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## Writing as teacher education

### A escrita como formação de professores

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**Writing as teacher education****Abstract**

This paper is inviting the teacher to describe everyday teaching. The teacher's point of view is used to investigate activities that evolve through interaction with existing conditions and the adjustments teachers successfully adopt. Writing is best research tool for investigating experience: you can attribute strong heuristic capabilities to the kind of writing that enables actions to be woven together

**Keywords:** Everyday. Teaching. Learning.

**A escrita como formação de professores****Resumo**

Este trabalho é um convite aos professores, para que estes descreveram o ensino de todos os dias. O ponto de vista do professor é usado para investigar as atividades que se desenvolvem através da interação com as condições existentes e as adaptações que professores fazem com sucesso. A escrita é melhor ferramenta de pesquisa para investigar a experiência: você pode atribuir capacidades heurísticas fortes para o tipo de escrita que permite ações a serem tecidas em conjunto.

**Palavras-chave**

Cotidiano. Ensino. Aprendizado.

**The *topos* of training is where all issues concerning research and teachers are concentrated.**

Teacher learning can no longer, or *not only*, be acquired through theory, even when that theory is profound and long lasting, but *also* and above all through apprenticeship, internship, training, or however one decides to call it.

The conviction needs to be revised that there's nothing more practical than 'good theory', whereby training is entrusted to top down transmission and assimilation: the established rules of the profession no longer unquestionably provide the general and legitimate framework for what should or should not be done in class, and how and why to do it.

It is what we have called the *legenda intellettualistica* (legend of the intellect) (Laneve, 2005), whereby *practical experience* is simply application of an idea or a decision that has been taken previously in theoretical terms. Sometimes abstract concepts of educational practices are even proposed, despite the shared idea of the irrelevance in teacher learning (for the student too – Laneve, 2011) of mere theories *alone*. According to this concept the teacher is seen as the person that puts into practice solutions offered by the researcher or the scholar who has produced them.

The excessive emphasis on theory at the expense of practice, which is still considered only as an opportunity for application of theories, and the lack of preparation for dealing with the typical complexity of real school situations, the difference, therefore, between *theoretical training* and *real practice*, could cause in future teachers what is referred to by various scholars as reality shocks, transition shocks, or *choc de la pratique*. All these phenomena are familiar to many young teachers.

These curricula are built around the implicit theory of teacher education as injection: i.e. transmission of knowledge and skills offered on university courses; and then, during apprenticeship (still all too often seen as different and separate from the theory acquired during lessons) transmission of what derives from the combination of the trainees' practical teaching experience and the practical wisdom of the educators.

This is in sharp contrast with the so-called 'major' professions, of doctors, engineers or lawyers who are required to engage daily in situations that may appear routine (applying an existing solution that is part of a standard repertoire) but in fact represent contexts that need special and often unexpected treatment: multiplicity of variables to consider, less possibility of referring to past experiences, the very complexity of the environment etc. Thus, for example, in the legal field one may have to cope with changing and unpredictable case law; it is precisely the advantage of jurisprudence that it produces ad hoc solutions and considers the behaviour of those applying a textbook answer without proper discernment to be unprofessional. On a daily basis these professions (almost all professions) face the issue of a differential diagnosis for the vast majority of cases and situations.

As a result, one of the major difficulties in managing teaching-learning processes is theming and designing learning paths which do not deal with abstract and sometimes nebulous concepts but *contextualized work experience*. Which is why analysis of actual practice represents the new direction in education research.

### ***Towards dual polarity***

The aim here is to stress the need for a space where the two poles of training can interact: *conjunction* rather than *disjunction: theory and practice, thinking and doing, reflecting and acting*.

Efficient and logical *fare scuola* (educating and being a teacher) assumes a mixture of theoretical *knowledge* and practice (derived from *experience*), using real educational scenarios for reference. This means going beyond the *technical-applicative model*, in which *practice* has a secondary and subordinate role to the *theory* taught at university; just as it signifies reaching beyond the *artisanal* model of the *apprentice*, which favours the kind of ‘doing’ that derives from tangible experience, placing *theoretical knowledge* in the background.

We need then to search constantly for that uneasy balance between *theory* and *practice*, and not to rely on formulas inspired by customary rationality, or rather total control over context. There is increasing epistemological awareness of the actual processes that activate subjects in-situation when they face a problem: usually the most effective behaviour is far removed from the rules prescribed by decision-making analysis and instead successful when sensitive to internal culture and context.

