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Narrative writing and University Internship Program

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of narrative writing in students' university educational path of the first and second level degree courses in "Education and Training Science", "Sapienza", University of Rome. Narrative writing is presented in particular as a tool to evaluate university internship programmes and students' training. In particular, narrative writing allows the evaluation of:

1. Activities those students took part in during the internship;
2. Students' ability to reflect on the experience and integrate it with previous knowledge and skills.

In the degree courses in "Education and Training Science", "Sapienza" University of Rome, internship experience is necessary to achieve the educational objectives and it is an integral part of the process of students' professional and personal growth. Thus, an internship report becomes an epistemic writing that determines the growth of understanding and knowledge. For this reason, an internship report, with other evaluation tools, allows a better reflection on the students' experience. The starting point is a rigorous analysis of the nature of narrative writing in specific educational and professional contexts.

In this paper we analyse narrative writing, emphasizing the importance of writing for the reworking of professional experience, which is particularly important for future student educators as reflective practitioners.

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1. Introduction

University internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in college

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with practical application and skills developed in a professional setting. Internship is described by Schön (1987, p. 37) as “a setting designed for the task of learning a practice. In a context that approximates a practice world, students learn by doing. The practicum is a virtual world, relatively free of the pressures, distractions, and risks of the real one. It stands in an intermediate space between the practice world, the ‘lay’ world of ordinary life, and the esoteric world of the academy” (1987, p. 37). An internship model based on reflection-in-action contributes to forming reflective practitioners. We think that the final internship report is one of the key elements of this training because it allows a student to rework her/his own experience and activate a process of “reflection on reflection-in-action”.

In the degree courses in “Education and Training Science”, “Sapienza” University of Rome, the internship activities are necessary to achieve the educational objectives. The final internship report is a useful tool for evaluating the internship of a single student. Indeed, in the report the student describes to the academic tutor what activities she/he took part in and how she/he carried them out. The report is also used to control whether the student developed the ability to reflect on the experience and to integrate it with previously owned knowledge and skills.

So in this paper we shall primarily reflect on the role of narrative writing as a tool for developing these abilities.

1.1. Professional writing as a form of narrative and epistemic writing

Narration of work experience by writing means both retracing this experience in an autobiographical dimension and practising a form of professional writing.

We think, indeed, that professional writing is not only a style of written communication used in a workplace environment that allows professionals (professors, educators and similar included) to make informed decisions. This definition emphasizes the usefulness of writing in professional fields, whereas it would appear partially apt to include some “professional-educational” texts. Specifically the texts have the specific aim of reflecting *on* experience and improving professional practice through a reflection *on* the experience. These forms of educational writing on the one hand are useful for the performance of a certain type of work; on the other hand an effective tool for reprocessing and interpreting the experience and for knowledge building.

Writing is, in fact, an important tool for transmitting and processing information as it can fix the content and come back to it: it reflects *on* writing, by selecting the content to come back to and deciding how to organize and tie it together, and it reflects *after* writing, reading and thinking about the experience turned into words. In this way, the experience carried out becomes the object of reflection, can interact more easily with the knowledge and skills possessed and can be integrated into them.

Moreover, we have to contemplate two characteristics of professional writing for professionals in the field of education: 1) by writing, you (educator, professor, teacher etc.) can easily carry out the complex operation of distancing yourself from the experience (object of reflection); 2) by writing, you also learn to distance yourself from the fatigue that characterizes those professions with high emotional involvement, such as education.

In reflective writing, you are trying to write down some of the thinking that you have experienced while carrying out a particular practical activity. In this way it becomes a recoverable form of epistemic writing, which allows for modification and growth of knowledge (Bereiter, 1980), in which the written composition helps to improve the writer’s understanding (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987, 1995, p. 86). In other words, reflective writing gives you the chance to think about what you are doing more deeply and to learn from your experience.

In this theoretical framework, narrative plays a lead role. According to Bruner (2002), we think, “A narrative models not only a world but the minds seeking to give it its meanings. And this restless dualism is not confined to drama and fiction: it also plagues the lawyer telling his law stories and the autobiographer trying to construct a self” (Bruner, 2002, p. 27). And as stated by de Maumigny-Garban (2006), «La réflexion engagée autour de l’identité personnelle s’est faite en lien avec le concept d’identité narrative de Paul Ricoeur. La structure narrative s’impose comme recours pour raconter, suivre et comprendre l’existence, car comme l’écrit Paul Ricoeur: “*Raconter c’est dire qui a fait quoi, pourquoi et comment [...]*”. En fixant leur vie par écrits, les participantes ont découvert qu’il ne pouvait y avoir d’univers sans un soi qui s’y trouve et agit et ont pu accéder à la dimension de sujet de leur histoire. L’identité se construit dans une histoire écrite. “*L’histoire racontée dit le qui de l’action. L’identité du qui n’est donc elle-même qu’une identité narrative*”».

1.2. The internship report

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