

Writing to Learn from Experience: Unguided Reflection as Meaning Making Practices for Teachers

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Language is one of the most powerful tools for reflective learning from experience. Writing, in particular, can become an effective means of professional learning for teachers, requiring them to grapple with words and their meaning in an effort to understand their professional practice better.

In this chapter, we focus on unguided reflective writing as a practice for reflectively learning *from experience*, and we argue for its recognition as a scaffold for teachers' professional learning from experience. Our discussion is sustained by the findings of a study that involved the collection of data during an in-service program for language teachers about the teaching of writing. Teachers used writing as a situated learning tool in a context in which they were consciously learning about the complexities and difficulties of learning how to teach writing. Teachers' unguided reflective writing assumed a narrative-like character and the texts were analyzed as tools that they used to create meaning directly from their lived experiences. The study unveiled the uniqueness and complexity of meanings that were constructed by each individual and illuminated a variety of profiles of teachers as meaning makers.

We problematize professional learning in its personal and social dimensions. By telling the research narrative that developed from the analysis of the teachers' writing, our aim is to highlight the complexity of narrative writing in the professional lives of those who dedicate themselves to understanding and improving the teaching and learning of writing.

1 Reflectively Learning from (Educational) Experience

A considerable amount of learning is based on experience. Learning happens when new meanings are made from experience. Meanings are the connections we perceive "between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence" (Dewey, 1916, p. 140). That is to say, learning is inextricably bound up with the thoughts and feelings we have as active participants

in any social setting. As Dewey sees it, in meaningful contexts, action is experience and, as a result of acquiring experience and reflecting about it, we become open to new experiences and further learning. Meaning making processes that are based on experience thus have a pragmatic role to play in the human lives.

Making meaning from experience is a multifaceted process (Brandsford, Brown & Cocking, 2000; Claxton, 2000). Learning comes from immersion in experience and it is learner centered. This means that a learner learns by doing in new, living situations in which his or her prior experiences, motivations and needs necessarily play a role. However, this does not mean that learning is simply an individual process. Rather, learning from experience is intrinsically social—it is always something that arises from our interactions with people who share the world with us. This is obviously the case when more able subjects are able to challenge the learner to search for new meanings and support his or her efforts by providing new information that scaffolds him/her into making new hypotheses and drawing new conclusions about how the world works (Vygotsky, 1986). Furthermore, it is social since what one learns is something to be shared with others and used to produce relevant knowledge for one's future situated life.

Thinking, which we will take as a synonym for 'reflection' here, is a crucial dimension of learning experiences (Dewey, 1938). Some form of thought is necessary for new meanings to be made in socially situated experiences. Thinking about practical experience has become a fundamental tenet of current professional learning theories (Alarcão & Gil, 2004; Schön, 1983). Such thinking requires one to take an analytical stance towards one's professional experiences, involving a reflective awareness of one's pre-conceptions as they have been formed by theoretical knowledge and other sources, a wide contextual awareness and serious ethical concerns (Habermas, 1986). It is to acknowledge the importance of developing meta-professional thinking abilities by using knowledge (otherwise abstract or decontextualized) in order to improve practice and promote teachers' life-long, autonomous professional learning. This professional disposition is now recognized as one of the most powerful driving forces for specialized, self-monitored, conscious and conscientious action, more and more understood as reflection-in-action, empowering teachers to actively resist mechanistic narrowly pragmatic attitudes and successfully address the demands posed by an ever-changing practical world. As several researchers put it, it is such knowledge that empowers the practitioner to face the top-down standardized rationalism that currently pervades any field of human action (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Doecke, 2013; Doecke & Pereira, 2012).

Reflection has also become a central professional disposition to be cultivated in the professional world of teachers. This is to reconceptualise the role

of teachers as 'conscious knowledge producers and transformers of their own practice' through reflection, rather than merely 'knowledge users and exemplary technicians' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Marcos, Miguel, & Tillema, 2009; Moon, 2004). Reflective learning has been characterized as teachers' specialized form of cognition (Bazerman, 2009; Pereira, 2014). Following, and expanding, Schön's ideas, Garcia (1992) identifies four major reflective processes in teachers' practices, namely: introspection, through which teachers make meanings about themselves from their lived experiences; thinking in practice, through which teachers make the sort of intuitive meanings that characterize response to immediate action; thinking about practice, which concerns the meanings that the teachers construct in a more distanced manner about their past and future actions; and inquiry, which is the thinking involved in professional theoretical research. Learning how to become or to develop as a teacher is synonymous with acquiring or developing such thinking abilities that inform teachers' learning and professional growth.

