

WRITING ONE'S OWN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE BEYOND "STOLEN" TIME, TOWARDS A QUALIFIED, UN-BUREAUCRATIZED WRITING TIME

Cosimo Laneve, Loredana Perla, Laura Agrati¹

ABSTRACT

This article describes the implementation and the outcome of the first stage of an investigation started in May 2006, being carried out by a research team² of General Education in 130 primary and secondary schools in Apulia.

The main objective is to *make people aware of the training outcome, in terms of professionalization, of the writing practices of the teachers*. The basic hypothesis is that the teachers make the most, both from a private and a professional point of view, of the practice of spontaneous writing inasmuch as it lets them express their intentionalities and rework thoughtfully all critical and emotional events influencing the management of their work.

Thanks to a qualitative approach and several cross-analysis, the teachers' writing practices are being taken into account: both the formal documents requested by the school ("*bureaucratic writings*") and the written essays the teachers carry out autonomously to support their work ("*un-bureaucratic writing*") are included.

This research runs along three heuristic guidelines:

- exploration of the forms and modes of "bureaucratized" writing to seize any possible trace of subjectivity;
- investigation of the current "non bureaucratic" writing practices, the forms and modes of which will have to be detected;
- socialization of the already existing un-bureaucratic practices and testing of more useful forms and modes to the vocational development.

0. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to inquire into the professional expertise of the teacher's writing. Writing is a fundamental demand of the educational profession and, if exercised with awareness, in due time, after a long training, it can become a "spontaneous activity", so that, without falling into mimicry, words will successfully narrate what the writer has at heart, the things he has experienced, without making them trivial.

1. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING: FEELINGS IN EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONS

The narration of the emotional experiences enhances the affective-relational capabilities because it makes them "resources", whereas the idea of professionalism as necessarily neutral and impersonal considers them "obstacles".

Autobiographical writing responds to the demand to promote and to strengthen the assumption of the professional performance in one's emotional life; it is a practice that recovers the subject and his/her "emotional tones"

¹ Full Professor of General Didactics; Associated Professor of General Didactics; Ph.D. in Education.

² Research components: Cosimo Laneve, Professor of General Didactics; Linda Cassibba, Professor of Developmental Psychology; Giuseppe Moro, Professor of Sociology of Education; Riccardo Pagano, Professor of General Pedagogy; Ernesto Toma, Professor of Statistics; Loredana Perla, Professor of General Didactics; Chiara Gemma, Professor of General Didactics; Margherita Fusello, Professor of General Didactics; Serafina Pastore, ph. doctor, Planning and evaluation of formative processes; Laura Sara Agrati, ph. doctor, Planning and evaluation of formative processes.

in the professional experiences connected to the educational work. At the same time, it opens spaces of awareness and horizons of shared humanity.

Moreover, the writing practice endows the teachers with points of view which enable her/him to go beyond the obvious and standardized gestures of everyday routine, determining, on the contrary, *meaningful* actions.

Lastly, the drive to authenticity inhering this type of writing enhances innovation in professions, writings, actions and in the modalities of the educational encounter.

It implies writing down not only what one has accomplished, but also what s/he has thought worth while doing and has succeeded in accomplishing and what has thought worth while, but has not accomplished.

It does not simply mean to acknowledge scientific dignity to the "narrative inquiry", that is the theory according to which education, in being an experiential process, can be narrated: in order to narrate the educational practice it is necessary not only to reconstruct the phases of the epistemic process, but also the mental procedures and the emotional dynamics that have shaped such epistemic act. In other words: in order to relate his/her educational experience, the teacher must tell what s/he does, what s/he thinks, and what s/he feels.

As a matter of fact, though, even if the autobiographical and memorial practice is warmly encouraged, the subject who is going to write very often meets several difficulties, and faces inside resistances and outside expectations.

It is therefore useful to articulate the requirements necessary to consider the writing act as an unique occasion to give form to the intentions, to work in calm on what has been glimpsed through the fog of the perceptive confusion, of the emotional bombing in the professional complexity.

Only after overcoming the barrier of distrust and the feelings of inadequacy towards the act of writing, it is possible to succeed in measuring the transformative potentialities and the strength resulting from giving order to the professional experiences.