### ***The value of knowledge born from practice***

It can be defined as that compound system of knowledge about in-situation observation, drills conducted in the field, and so on. It, however, has little educational value unless analysed, reflected upon, discussed after the event, and modified during the course, for example, of a workshop that provides the opportunity for explanations, clarifications, exchanges and therefore theoretical contributions aimed at generating practical knowhow, which implies the ability to analyse a situation, how to intervene in it, alone and with colleagues, in a particular context, and so on.

A research movement on knowledge born from action is one of the consequences of the economic and social crisis that began in the Seventies: this emphasised the necessity to mobilise the cognitive and emotional resources of employees to meet the challenges of our time, for example globalisation. This encouraged a different approach to work and training and led to the emergence of training methods related to situations and actions at work, the aim of which were to acquire but also to produce knowledge, although this was hardly or not at all officialised. Based on these guidelines, the research was directed at skills produced in work situations in a wide range of fields (ergonomics,

psychology and didactics) (Huber, Chautard, 2001). Thus, in addition to academic knowledge, a place was made for knowledge directly generated by action.

### ***Towards a dynamically integrated model***

It is ultimately a matter of looking to a *training model* based not on juxtaposition or alternation so much as *flexible expression*, costly in terms of energy and intellectual and moral resources rather than material ones. Hence going beyond the paradigm of application (from theory to practice, from study to action, from knowing to doing) in favour of a training based on theory/practice according to *ways, timing* and *needs* related both to the actors (teachers and students) and situations.

Compared to simply talking, writing (Richardson, 2000), with its “isochronic and isomorphic regularity” (Portelli, 2007), allows experience to be formalised, creating a transition *from shadows to concepts* (Laneve, 1997), in other words distancing, cognitive processing and reconsideration of emotions: a combination devised to spotlight training processes and based specifically on memory. In this sense, it proves a more refined device for producing/processing knowledge.

Writing itself is an act of detachment, of recommencement and restructuring, and of taking care of oneself. The very act of writing implies thinking and reflecting, explaining inner turmoil, defining the outline of your own learning path.

Thoughts on a page are primarily intended as a way of using daily experience for research to which a young person gives new meanings that become part of their growth and development, both on a professional level and personally.

It is writing that first of all means learning to think about one’s own research methods, not only after or only beforehand, but also within the action itself: it is its objectification.

It is the ‘pen’ that, through self-knowledge, gives shape to one’s own learning.

### ***Pre-service training/learning as writing about the self***

Defined simply as “consumers” of *pret-à-former* packages teachers are not given the skills required to do their job. Formal professional rules, established *a priori*, no longer necessarily provide general and pertinent frameworks for *what should* or *should not be done*, and *how and when to do it*.

Conversely, other perspectives open up, outlining training curricula based on a narrative approach to teacher training built around teacher education as reconstruction, a process of reworking and reflecting on what happens when you are experiencing the training curriculum. The profound significance of this second perspective is the fact that “at every moment of our lives, spent in the classroom or not, our whole person is there: our past is there” (Clandinin, Connelly, 1994).

The mental mechanism that writing about yourself sets in motion therefore becomes a very useful device because it triggers processes of self-analysis, introspection and critical review, allowing you to retrace your personal history and note the significant elements that have characterised it in different ways.

In the view of Gomez and Hostein, this is why it represents “*le prétexte et la trace d'un processus d'acquisition de la professionnalité enseignante, identifiée au praticien réflexif de Schön*” (Gomez, Hostein, 1996). On the other hand, “*L'ecole de la vie, c'est-à-dire le vécu et la réflexion su ce vécu, contribue largement à former, déformer, transformer les adultes*” (Courtois, 1995).

Therefore, not educational curricula that ignore the lives of future teachers, but ones aimed at welcoming student teachers to talk about and re-tell experiences during their courses. “[...] we – state Clandinin and Connelly (1994, 149) – recognize that student teachers bring their own life stories, stories they have experienced but rarely tell, to create narrative texts that become a way of taking charge of their lives [...] knowledge born from the experience that is *incorporated* in them as people and that translates into action in their classroom practices and lives”.

Experiential training arose during the seventies and eighties where, thanks to the development of *continuing education*, the dominant model of mere transmission of knowledge and cultural capital became outdated. It is an act of self-training that, as such, should be fostered and expanded, made to become the new paradigm of contemporary education: deconstructing and reconstructing, always highlighting the problematic nature in the development of every profession which is renewed by being reconsidered (Alberici, 2000). This current direction of professionalism in education, which is becoming more and more central in society today, meets the need for a continuing education that is part of the ‘for life’ project. A conscious, critical and responsible professionalism is acquired not so much through study or by acquisition of knowledge of methodology and subject matter but rather through constantly and critically reviewing real experience, actions taken, the knowledge gained from such experiences.

