para ello, se implementó un dispositivo denominado diario "exterior-personal", cuya función era servir de soporte para que los alumnos exploraran la cotidianidad de sus vidas a través de registros narrativos regulares a lo largo de los meses del curso. A partir de un análisis de contenido de los registros del diario, fue posible comprender las dificultades experimentadas por los estudiantes, las estrategias de apropiación del diario y sus efectos positivos en los procesos de formación formal e informal vividos en la universidad.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Narración. Experiencia. Escritura del yo. Aprendizaje experimental.*

Introduction

The present article aims to present the results of a reflective narrative production work, carried out with second-year undergraduate students of educational sciences at a public university in Paris. The said work was developed in the scope of a course entitled "text writing", held between the years 2016 to 2018, whose aim is to improve the students' writing skills in view of the identification of certain difficulties and blocks of the students, related to the feeling of "not knowing how to write" and, above all, to the "fear of writing". We understand that the transformation of the demands about the exercise of writing at university puts the writing of the self and the dimension of the sensitive (RANCIÈRE, 2000) "asleep" (BAILLY, 2011). Our hypothesis, therefore, was that this fear was, in part, related to the process of socialization to institutional norms (implicit or explicit), through which students pass and which guide the learning of a specific style of academic writing of the discipline in which one is enrolled.

In order to help students, recover their self-confidence, to make them understand the biographical dimension that writing has, and to awaken in them an interest in practicing it, a daily writing exercise was integrated into the course using a journal that we called "exterior-personal. This denomination is due to the counterpoint we made with the idea of the intimate journal, also characterized by everyday writing, which brings out an identity of author-narrator-principal character directed to the author's private life without, however, having the intention of sharing or publishing (CHIANTARETTO, 1998). The "outside-personal" journal, on the other hand, conceived by the discipline, was intended to be shared. It was not, therefore, conceived as intimate writing only, but as a writing of the self-intended for the other and for





oneself. (HESS, 1998, p. 135). In this sense, we establish as our second hypothesis that the inclusion of this auto, heterobiographical and ecobiographical biographical writing (BRAGANÇA, 2011) throughout university education allows us to shed light on the "silent transformations" (JULLIEN, 2010) that take place in the lives of students, through which they graduate and construct their life trajectories.

Between these two forms of writing, called "academic" and "personal" a gap is created (JULLIEN, 2012) in which a space for reflexivity opens: an *intermejournal*, conducive to the emergence of thought. In fact, the gap becomes fertile by putting into tension what initially separated. So, we ask ourselves: in what ways does the opening of a space for the practice of a writing of the self, within a university curriculum, allow the meaning of a life course and the construction of a particular meaning to the training experience? In what ways does the exploration and exploitation of this "in-between", through writing implicated with oneself, trigger processes and perspectives of self-transformation?

Based on the third hypothesis that human experience is apprehended through narrative formulations (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2014), our reflection is based primarily on the analysis and interpretation of both the personal diaries, which were written daily during the months of the course, and the reports written at the end of the experience by the students who participated in these daily writing workshops. Through these biographical and reflective activities, we seek to understand, on the one hand, how students weave the relationships between their training and all the occupations and concerns that mobilize them in their daily lives. On the other hand, we sought to capture the transformations generated by the personal writing involved. Thus, our center of interest turned as much to "learning from life - in life" as to the processes of constructing experience in its narrative dimension.

Methodology

Development of the work by the students

Throughout the years 2016 to 2018, the opening of the "text writing" course relied, in addition to the presentation of its formal aspects (objectives, bibliographical references, schedule, and form of assessment), on the introduction of the personal journal as a writing and reflection device. The instruction passed to the students was to incorporate the "outside-personal" journal into daily life, through regular and continuous writing over the months. The content was free, and the student could choose whatever they wanted as their topic each day. Students were allowed to choose whether the journal would be handwritten or typed. Either





way, the students were to regularly confront the blank page in order to de-dramatize the situation of fear, gradually limiting the blockages linked to writing.