2. THE FORMATIVE DIMENSION OF THE REFLEXIVE PRACTICE: PROFESSIONAL WRITING AND EDUCATIONAL EVALUATIVE RESPONSIBILITY.

The teacher who writes about the people with whom/ for whom s/he works (case-studies, observations, reports for customers, etc.), or keeps a "logbook" on the class progress or on a single student's results, or who fills in a portfolio, is not doing something "beside" or "more" than the usual educational work, but something which inheres the educational praxis, i.e. the way the teacher cares for his/her disciples: writing can have positive or bad effects, it can give hope or destroy hope; it can improve or ruin relationships, it can arouse an interest or forward a refusal.

The choice of words is one of the skills required in the educational professions, and feeling responsibility for the words pertains to the code of ethics of professions.

As the project objective is to analyze a series of writing practices used by teachers, it is necessary to focus on the following aspects:

- a) Bureaucratized writing times³
- b) Un-bureaucratized writing times
- c) Bureaucratized writing forms⁴
- d) Un-bureaucratized writing forms
- e) Bureaucratized writing procedures⁵
- f) Un-bureaucratized writing procedures

METHODOLOGY

The work will proceed along three heuristic guidelines:

The first step requires a recognition of the forms and procedures of "bureaucratized" writing (through a descriptive itinerary that confirms the thesis of the "stolen time").

The second guideline requires from us an investigation of the practices activated in "un-bureaucratized" writing acts: we will track down procedures and forms.

The third one concerns on the one hand the already "widespread" socialization of un- bureaucratic practices, and on the other hand the experimentation (with the help of experts) of more conscious forms and procedures functional to professional development.

FIRST PHASE

TYPOLOGIES EXAMINATED

Educative offer plan

³ By *bureaucratic writing* we mean the texts the teachers are asked for by the institution to formally describe and give a detailed report of their activities. By *un-bureaucratic writing* we refer to auto-reflexive texts.

⁴ Textual typologies.

⁵ Editing.

Final disciplinary reports

Tutors' report for newly-enrolled teachers

Students' assessment records

Plans to widen the educative offer

Educational programming and minutes of class councils' meetings

Minutes of the pedagogic team

Programming disciplinary measures

ANALYSIS OF THE BUREAUCRATIC WRITINGS

We have taken into account 30 schools, stratified for institutional, socio-economic and cultural characteristics.

The selection has been made considering the following factors:

- historico-geographical;
- socio-economical;
- innovation;
- willingness to contribute to the research.

The choice has therefore fallen on:

- 1) the schools that, although not homogeneous, present the different facets of what is meant by "school action". They, not by chance, belong to different orders (primary school, secondary school and high school), and to different geographical and social realities (the provinces of Taranto, Brindisi and Bari).
- 2) The schools that, following the analysis of the results of the pilot questionnaire administered to the school staff, have showed a true interest for the research work "without yielding to the flattery of the image"⁶. This aspect has allowed the team to take on the role of active partners in the research progression.

⁶ Laneve, C., (2006) *Analisi delle pratiche educative. Metodologie e risultanze della ricerca*. Brescia, La Scuola, 8.

In this first phase of the survey, a series of "bureaucratic"⁷ writings have been analyzed in the attempt to retrieve *traces* of the "subjectivity" of the recording teacher-writer. We have taken into account different typologies: disciplinary measures, tutors' final report for newly-enrolled teachers, disciplinary registers, assessment portfolio, registers for optional activities/workshops, registers of the meetings of the teaching staff, project proposals for extra-curricular activities.

As anyone can see, these typologies of writings belong to the *micro* level of the teaching activity, i.e. they concern the classroom didactics and just in one case - the Educative offer plan- the school didactics.

We have carried out two levels of reading: individual and *in tandem*. The documents have been divided among the researchers; at first each researcher has made an individual reading of his/her material; in a second time we have passed on to a reading "in tandem" of the material in order to compare the mutual observations.

At the end of the analytical reading, we have tried to formalize (*post-hoc*) the *traces of subjectivity* we have retrieved in the analysis through a series of indicators with connected describers.

Synthetic chart of the indicators and the describers emerged by the survey of the documents

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Describers</i>
The writer's position	Use and frequency of the first person Meta- reflexive references (to the self, to one's role)

⁷ For example, in examining the minutes of the meeting of a Class Council (secondary school, May 2006), we detected a "non-standard" expression in the canonical lexicon (*the offer, will of course be free*): direct form in a context that required an indirect and impersonal register and, above all, the presence of the future verb form in a context up to then at the present form (as it is usual in this typology of writing).