In short: writing about themselves (*epimeleía heautoû*) stimulates – and therefore gets the young teacher to:

- cultivate thoughtfulness and introspective slowness;
- listen to themselves so as to be able to listen to the other (afterwards the student), although the process is not only unidirectional;
- through the events consciously, critically, openly and accountably form *a sense*;
- give the training process a personal goal, a rational view.

A few briefly outlined objectives:

- discover, learn and strengthen motivation levels;
- sharpen awareness of the role of emotions in the workplace;

- provide new perspectives for understanding your own needs and then those of colleagues and, therefore, students;
- help decrease the perception of stress;
- increase the capacity to listen to and understand others.

Ultimately make training time a time for self-care, for a search for the self, for the possibility of self-determination, for choosing and choosing yourself, for belonging to yourself.

***A real account of 'fare scuola' i.e. educating and being a teacher, not excess paperwork***

To face their daily teaching tasks teachers use knowledge – or rather 'knowhow' – working knowledge that has been patiently earned, and is very often far more comprehensive than abstract theory.

Filled with knowledge and generative of new knowledge, professional experience often remains in silence, each teacher keeping it for him or herself. Usually hesitant and sometimes diffident in speaking, but especially when writing their actual practices, the teacher does not imagine these experiences to be considered worthy of being read by others and is sometimes surprised to discover that what they actually did and experienced at school might be of interest to others. Often they are held back by an indistinct concern about the contents of the syllabus, exam results, or about not knowing how to deal with questions that are interpreted as 'assignments'. Speaking means exposing yourself: there is generally a fear of being judged at school, of being fixed on a point of the scale ranging from 'right' to 'wrong': teachers are not in the habit of being accountable to others for their actions.

Therefore, usually no trace remains of this live and very valuable knowledge; only the bureaucracy and the formal rules of document writing persist, and as a result writing about the real life of the school is often flat, weak and banal and does not describe at all *what teachers actually do*, or try to do: their doubts and uncertainties, and whatever else. Without even mentioning the risk of the forced and rampant objectivisation, absolute reification, that reduces the opportunity for teacher subjectivity and is exemplified by the current demands of the Ministry for paperwork (minutes, syllabi, evaluation sheets).

Hence the need for an extensive renewal of teachers' written work, urging them to write about *their professional self* (work, problems, successes), contributing, naturally enough, to in-service training, but above all to shifting the traditional bureaucratic communications (proceedings of meetings, minutes, syllabi and curricular modifications, student material, letters to families, routine paperwork) away from amorphous, trite and stereotyped writing. It means starting – or even just attempting to start – a renewal process that prevents the paperwork surrounding *fare scuola* from being reduced to automatism and routine inscribing.

In comparison to paperwork born from bureaucracy, working writing highlights what would otherwise remain hidden or, even worse, be lost.

So what is needed is a research project intended to get teachers to talk of their teaching habits, of ‘what they do when they teach’: how they actually behave during the course of their work, in real situations in the classroom.

Obviously *only* the telling of actions is not enough, nor simply the *sense of fare scuola*. If the question is to say ‘what was done’ by each teacher, it is also to say ‘how’ and ‘why’ it was done: to make the paradigm of reference and the theory clear, to indicate the reasons for certain choices, motivate and justify the decision.

So: not writing *on* teaching (developing a ‘theory’ of the learning action), but writing *about* your teaching: saying how you produce or try to produce learning. Therefore describing:

- the actual work that takes place step by step in the execution of a task (explanation, support, questioning, appreciation, rebuke, evaluation);
- the success or failure of teaching depends on the adequacy of the project/syllabus, the scheme mapped out before starting; it depends above all on a progression of subsequent steps, where each result affects, as a constraint and as a resource, the very achievement of the next stage and so on, even allowing (but also, often, compromising) the continuation of the educational project as a whole;
- the no less important dependence of each act of teaching on the material, social and cultural contingencies in which it is made;
- the use of the circumstances in which you are to act in an educationally smart way;
- the strategies that each of us develops to address educational problems;
- the actual practices and theories that support them, working theories developed over time and continually rechecked.

Its purpose is, in short, to bring out teaching expertise. And this entails promoting a more analytical examination of professional experience.

Writing about educational practices means illuminating working experience in both directions: it means organising temporally the continuous stream of what is happening or what has happened: the thoughts of the teacher, school life, what was and what can be.

This is precisely why teachers should be encouraged to write about themselves, their work, their difficulties, successes, decisions and moments of weakness.

It means encouraging the habit of retrospection-introspection, inducing inner monologues and dialogues, favouring critical reflection and suspension of judgment (which uses various forms of thought to analyse-resynthesise positions, statements, ideas) to encourage metacognition by analogue processing, and so on.