The students were informed that the content of their journals would be read by the teachers, but that it would not be subject to notation. The purpose of the journal was to demonstrate to the students the benefits of writing, highlighting the reflective activity that it could generate. The only element that was subject to evaluation was the activity report, written at the end of the activity, whose purpose was to make a reflective balance about the practice and its effects. To this end, the students had to reread their diaries, write a report explaining the writing approach adopted and their reactions to their daily writing. The following questions were given as guiding questions: How did I use the journal? What kind of questions came up? What did writing and rereading the journal bring me?

The analysis of the writing exercise

The analysis work undertaken with the students' diaries followed the same process throughout the years of the discipline (2016 to 2018). However, the results that will be presented in this article focus on the third-year group (2018), in order to bring the most recent contributions of the work.

The research conducted was based on the qualitative approach of content analysis (BARDIN, 1977). Initially, we had 28 diaries in our possession. The analytical work was divided into stages. Initially, reading was done to identify the main aspects that caught our attention. This first reading allowed us to know the themes addressed by the students, their ways of writing and using the journal (both as a necessary exercise and as an introspective tool). After this step, we identified that the students appropriated the journal in different, individual and personal ways of the writing process. However, we observed certain recurrences and an evolution of writing in each student as the weeks of practice passed.

Based on this initial work, we selected, by consensus, 12 diaries. The corpus was chosen according to the following criteria: appropriation of the journal, themes addressed, effort of reflection on daily events. Thus, the journals that did not involve an appropriation of the instrument as a means of reflection and introspection were removed from the investigation.

The second stage of the work was dedicated to the content analysis and, for that, the categories that emerged were grouped and organized in a table, with the use of the Excel program. This table also included excerpts from the students' written records, characterizing and illustrating each analytical category. The results of this phase of the work gave us the





opportunity to better understand the journal as an instrument to analyze the experiences of the students' individual, professional and training trajectories during graduation.

The next step was devoted to interpretation through the articulation of the categories. Considering writing as a narrative expression and a medium through which experiences take shape (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2014), we proceeded to a transversal reading of the diaries in order to explore the students' social and cultural reality. By looking at both the categories and their articulations, we were able to understand the central issues that cut across the students' trajectory at the time of journal writing. According to biographical research, codes, repertoires, figures of speech, and schemes of action contribute to understanding how each individual inscribes himself in the social world and represents his life (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2014). Thus, we understand that during the journal writing period, students were able to shape their experiences, evoking their relationship with the world and organizing the various events that ran through their daily lives. Our interpretation work sought, in this way, to capture the succession of events and the various strategies put in place by the students in order to understand the processes of biography (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2014) that took place during the training period.

A final stage of work consisted in the analysis of the students' reports. This step was important because it allowed us to establish an articulation with the analysis of the progression of writing over the weeks. Through the reports it was possible to better grasp the students' view of themselves during their evolutions, between the beginning and the end of the writing. By including this analysis, we were also able to find the formative dimensions of journal writing.

The following results focus on the journal writing process, the appropriation of it, the strategies put in place by students to facilitate writing, in order to reflect on the notions of implication, path, and trajectory.

Results

Appropriation of the newspaper and the relationship with writing

A difficult beginning...

For many students, the beginning of journal writing was marked by a sense of uncertainty and anxiety. From the very first pages, phrases such as "*this is the first time I have done this kind of work*" alert the reader to the innovative nature of this formative process. In fact, for most students, this was the first time that such a broad assignment, which allowed them to express in words their experiences and concerns, was proposed at the university. Some





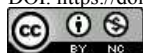
students describe this exercise as being "a complicated test" and question their ability to respond to such a task.

Strategies put into practice

However, in order to overcome these difficulties, we noticed that some students put into practice some strategies to evolve the writing process. Journals become real challenges for some. Others made certain choices related to the pace and timing of writing, using the first few sheets of the journal to explain how they will proceed throughout the course. For example, one student explained that due to her difficulty in expressing herself, she decided to write her journal twice a week. Others choose to enter a process of personifying their diaries by giving them names. In this case, the journal is presented as an individual and occupies a place as a third agent, standing between the student and the teacher and between the student and the outside world.