2 Writing as a Tool for Teachers to Reflectively Learn from Experience

Language is the most important mediating tool for learning from experience and the development of cognition. The role it plays in scaffolding human learning from experience is complex in that it occurs at both a social and an individual level. The idea, originating in Vygotsky (1986), that people start by learning interpersonally, "talking through' our tasks with another person and then internalizing that conversation as thought" (Bruffee, 1986, p. 785), within the so-called Zones of Proximal Development that those interactions generate for learners, is a fundamental aspect of the professional learning that we are reporting here. When such inner conversations become spontaneously enacted by the learners themselves to solve any practical problem, this shows that they have become autonomous learners. Language is the vehicle for (life-long) thinking and learning from experience (Wells, 2001).

Writing has received a renewed interest in the context of the acknowledgment of the cognitive role of language in learning from experience. It builds on the role played by oral language in learning by rendering thinking tangible and, thus, providing a means of self-monitoring for learners. By writing to ourselves (as when we keep a journal) we represent our experience as an object for our own understanding and learning (Britton, 1970). When we construct a written text from experience, we construct a verbal representation that is separate from that experience. Through the process of creating such a representation,

the contents of our thinking are objectified, made concrete, stable, analyzable, editable and liable to be shared and validated by others. Another way to put this is to say that writing about experience extends thinking, allowing *thinking about thinking* to occur, a meta-cognitive dimension that has a powerful heuristic force: “[t]he act of making [a representation] is not only an occasion for expressing or representing what you already know, imagine, or feel; it is also a means through which the forms of things unknown can be uncovered” (Eisner, 2006, p. 109), opening up possibilities for (re)constructing future experience for those who write. Writing from the standpoint of what he calls pedagogical phenomenology, Van Manen has argued the crucial role that writing plays in learning from experience (Van Manen, 1989, 1990, 2006). He conceives of writing as a method for any kind of research that aims to gain personal insights and to build knowledge from lived experience. As he puts it, writing “places consciousness in the position of the possibility of confronting itself, in a self-reflective relation” (1989, p. 30). He highlights the potential of writing about lived experience as “a kind of self-making or forming” as well as an opportunity to direct thinking to praxis, “a potential more tactful action” (p. 30), a more fully aware experience.

Teacher education and the research into teacher education have been particularly influenced by this interest in writing due to the potential it holds for enhancing learning from professional experience (Álvares Pereira, 2001; Calame-Gippet, Delamotte-Legrand, Jorro, & Penloup, 2000; Darling, 2001; Doecke and Pereira, 2012; Rosen, 1987; Shulman, 2004; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

A vast number of situated writing practices have emerged in teacher education programs, most (if not all) of which assuming a narrative-like character (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Darling, 2001; Doecke, 2013; Vieira, 2010). When teachers try to make meaning from their lived experiences, they inevitably use narrative-like genres, which mediate and give structure to the experiences they relate to and the meaning they make. Rosen (1987) observes that “narrative itself is a cognitive resource—a meaning making strategy” (p. 13), that making stories is “a product of the predisposition of human mind to narrativize experience and to transform it into findings which as social beings we may share and compare with those of others” (p. 12). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) reinforce this idea by saying that “people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others” (p. 4). Narrative writing brings with it the logic of the uniqueness of the learning experience by representing the complexities of each individual’s response to the specific situation with which he or she is faced, as a situation that requires a decision on his or her part to act in a certain way.

This turn to narrative inquiry, to telling stories about experience in the field of teacher education, is directed towards enabling teachers to strengthen their own situated reflective learning, practice and professional identities in an authentic manner, scaffolding them to be more responsive to their teaching reality. A relevant point made by Doecke (2013) is the possibility, opened up for teachers by writing stories about their practice, to develop a *standpoint* (a reflected meaning) from *within* the world in which they live as a way of empowering them to transform that world. Writing stories goes beyond the passivity of merely interpreting the world to an intellectual engagement with experience as it is lived by teachers.