In another case, the minuter shifts from indirect discourse (typical of the minutes) to a direct form, usually chosen to express personal considerations and not to record a formal meeting. In this case, we can subsume that the minuter is not conforming to the recorder's role, but tends to take on the teacher role, and so writes down personal considerations.

General characteristics of the examined writings:

- Annual final disciplinary reports:

Usually there is a narrative part – organized around themes, in which the writer describes the general situation of the class– and a more schematic part in which s/he exposes the objectives and procedures pursued by the Class council. We are faced with impersonal form, descriptive vocabulary, present or past perfect verbal times, improper expressions taken from informal language (ex.: "*s/he doesn't shin eat commitment*", "the winning card", "turning away from school").

- Final report – English:

The phases of the planning have been completely reported though tree flow-charts and the parts on the acquired skills in the form of a word list. It is not possible to find traces of the writer's subjectivity because the form is extremely impersonal.

- Final report – Arts

The form is impersonal and the vocabulary is typically scholastic (level range, educational targets, educative and didacting planning). There are no elements which can help to individualize the writer's personality.

- Final report - Sciences.

The topics are separated by paragraphs and their articulation is stressed by means of underlined words and different printing types. The narrative is impersonal, the verbal form is in the past time, the vocabulary is typical of the disciplinary subject. Even in this case, because of extreme formalization, it is impossible to find elements traceable to the writer's subjectivity.

From the analysis and the comparison of the materials (5 final reports and 2 meeting minutes) it is clear that in bureaucratic writing there is a standard model which moulds the minuter's writing.

3 reports out of 5 have organized the matters (composition of the class, educational actions) in a very similar way, have used a lexicon typical of the didactic "know how" and made use of the descriptive and impersonal form, so that the complete absence of *subjectifying* elements clearly emerges. However, in some of the bureaucratic writings, it was possible to retrieve markers of the writer's personality such as register shifting, misuse of the didactic and even of the colloquial register.

	<p>Changes of register</p> <p>Presence of judgments of value</p> <p>Number of general statements, references to lived experiences, expressions of evaluation and self-evaluation</p>
Editing/narrative choices	<p>Suitability of the chosen textual typology if compared to the written contents</p> <p>Form: argumentative, discursive, with notable swerves from the canonical patterns.</p> <p>Variations of typographical characters (boldfaced, underlined, etc.)</p>
Language	<p>Variety of the lexicon (essential, rich, supple, not stereotyped).</p> <p>Presence of typical expressions of the educative language</p> <p>Register: colloquial, courtly, etc.</p> <p>Use of the verb form (descriptive past and present, future, etc.) and swerves from the verbal form asked for from the chosen textual typology</p>
Educational dimension	<p>References to values, or to the sense of the choices made in the pedagogic activity</p> <p>Use of proper names</p> <p>Specific references to single persons and not general references to classes</p>
Content	<p>Preponderance of references to the epistemological-disciplinary level over the educational-didactic level.</p> <p>Integration of the ministerial prescriptive contents with other sources</p>

Of the 320 analyzed documents, 180 contained elements which were useful for our investigation.

The large/small amount of *traces of subjectivity* depended essentially on the analyzed typology. The typologies of writings that mostly express the subjectivity of the writer are the final report of enrolment, the registers on the optional activities/workshops, the registers of the meetings of the pedagogic team, the project proposals concerning extracurricular activities.

The typology that has presented the greatest evidence of subjective aspects, has been the final report of enrolment. We have noticed, none the less, that also in the “more” bureaucratic typologies it is possible to retrieve elements of *personalization*, above all at :

- *lexical level*,
- *editing/narrative style*
- *educational bendings* of the contents.

We have noticed, in fact, that when a typology does not have a standard model of reference (as for the assessment records), there is a rich variety in the organization and presentation of the contents. The way according to which the document (by means of paragraphs, diagrams, charts, etc.) has been worked out, "says a lot, even if in an indirect way, of the writer" (in this case the "publisher!"). We have in mind the case of a mathematics report completely written down thanks to unexpected and original diagrams of tree flow.