The importance of analyzing one's own relationship with writing

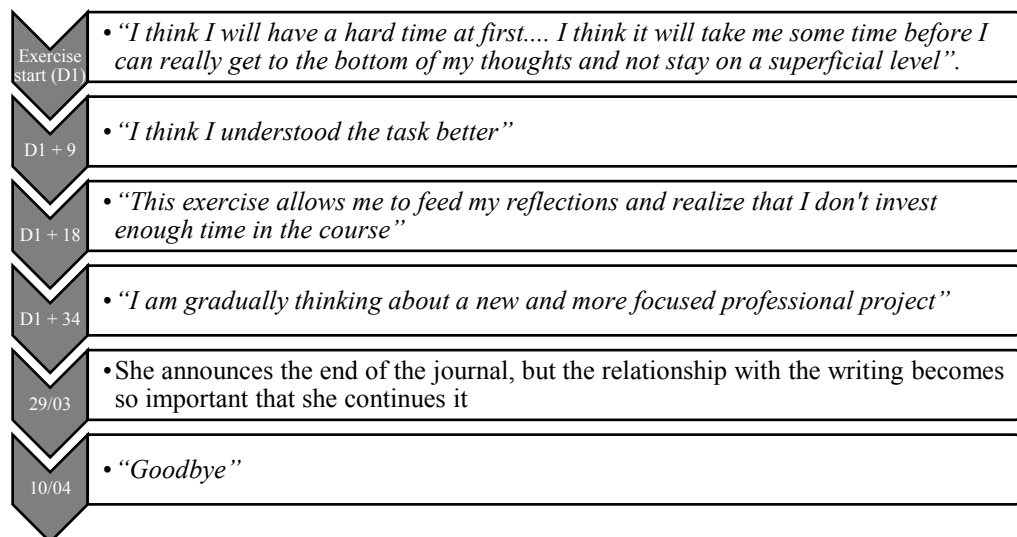
Many of the students used the journal to also express a personal analysis of their own progress through the exercise. This is an analysis of one's own attitude towards journaling and writing. This evolutionary process can be illustrated by the words of one student who began her journal by wondering if she would be successful at writing: "I think I will have a hard time at first.... I think it will take me some time before I can really get to the bottom of my thoughts and not stay on a superficial level". After nine days of writing, this student jumps from one-sentence entries to longer paragraphs, highlighting her initial thoughts. It is noticeable that she is beginning to perceive journaling as a tool for reflection, feeling increasingly comfortable writing, "I think I understood the task better". On the eighteenth day, she makes a comparison between the first pages of the journal and the day's page. The conclusion announces, "this exercise allows me to feed my reflections and realize that I don't invest enough time in the course". On the thirty-fourth day of writing, the student writes, "I am gradually thinking about a new and more focused professional project". It is apparent that the relationship with the journal progressed through the questions the student was asking herself about her relationship with life, which resonates with a new career plan that was taking shape. The connection with the journal becomes so important that on March 29, the student announces the end of the





journal, but she continues to write until the April 10 deadline date of the exercise, bidding her journal "goodbye."

Figure 1 – Summary of a student's journal appropriation process



Source: Prepared by the authors

Definitions and questions about implication and self-writing

Implication and engagement

We could observe that most students gradually appropriated the journal. This appropriation can be illustrated by the inclusion of more content and themes that were gradually addressed, by the personal traces (drawings, photographs) that were left along the pages, by the personification of the journal, which gained its own name for some students. This set of findings allows us to defend the benefits of writing of the self-engaged with the other.

Table 1 – Selection of newspaper excerpts: from appropriation to implication

Student	Traces of appropriation of the journal	Traces of implication with writing
AI	"I write and my friends question me about what I write, why do I write? They think that what I do is fake and useless and I explain to them that this was also my starting point, but it is mainly a perceived old idea of the paper!"	"After several weeks, I began to find it easier to write, to take a pen and paper and write whatever came to me. [...] At first, I started writing at night at home [...] then, very quickly, I started writing at any time, [...] even outside the house, I caught myself writing in the notes on my phone. The journal followed me even when I went on vacation."
BI	"I'm not someone who is in the habit of externalizing my thoughts, but I think this work will allow me to do that and help me question myself more and put these thoughts on paper...it's a good thing."	"As soon as I began to understand the purpose of this exercise, I enjoyed writing. I wasn't yet at the stage of taking my journal with me everywhere, but little by little, each time something came up, I immediately thought that





		it would be interesting to write in it when I got home, and that's what I did."
DH	"I've always been the kind of person who asks a lot of questions, but by writing them, I think I may have some answers about myself."	"My journal goes with me wherever I go, it is a test for me. [...] Although this task was very complicated, I think it allowed me to try to put into words what I think, what I will continue to do."
TS	"Today I don't have a class. I really wanted to write. I always wanted to write, especially when I feel sad, it calms me down, comforts me, allows me to express myself."	"As time went on, I started writing daily. I got used to it. [...] When we write something down, we can rethink the action that relates to it and it helps to have another view of things."