Portfolio writing is an interesting example of teacher's reflective, narrative-like writing (Pereira, 2014; Sá-Chaves, 2009; Shulman, 1998; Vanhulle, 2000; Zeichner & Wray, 2001). In teacher education, narrative-like writing also takes teachers' personal lives as an object of inquiry. Autobiographical and biographical writing, for instance, put the focus on how meanings drawn from past experiences shape teachers' present identities (Josso, 2004; Pineau, 1983). Journal records, field notes, letter writing, plans and personal notes, among others (Connelly et al., 1990; Vieira, 2011), are also examples of narrative-like types of writing that teachers can use to write their stories and make meaning out of them.

Types of writing about experience such as these are clearly done with a complex pedagogical intent, involving the transformation and enhancement of teachers' lived experiences as educators, enabling them to be more fully aware of the complexities of their day-to-day lives and the responsibilities that their work involves. The teacher who goes through such a process of meaning making through reflective writing is the main audience for the renewed meanings that (s)he has made (Darling, 2001). Writing about one's experience contributes to the extension of the writer's mind. However, to represent what we have experienced is also an important means to contribute to extending other people's minds. Teachers' reflective writing about their experience is potentially relevant for enriching the practical epistemologies of the professional community to which teachers belong. Through reading teachers' stories, others may come across practices, meanings, interpretations that they can use to expand their own minds and experiences. Teachers' writing is also essential data that teacher educators use to draw meaning from their own educational experience by thinking about what is important, necessary and possible for those who need to professionally learn with them (Margolin, 2011; Clandinin et al., 2007; Murray, 2008) and also by intervening to improve the quality of the teachers' learning experience. Pinnegar and Daynes (2006, p. 24) point out the relevance of such data as it allows researchers to "embrace the power of the particular for

understanding experience and using findings from research to inform themselves in specific places at specific times". As well as engaging directly with the specific contexts in which teachers operate, narrative can also play a crucial role in advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning (Shulman, 2000). Stories originating in teachers' lived experiences prompt others to reflect on how to interpret those experiences, reaching out to an audience beyond the specific situations and people referred to.

3 A Case of Teachers' Unguided Reflective Writing

The understanding about writing as a tool for teachers' learning from experience that we have discussed thus far has been influenced by our roles as educators of pre-service teachers as well as by our recent participation in diverse in-service learning programs in which reflective writing has played a learning function (Pereira, 2012). Reflective writing is in fact one of the most significant transformations in the last decades in pre-service and in-service education in Portugal, closely connected to the introduction of the idea of learning through reflection, which has also been officially introduced.

One of the in-service programs in which two of us have recently participated focused specifically on the teaching of writing (Álvares Pereira & Cardoso, 2010). The purpose of the in-service program was to help teachers transform their teaching of writing by reflecting about research on writing and their own (past and current) practices. The program was carefully designed to help teachers adopt an inquiry disposition by providing a collaborative space for participants' previous experiences to be actively taken into account as "the starting point for further learning" (Dewey, 1938, p. 74), embracing theory about the teaching of writing that they could then consciously transfer to their school practices and then self-assess and share their learning. Twenty-four participants, including primary and secondary teachers, teachers of Portuguese and of foreign languages, learnt about the teaching of writing at the same time that they *experienced what they themselves were learning about* (writing) because they had to do several reflective writing tasks throughout a year-long learning program, from October to July (75 hours total, comprising face-to-face and e-learning training, using Moodle learning management system) (Pinho & Simões, 2012).

The initial period of the program was designed to allow teachers an extended time for sharing experiences about the teaching of writing by using writing. This involved intensive engagement, when a strong spirit of collegiality amongst participants emerged: teachers told about their experiences of teach-

ing writing and received feedback to their stories, comparing and analyzing their previous professional experiences, formulating questions and doubts, while at the same time exploring the potential of reflective writing. This initial period also included the sharing of some general theoretical knowledge about the procedural nature of writing as well as of some pedagogic strategies—which was done at teachers' own request, as they found themselves that they were unable to learn any further beyond what they had experienced and shared. Teachers were then asked to freely write about the learning process as they had experienced it up to that moment. Of all the reflective writing practices that were carried out by teachers, we found such *unguided writing task* to be a particularly stimulating prompt for further inquiry on our part as to what we really understood by writing and storytelling as forms of professional learning. Among the 24 participants, 20 reflections were written and posted on Moodle by the end of January, and these were the texts we analyzed: 18551 words in total. No writing instructions or formal guidance were provided for these texts. This “freedom to narrate” generated very different texts, as far as their layout and length were concerned: ranging from 338 words as a minimum to 2321 words as a maximum, with the average number of words being 928.