In the disciplinary registers and in the portfolio of skills, we have read a sort of "crystallization" in the writing act, maybe because, we suppose, the writer tends to satisfy the receivers' expectations (they can be parents, executives, colleagues) and so s/he does not faithfully represent reality as actually lived and acted on. The teacher chooses to stick to presumed "ideal-types" of writing that are expressed in essential forms and in a stereotyped lexicon. In these typologies of writings, the *subjectivity* generally "blurs" in the sheer impersonal report of routine educational activity. But, we must add, even in these cases, here and there the *tension* towards a personalization in the writing emerges notwithstanding.

When the contents of the writing are concerned with lived, acted upon experiences (highlighting of the crucial episodes of the scholastic year, new institutional experiences as the workshops or the extra-curricular projects) the narrative element prevails and, sometimes, the writing takes on the shape of a tale.

Second phase

Writing of oneself, beyond "lost" time

Here are listed the steps heading towards this kind of writing. The following phases are steeped in the conviction that it is meaningful to accord scientific dignity to the narrative inquire, that is to the theory according to which teaching, in being an experiential activity, can be narrated.

Reconstruction of memories: from the recollections of the students to family memories up to that thesaurus of didactic work, an irreplaceable wealth, through which the teacher can reconstruct his/her own professional biography made not only of successes, but also of failures, from which, nonetheless, s/he has learned something.

Of course it is impossible to recollect this thesaurus as a whole, how the teacher earned it and who helped out. The teacher's thought is not cut off from the situation, on the contrary, it is inside the situation, incorporated in action itself: ideation takes shape in the doing.

Explicitation of the implicit knowledges: this is strictly linked to the previous step. It has to do with the knowledge the teacher acquires just because of his/her doing, and not through concepts, plus the memory of other actions, mental images, metaphors. It is “lived thought” which has to do with “critical incidents” concerning a specific circumstance, which can be narrated, showed, in an anecdotal form.

In other words, it has to do with the knowledge the experts have on "how to make things", with problem-solving skills, and with the ability to elaborate judgments on the basis of experience. It contains ephemeral elements as well, such as personal opinions, intentions and points of view: in sum, it's a very personalized knowledge, difficult to formalize, and, as such, it is difficult to communicate to others. As Polany writes: "we can know more that we can tell".

And yet, this kind of knowledge is the foundation of everyday act and it has the characteristic of being contextual, i.e. it is related to a specific setting. It is the result of social construction, of exchanges, contaminations, discussions, practices of elaboration⁸. It is worth while making the distinction – which pertains the field of knowledge – between *cognitive dimension* (paradigms, mental patterns, representations) and *technical dimension* (that kind of know-how, expertise, applied to a specific context and related to experience, which cannot be conveyed through traditional education).

Expression of the beliefs and interpretations produced by the didactic practice: we know very little about the teacher's beliefs and knowledges as, for example, the beliefs about the disciplines one developed while s/he was a student. This implies the “colour” of one's emotional response to the subject one teaches on the basis of the satisfactions s/he received, as a student, from the more or less rewarding relationship with his/her teachers: clearly, the ways one experienced the discipline become predictive factors of the way the student will teach that subject once s/he becomes teacher.

These not much discussed and widely implicit conceptions can largely influence the cognitive, metacognitive and operational processes which are activated in the teaching⁹: “naïve” ideas, spontaneous conceptions, incautious thinking.

A good training should help teachers to make their beliefs accessible and to facilitate an examination of and a change in the direction of alternative "beliefs".

Expression of the teacher's intentionality in a class situation : how and where we direct our intentionality when we perceive the class has a strong need to which we must respond (for example: correct serious grammatical mistakes).

⁸ A. S. Reber writes about “implicit learning” as something almost automatic, independent from subjective consciousness. Reber, A.S. (1993). *Implicit Learning and Tacit Knowledge: An Essay on Cognitive Unconscious*, Oxford New York: Uni.Press.

⁹ Cf. Abelson, R.P. (1979). Differences between Belief and Knowledge Systems. *Cognitive Science*, 3, 355-366. Nespor, J. (1987). The Role of Beliefs in the Practice of Teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19 (4), 317-328.

*Write the unforeseen*¹⁰

Narration of one's own aptitude to "bricolage", that is of one's own "didactic of common sense".

Nowadays we are very aware of the processes the subjects activate when they have to cope with a situation, that is when they have to solve a problem or, as we said a few lines before, handle the unforeseen: usually, efficacious actions are quite far from the "canonical" rules prescribed by the decision-making analysis; on the contrary, they become effective when they are conscious of the inside culture related to the context, integrated between action and reflection. As E. Morin wrote: "our teaching is aimed at the curriculum, whereas life asks for strategy and, if possible, serendipity and art. To prepare ourselves to the times of incertitude, it is necessary a reversal of conception"¹¹.