Source: Prepared by the authors

The progression of the appropriation of writing puts into relief the notions of engagement and implication. Indeed, when instructions were given, students engaged in the work, seeking to make sense of the practice. Questions at the beginning of the writing process, such as, "What do I have to write? What do I get out of it? How should I do this exercise?", make visible the traces of an exercise of understanding on the part of students, related to participation in the activity, which Bellelle (2014), describes as engagement. In this sense, engagement concerns a search for meaning for something one does, which involves an effort to elucidate what is being done. Since this process lies between over-engagement and disengagement, the analyzed records show that the students remain neither in lack of engagement (disengagement) nor in full adherence to the activity (over-engagement), since the activity seemed complicated to them at first. Maintaining the writing, despite the difficulties, and seeing their progress over time led the students to search for the finding of both a time (dimension of chronological adjustment for the execution of the activity) and a place (dimension of investment in a space that takes shape through the journal) for everyday writing. This process, initially located outside the individual, reverberates and takes root inside him/her, transforming the space-time for the activity into a space-time for him/herself, filled with a meaning specific to the student. From this aspect, we can understand that students move from engagement to implication, understood as an intense commitment, "a commitment of the whole individual" (LE BRETON, 2010, p. 373, our translation).

This space-time for itself from the idea of "totality", evoked by Le Breton (2010), is essential nowadays, in which life in society is immersed in a constant process of acceleration (ROSA, 2013). It is important to remember that "human life, human experience cannot be cut and compartmentalized into autonomous spaces and temporalities impermeable to each other" (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2014, p. 132, our translation). Writing through the "outside-personal" journal can be seen as a moment to encourage a form of implicit questioning: What am I doing here? Why this area? What relationship do I establish between the spheres of my





life? The journal is thus shown to be a tool that students can continue to use and that, in the future, will serve them as a space-time for reflection on professional implications.

One cannot talk about implication without pointing to a paradox that runs through it in contemporary times, as implication can sometimes be considered the cause of burnout at work (MORROW, 1983), implication can also be seen as a "source of motivation, self-efficacy, and ultimately well-being, both physical and psychological" (TRUCHOT, 2006, p. 313, our translation). By writing in the journal, students practice a back-and-forth exercise between acting in the different spaces of life and reflecting on what one does, how one does it, and how it feels to do it, questioning the forms of implication (BELLELLE, 2014). This movement proves to be important in order to avoid the risks of excessive implication (PAILOT, 1996), especially in areas that lead students to graduate in areas in which relational implication with others is strongly present (training, accompaniment and health care).

Because it is characterized by individual and personal work, the writing of an "exterior-personal" journal allows putting into perspective aspects linked to belonging, beliefs, and the development of skills. According to Le Breton, (2015, p. 14, our translation):

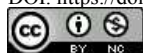
In a society where flexibility, urgency, speed, competition and efficiency are imposed [...] one must, at all times, place oneself in the world, adapt to circumstances, assume one's autonomy, stay on top of things...[where] one must permanently construct oneself, remain mobilized, give meaning to one's life, support one's actions with values.

Thus, keeping up with writing is also a way to negotiate the rhythm of life between acceleration and deceleration (ROSA, 2013). By negotiating their implications and engagements, the individual can manage their life rhythms from a perspective of unity, with a view of themselves as an indivisible being.

Life trajectory and experience

Another aspect that the results showed concerns the questions that students express about the future: whether to continue their studies or enter the job market, which shows the beginning of new chapters in their lives. The elements identified in this respect point to the dilemmas that emerge from the professional engagement, sometimes understood to follow a vocation, sometimes circumscribed to the opportunities offered by the job market.