During the remaining educational program, which lasted until July, participants planned, developed and assessed new practical experiences with their own students and wrote guided reflections in order to complete a written portfolio of their whole educational in-service learning. These latter guided reflections were to be informed by the discussion generated by the initial unguided reflections.

In spite of the freedom ascribed to the first reflection, this written task was still obviously shaped by the context of its production (Álvares Pereira & Graça, 2008). Teachers were well aware that this writing was part of the assessment components they had to fulfill for their final assessment, a fact that must have conditioned their writings in one way or another. In addition, the unguided writing task was undoubtedly mediated by participants' own understanding of reflection (specifically 'free' reflection), and might be seen as the product of the professional experiences and knowledge that they had developed over the years they had been teaching.

The unguided reflection task nonetheless fit perfectly the constructivist dynamics of the program as we expected these texts to contribute to better informing the impending program as closely as possible to each individual participant. Also, the unguided textual format seemed to us to offer a rich set of material to inquire into reflective writing in the professional learning processes of teachers due to its authentic narrative-like character. We felt that we were offering teachers the possibility to identify the most relevant

meanings that they were able to construct collaboratively about the teaching of writing. The task allowed them a space to think about and monitor their learning, consciously identifying, selecting and recording the most significant meanings that they individually made for themselves in the context of the educational program. We also felt that the unconstrained nature of this writing task would allow us to have a closer look into the way these teachers were assuming their role as reflective learners. The importance of leading teachers to reflect through structured thinking tasks (mostly through genre dispositions [Bazerman, 2009]), offering teachers tools and guidance to learn how to be reflective, is now well documented (Orland-Barak and Yinon, 2007). In spite of that, we encouraged unguided reflection because we believed that it would provide rich data about teachers' dispositions to learn from experience through reflection. We therefore assumed the unguided writing to be valuable data, which we approached with the following research questions:

- *Which meanings did teachers construct about the teaching of writing during the initial phase of the in-service learning program?*
- *What can we learn about teachers as reflective learners?*

We assumed that these questions would be answered by inquiring into the meanings that were represented by teachers in their texts. We thus looked for an analytical way into the texts.

3.1 *A Path into Unguided Reflective Writing*

Habermas' (1986) tripartite categories of human activity and 'worlds' were used to look into the unguided reflections. He maintains that any human activity which is carried out within a particular social group is anchored by collective representations organized in three systems, which he calls 'worlds': the objective, social and subjective world. Simply put, the objective world concerns any representations about the physical or material world; the social world concerns the set of rules, values, conventions and organized forms of knowledge that guide human activity within that world; the subjective world concerns the representations about the psychological and psychic features of the individual who carries out any action. This distinction was considered relevant *to categorize the meanings that were individually constructed by participants about their teaching of writing and represented in their writings*. Three categories of meanings were developed to analyze the writings: objective, subjective and social meanings, that is meanings concerning:

- i) *the objective world of teacher-in-pedagogic-reality*—or the actual world of teaching and learning writing as represented by the teachers;
- ii) *the personal world of the teacher-as-person*—or the emotional world and mental states of the teacher of writing as seen by him or herself;
- iii) and *the social world of teacher-as-practitioner*—or the didactic norms and rules of teaching writing.

Furthermore, it was assumed that these analytical categories would be suitable to develop an idea of teachers' positioning as reflective learners and obtain an answer for the second question, namely: what can we learn about teachers as reflective learners? Habermas' tripartite definition presupposes an interaction among those three worlds of meanings, that they should not be understood as existing in isolation from one another. According to this view, we assumed that the teaching of writing is, just like any other action in the Habermasian worlds of experience, interactively mediated by the subjective interpretative and emotional meanings (the subjective world), the perceptions of reality upon which the action is being done (the objective world) and the social knowledge that directs social action (the social world). By accepting this, we discarded the view that the social action of teaching is the direct and simple expression of meanings of a social character. We hypothesized that teachers would represent the interactions among the worlds in which they acted as teachers of writing in individual ways, and we hypothesized that a close interaction among such worlds would be indicative of teachers' positioning as reflective learners. An accomplished reflective teacher of writing would not understand her practice simply in terms of one level of activity as defined by Habermas, but would think her professional practice as one in which all three dimensions were present. Finally, we also hypothesized that a reflective positioning would be observable when teachers' represented *new* meanings, whatever they were, which obviously takes us back to Dewey's conceptions of learning through reflection. This analytical conceptualization is in accordance with the reflective view of learning from experience, through which the *subjective* mediation of the *reality* of the teaching of writing and the *social* rules about teaching is crucial for transformed action to be carried out. Individual teachers must feel personally engaged; they must feel that the knowledge they have acquired about the teaching of writing matters to them, and that it can illuminate their practice in personally meaningful ways.