The educational value, the pedagogical scope of non-bureaucratic professional writing is justified, ultimately, for these reasons: because it helps the professional take charge of themselves; because it frees you from prejudice; because it enables you to think freely; and especially because it defines a writing made of listening and dialogue, but also of self-transcendence and intentionality, a positive outlook on the future, renovation and interior re-birth; and, finally, because it encourages the pleasure of producing knowledge first-hand from your own professional experience.

In this light, even school websites, e-mails, comments and personal or class blogs can take on a new significance.

It is important to make writing time a time freed up for self-care, for a search for the self, for – as repeatedly stated – belongingness and for being with others.

### ***Teacher writing for study***

The most advanced research on teaching in Italy is becoming increasingly focused on the ordinary activities of everyday teaching life (see the work of Damiano, Laneve and Mortari): the object is to formalise the theories (implicit) in professional teaching practice.

Analysing educational practices<sup>1</sup> is an interesting way of studying and verifying actual behaviour in an organised system such as school. This methodology allows us to understand both the way the rules work in practice and the procedures put in place by the actors (teachers and pupils) to achieve the required results. The focus of study is therefore the daily work of teachers (actions, activities, routines) but also the gestures and intentions that make up the interaction, speaking and the many ways of behaving, even minimal and seemingly irrelevant ones, expressed by the pupils.

Latent production of *practical knowledge* by school workers has for some time been claiming its role as the *main source* of Teaching (Bolster, 1983), in the sense of teaching theory (Laneve, 2011).

Only recently have epistemologists stopped considering it unreliable or even despicable to rely on *experience*, seeing it instead a source of scientific inquiry. Helping build teaching knowledge through the oral or written experiences of teachers may therefore be regarded as perfectly in line with the most advanced trends in contemporary epistemology.

The method proposed here is that of inviting the teacher to describe everyday teaching, from the ‘teacher up-front’ lesson to the conversation-dialogue, from explanation to oral test, from evaluation to assignment (to the students), and so on, not only in oral form (through interviews, focus groups, short stories), but especially in the written one (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002). The teacher’s point of

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<sup>1</sup> Comprising a large group of Italian scholars – from the Universities of Bari, Parma, Turin, Verona, Milano Bicocca, Val d’Aosta, Perugia, Macerata, Naples-Suor Orsola Benincasa, Palermo, Messina –, led by Cosimo Laneve and Elio Damiano, l’Apred (Analysis of Educational Practices) aims to contribute to *teaching knowledge* by studying education and coordinating studies that will provide an Italian way of understanding educational practice (Laneve, Day, 2011).

view is used to investigate activities that evolve through interaction with existing conditions and the adjustments teachers successfully adopt.

Writing is best research tool for investigating experience: you can attribute strong heuristic capabilities to the kind of writing that enables actions to be woven together.

A form of rational inquiry, therefore, carried out in cooperation with teachers considered as source material. Their professional lives are ideas to be investigated in a climate of mutual trust: the stories told are complex and open to interpretation. It is however important for researchers and teachers to share the hope that this type of research may ultimately improve training and policies.

The most recent educational research attributes a significant cognitive value to the experience of those in the teaching profession and calls for its production in narrative form; it also helps identify themes and categories that emerge from their stories.

In this regard Zembylas (2003) adds: “the narrative method offers an interpretative reconstruction of parts of people’s lives. Studying narrative has in this way become an important means for understanding teachers; i.e. teachers researching themselves, their own situations, the children, subjects, teaching and learning”.

It is necessary to urge teachers to open up to a reflection on how writing can provide a deeper insight into their profession. This is why their ideas should be written down and read: ideas are born from discussion and lead to further improvement. Not forgetting of course that anyone who describes themselves professionally usually does so admiringly, sometimes even over complimentarily. They do everything to seem pure, kind and inspiring of positive emotions: any honest writer knows just how truthful they have actually been.

The symbolic relapse of repeated bureaucratic paperwork is significant: asking teachers to write down what they do and their daily knowledge means recognising their role as privileged collaborators in education research and therefore as sources of teaching knowledge and no longer as mere executors. This allows the researcher to really get inside the teacher's work and thus inside the research. Understanding what teachers do means reading their experiences in the field, or rather what they have written about them.

The epistemological legitimacy of qualitative empirical research on educational practices does not consist in claiming to ‘objectively’ grasp the practice and evaluate it, but in the openness with which researchers approach the experience of the practitioners.

And finally: making teachers write means providing young teachers with knowledge capital. The education of young people requires practical accounts rather than theoretical, abstract books.

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