We understand that this dilemma is born well before the moment we meet the students. It begins to take shape at the end of adolescence, when the educational system imposes a choice of direction and based on this choice, proposes professions. Once the route has been set, the





path is automatically marked out, and that it is up to the student only to follow it to reach his or her goal of becoming a "professional" in a field of knowledge. To perceive the path of one's life in this way is to divide one's existence into compartmentalized and impermeable slices: into paths. In fact, not unrelated to social determinism, a path can be defined as "the set of positions objectively occupied and subjectively experienced in different social phases by an individual over time" (DUBAR, 1998, p. 77, our translation). In this process, there are moments of change, of reorientation and transition, during which the structures of existence are transformed, from a dynamic of adaptation (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2009). Our experiences invite us to discoveries, hesitations, doubts, certainties, etc., both in moments of acceleration and deceleration. It is these 'experimental' lines that will give an outline, a shape, an expression to the professional identity. It is then understood that life is not an accumulation of compartmentalized experiences, but rather an interweaving of moments of continuity, discontinuity, dialogue between different dimensions of life, of connection and tension between various temporalities of existence: it is a trajectory.

According to Delory-Momberger (2009, p. 19, our translation), "the trajectory is thus a site of tension between the unfolding of existence and the individual's ability to act on his or her life and the determinations that weigh upon it." Although the exercise of writing in the diaries was not intended to bring the students face to face with their life trajectories, the fact that they immersed themselves in their daily lives and had time to reflect on their thoughts and actions led the students to build a connection between the events they considered important and the way they were crafted.

The time of writing opened a space for students to look at their lives with distance, which gave them the opportunity to synthesize their experiences and to position themselves both as a teacher and as a learner of self. Thus, the action of writing according to a social, cultural, and historical temporality puts into perspective the permanent work that takes place between lifelong learning and biographical constructions (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2009).

Whether it was in the daily writing or in the writing of the report, at the end of the activity, students developed a biographical work anchored in a space-time that allowed them to explore different dimensions of their lives. The fact that this exercise invited the exploration of daily life as a whole, if they so wished, triggered a process of appropriation of the diversity that is inscribed in the life trajectories of each one, which allows us to understand that the professional identity of a student is progressively constructed, whether through the ordinary or extraordinary issues that cross through daily life.





It seems essential to propose such work at the university, especially at the moment when students are led to define specializations. Valuing the dimensions of formal and informal learning means going against the linear, predictable and observable movement linked to the notion of training path, bringing to the surface the complexity and multidimensionality (GUILLAUME, 2005) that thinking about existence requires.

The journal offered students the opportunity to reflect on their course of their lives and invited them to "transform what life experience seems to bring 'by chance' into acquired experience" (DELORY-MOMBERGER, 2014, p. 137, our translation), so that they learn more about themselves and can build their professional projects and identities more serenely.

Finally, through the activity of writing the report, the students were able to look at the whole of the lived experience and erect new perceptions about the task, seeing themselves at the center of a process of transformation and evolution. Beyond the aspects already mentioned about the complexity of the writing task and the difficulty of putting the ideas on paper, all the students evoked the benefits of writing in the journal and were able to see themselves in different ways and able to: write in the university without being judged; better understand their ways of thinking, of perceiving things and observing their changing points of view; discover the pleasure of writing; feel the important things around them

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it was possible to understand that the writing exercise, as a formative activity, allowed students to find a space-time propitious to give shape to their experiences throughout their university education, especially during the course "writing texts". The activity took shape in their lives, and they gradually translated the meaning of the activity presented at the beginning of the course into personal meaning during their life trajectories. The writing exercise involved the students in a reflective and transformative process of lived experiences into acquired experiences. This space of biographical expression, different from other writing spaces traditionally offered at the university, positions the student in a process of decompartmentalization of life spheres, allowing them to create connections between their different experiences and inviting them to think of their professional projects as real-life projects.

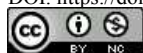
Although the writing exercise was experienced in a difficult and complicated way, the final reports showed that the students were able to overcome their initial difficulties and that



this activity can foster the exploration of writing as a means of self-construction throughout their college career.

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