In order to develop this analysis, 20 unguided reflections by different authors were examined using the analytical categories just presented. Each reflection was given a pseudonym, which is easier to retain.

3.2 *Meanings and Meaning Makers in Unguided Reflections*

As mentioned above, the analysis aims to provide answers to the following questions: 1) what meanings did teachers construct about the teaching of writing from their learning experience?; 2) to what extent did teachers act as meaning makers and reflective practitioners in their writing?

Meanings

Our most immediate finding was that teachers constructed different meanings from their common in-service experience: each written reflection was *unique in the meanings that were represented*.

Meanings concerning the social world of teacher-as-practitioner were constant to all reflections, which was in accordance with the focus of the in-service program. Some of the meanings about the social dimension of the teaching of writing that were represented in the texts concerned the strategies for teaching writing, as is the case in the following excerpt:

Here are some strategies to stimulate writing:

- transform comics into written language;
- abridge a text;
- label an image sequence;
- finish a story from which the end was removed.

LÍDIA

Other meanings were about the pedagogical construction of teaching-learning for teaching writing. In the following case, a case is made of the role of interaction:

So, it is up to the teacher to roll the dice in the 'argumentative writing process', as tutored by him/herself, but focusing on interaction: self, other or co-evaluation by the students, as a starting point to meta-cognition/reflection (to develop awareness) on what works, what fails and why.

BRUNA

In the written texts, we also found different meanings concerning *the personal world of the teacher-as-person*. For instance, teachers acknowledged the difficulty of teaching writing and manifested empathy for students' difficulties in writing, as evident in the following example:

At this moment, I revise in my mind, as if in a film, the image of my students when I ask them to write something [...] I clearly feel what my students have felt for years—the horror of having to fill-in a blank space with words that someone will read, will underline, about which (s)he will make comments.

RUTE

In their writing, teachers very often expressed their will to learn:

“There is no real commitment from them [students] in what they write and that they will only do it because they are obliged to, therefore acting in a disturbingly irreverent way!” (Cardoso & Álvares Pereira, 2007: p. 176) In here therefore lies a habit that needs to be changed! How? I’m not yet sure, that is what I intend to apprehend in this project.

PAULINA

Others had already the opportunity to express happiness for what they had already learned: “After each session, I had the feeling of becoming ‘lighter’ because I was able to share my doubts and to receive suggestions of activities to develop with the students” (*Anabela*), whereas others stressed the pain they felt when assuming the role of writers: “When there are only 7 minutes left for the new day, February 28th, 2009, I would say that this is the text that is possible [*followed by the transcription of Miguel Torga’s poem “Mute”*]” (*Flora*).

In the written texts, there are also meanings concerning the *objective* world of the teacher-in-pedagogic-reality. For instance, teachers referred to the learning of writing as a time consuming process: “To me, teaching [writing] is (...) a long-term investment, the results of which are often observable much later” (*Ivone*), and they reported and analyzed teaching events, and described and analyzed students’ difficulties in learning how to write texts:

What I’ve done, how I’ve done it and when I’ve done it. First, I observed by myself the structure of the texts that I wanted to analyze (...) After that, in class, I commented, I asked; I made people underline; I made people replace structures, I made people understand textual structures. I heard comments that I registered—“This writer needed some Portuguese language classes [because (s)he repeats certain words many times]”; “Did the author purposely meant to write like this?”

TÂNIA

These are examples (and not a comprehensive list) of what was represented in unguided writings that clearly reveal that teachers' minds were filled with heterogeneous meanings as the result of the participation in the learning experience. Our second question dealt with teachers as reflective learners, or in Habermas' term, as meaning makers, as we explore below.