Of course we have in mind competences which are not juxtaposed to the disciplinary knowledge, but it is the knowledge of the subject we are teaching that shines through schemes of actions and repertoires of strategies to be activated in real time in the forms of the "strategic improvisation", Tochon speaks of¹².

Reconstruction of one's own performance and decisions "inside" the teaching act: this implies both what one has done and what one has not done; what one planned to do and, for several reasons, s/he did not accomplish, etc.

Hence, it is necessary:

To report personal failures, defeats, etc.

To express personal emotions: tell what one really cares about without triviality; what one feels and what one fears: it could be interesting to analyze the role of the fear in innovation, for example.

To remember both cooperation offered by colleagues and obstacles.

To recognize the determining role of the context.

And consequently, it must be avoided the kind of training which may become context-free .

¹⁰ Huber, M., Chautard, P. (2001). *Les savoirs cachés des enseignantes*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

¹¹ Morin, E. (2000). *La testa ben fatta*. tr.it. Milano, R. Cortina, 63.

¹² Tochon, F.V. (1993). *L'enseignant expert*. Paris, Nathan.

To write on the positive or negative function of the school manager.

To make explicit the dark side of didactics.

It is worth while to make the school work known not only because of efficacious, rational management, but also unveil its dark repressed side: the shadowy areas, the dark corners (anxieties, fears, expectations, so that a "clinic" of the school can be elaborated¹³.

We can no longer overlook how the unconscious part of teaching is often an obstacle to awareness.

To experiment an estrangement from the usual practice.

In literature, estrangement is a process of composition which aims at producing a new unusual perception of an already known reality, by means of the modification of the expressive techniques and the deformation of language automatisms.

Russian formalists, through estrangement, discovered a means to disperse perceptive automatisms and so they attributed to criticism, but also to art, the function of activating "le dépaysement". Estrangement is the "displacement of the gaze" in order to produce a new unexpected object: it implies a transformation of the perception of oneself and of the world (Marco Aurelio); of the social world (Montaigne, Voltaire, Tolstoj); of the visible world (Proust). It is "a means to go beyond appearances and reach a deeper understanding of reality"¹⁴.

The analysis of the estrangement procedure, of dépaysement, shows how this exercise allows us to un-learn and then learn again, to go beyond our unconscious automatisms in order to acquire a different perspective. The changes of points of view are, very often, moments of estrangement. Tolstoj learned from Voltaire the recourse to the estrangement technique as a delegitimizing device at every level: political, social, religious.

Both for Marco Aurelio and for Tolstoj, "to reach things" meant "to free oneself from fake ideas and representations"¹⁵.

By proceeding in this way:

Practices become ideas;

Experiences become conceptions;

¹³ Cf. Quaglino, P.G. (2004). *La vita organizzativa*. Milano, R. Cortina.

¹⁴ It is sufficient to think of how art is still taught in our days: as reproduction of reality and not as a different representation of reality.

¹⁵ Ginzburg, C. (1998). *Occhiacci di legno. Nove riflessioni sulla distanza*. Milano, Feltrinelli, 29.

Knowledges become theories and learning.

Bibliography

Abelson, R.P. (1979). Differences between Belief and Knowledge Systems. *Cognitive Science*, 3, 355-366.

Ginzburg, C. (1998). *Occhiacci di legno. Nove riflessioni sulla distanza*. Milano, Feltrinelli.

Huber, M., Chautard, P. (2001). *Les savoirs cachés des enseignantes*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

Laneve, C., (2006) *Analisi delle pratiche educative. Metodologie e risultanze della ricerca*. Brescia, La Scuola.

Morin, E. (2000). *La testa ben fatta*. tr.it. Milano, R. Cortina.

Nespor, J. (1987). The Role of Beliefs in the Practice of Teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19 (4), 317-328.

Quaglino, P.G. (2004). *La vita organizzativa*. Milano R. Cortina.

Reber, A.S. (1993). *Implicit Learning and Tacit Knowledge: An Essay on Cognitive Unconscious*, Oxford New York: Uni.Press.

Tochon, F.V. (1993). *L'enseignant expert*. Paris, Nathan.