Meaning Makers

We perceived that no teacher focused their thoughts on a single dimension of the Habermasian worlds of experience. Rather, teachers' thoughts about the learning experience were complex as more than one of the worlds were always inextricably referred to in their reflections. Despite all referring to the *social teacher-as-practitioner world*, which was the focus of the in-service program, no teacher focused on that world exclusively: some centered on two, others on the three worlds of their experience. We also found out that meaning makers also differed concerning the capacity to interrelate the three worlds of action. The more teachers seemed to relate references to their three worlds of action, the easier it was to find traces of professional learning that was both deeply grounded in the situations in which they were working and which they found personally meaningful. The following example illustrates one such case, a dense flow as the teacher relates different meanings, from different worlds, in the representation that she offers in her discourse:

We all know how important the word is, either written or spoken. (...) The sentence "I write, therefore I am" demonstrates that writing is essential to being, to the being's formation and development at various levels. (...) But, would students think like this? Of course not! To them, writing is an imposition, a kind of torture, an unfruitful work that serves no purpose! In that case, why is it that we have students that write journals? (...) The answer to this may be: "we assume that, for its characteristics of being personal and impossible to repeat, the affective and behavioral components are important in regulating the writing process. (...) the student only writes if (s)he likes what (s)he is writing" (Cardoso & Álvares Pereira, 2007, p. 176). In fact, we all feel like the authors state: "Countless teachers agonize in schools because students don't want to learn (...)". Writing implicates to give a part of ourselves and if students can't find meaning in what they are doing, then there is no real commitment from them in what they write and that they will only do it because they are obliged to, therefore acting in a disturbingly irreverent way! In here therefore lies a habit that needs to be changed! How? I'm not yet sure, that is what I intend to apprehend in this project.

PAULINA

The teacher/writer begins with an acknowledgement of the role of writing in human development and goes into an elaboration about students' relation to writing (the objective world), goes into considerations about the didactics of writing (the social world) and introspectively looks into her own feelings about this reality (the subjective world). She does this as a clear process to reach new understandings about teaching writing (the social world), (subjectively) reinterpreting students' resistance towards writing and diagnosing a possible cause in her real world (*In here therefore lies a habit that needs to be changed*), and setting clear questions about that (social world) that she wants to find an answer to (personal world) during her learning experience

As we perceive in this excerpt, the teacher in question reveals a disposition to make meanings that are *new to her*. She allows us to perceive that the in-service experience was assumed as an opportunity of self-transformation. By contrast, some teachers demonstrated a quite different, passive stance towards the learning experience. This was evident in the fact that they gave emphasis to one or two worlds. In the next example, such stance is revealed by the teacher assuming that solutions for the difficulties in teaching writing (the objective world) can be found in recipes or formulae (the social world) that could simply be applied mechanically: "It was with the difficulties that writing represents to my students in mind that I've decided to enroll in this training, hoping to find the magic formula!" (*Ema*). But also some teachers revealed to think of themselves as being unable to make meanings (subjective world), assuming that meaning making processes somehow lay in some other person's more knowledgeable head (the social world), as it is clear in the following excerpt:

Nothing new so far. And why? Because what I feel has already been verbalized, through more or less scholarly words, illustrated by maxims/thoughts of great authors and writing masters, thinkers, philosophers, in greater or smaller length, by my distinctive colleagues.

MAGDA

These are cases in which learners are less engaged in the learning experience. The acquisition of theory appears to dominate teachers' meaning making concerns, few or no glimpses being offered of the teachers' capacity to actively and productively relate it to either their objective or their own subjective world. For these teachers, the improvement of teaching practices seems to be exterior to their agency, and we get the idea that they are not actually strengthening their own situated reflective learning, practice and professional identities in an authentic manner in this learning experience. From these data it is therefore possible to conclude that teachers as reflective learners from experience

revealed themselves to be *heterogeneous and uniquely individual meaning makers*.

3.3 *Unguided Reflective Writing in Teachers' Learning from Experience: Some Lessons Learned*

The analysis confirms *learning to be a meaning making process from experience*. It shows how teachers' thinking about their learning experience was overwhelmingly complex and elaborate. It reveals compelling evidence of the uniqueness of the meanings that teachers constructed for themselves in this learning experience as well as of the heterogeneity of their reflective meaning making dispositions. We nonetheless observed outstanding differences in the quality of their engagement in this task. For some teachers it was initially just a matter of knowledge or strategy, the latter conceived as a 'magic bullet' or recipe that they might simply apply, regardless of the contextually specific character of their situations or of themselves. For others, the knowledge they acquired was registered at a deeply personal level, both a moment in their practice and in their biographies as practitioners. For them, knowledge about writing was not simply 'disembodied'. It was as though it needed to be registered on their pulses.

We understood that unguided writing had a fundamental role in these teachers' reflective achievements. Our data shows that free writing stirred reflective processes in teachers' minds. The reflective introspection they were asked to make about their experience, by writing about it and making it tangible, each at their pace and in relation to their own past experiences, their interests, emotions and their ways of learning, guided them to make visible their own learning as well as the limitations in their practical epistemologies and to identify new learning processes and learning aims through the mediation of writing. In fact, all the above-transcribed excerpts show the cognitive role of writing in creating a space for teachers to represent the individual significance of what they were experiencing. As such, this analysis supports our view that unguided writing is a relevant practice in the construction of teachers' thinking and professional learning from educational experience.

Ultimately, this unguided writing *guided* teachers into a closer look at themselves as persons, teachers, learners and writers in the first part of the in-service program and, for that matter, until the end of the learning experience. As said before, the teacher who goes through processes of meaning making through reflective writing is the main audience for the renewed meanings that (s)he has made (Darling, 2001), enabling him or her to develop a *standpoint* (a reflected meaning) from *within* the world that can be empowering and transformative. We believe our data bring evidence to these claims.

However, we believe that for this to happen, the process of unguided reflective writing needs to be an authentic, situated one. As teachers of these teachers, there were several professional meanings we made as a result of the initial analysis of these written texts. We defined dimensions of further intervention and monitoring of the learning experience, which were shared with all the teachers, so that we could help them develop the initial meanings they had made or wanted to make during the remainder of learning process, as well as reflecting critically on their learning stances. A text was shared about our main results, which provided guidelines for teachers to distil their meanings and profiles as reflective practitioners. We believe the role of the situated unguided practice as a tool to foster learning is well evidenced in the following excerpt, a final reflection of the learning process (in July), in which one teacher points out that her initial unguided writing facilitated her final self-confrontation and self-evaluation of her learning:

When we are teachers of Portuguese, we think: what a great challenge it is this of wanting to teach writing! [...] But, *alas* when the challenger becomes the challenged and, right at the beginning of this training, we were requested to write our own texts, building our thoughts through writing, our written critical reflections, as in-training participants (behold!) of a training on writing teaching, even before we reflected about our students' work (Nothing would be more suiting or obvious, it seems to me now) (...) Some of us ... me included, of course, felt terrified because it wasn't just about writing, we would also have to publish what we wrote on moodle so that everyone would read it! Well ... eventually we dared and now I know, feel that, and that's precisely why I can be here today, it was due to that first big challenge (of realizing from the start and by myself that writing is difficult, demanding, complex and serious, both for students and teachers alike) that this training has contributed to expose my frailties and to gain personal and professional experience.

ALEXANDRA

4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have presented our views about unguided reflective writing as a tool for reflectively learning from experience. We contextualized it in the general understanding about professional learning as reflective learning from experience and in the acknowledgement of writing as a tool to scaffold such learning as it represents lived experience for the learner's own think-

ing. In this text, unguided reflective writing has been characterized as a valid practice for teachers' professional learning. The data we analyzed have shown how this practice supported teachers to represent and recognize themselves as heterogeneous meaning makers, thus clarifying learning paths for themselves and for the teachers that were scaffolding their learning in the in-service program.

As in any other narrative study, our main intention was to understand reality as lived experience (Clandinin & Huber, 2010) and not to reach generalizations and certainties. The particularity and uncertainty remain. Our analysis offers further possibilities for inquiry. The data raise other questions, the answers to which we believe will provide relevant results to better understand the complexity of the process of reflective writing. One such question paradoxically concerns the nature of *unguided reflection* as genre. Unguided reflection did apparently configure as *genre* in a specific communicative context and serving particular forms of inquiry. Further research is now needed.

Crucially, however, the analytical findings offered us the opportunity to discern the use of writing as a tool that we, as teacher educators, can use to contribute to the scholarship of (in-service) teaching and learning (Swennen, Jones & Volman, 2010). We found ourselves thinking about the narratives that teachers constructed about their learning experiences. The theoretical reconstruction that we built from the results of our analysis of teachers' stories demonstrated academic writing as a space through which we ourselves have made meanings from specific lived stories with a potential impact on the future learning experiences of other teachers-as-learners. In this text we have presented all the learning that we have constructed or reinforced by thinking (because we have been obliged to write in order to understand what we did better) about the unguided writing task. We could not have reached these meanings had it not been for teachers' writing and our own writing about that writing.

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Edited by Giulia Ortoleva, Mireille Bétrancourt and Stephen Billett

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