

EDUCATORS IN TRAINING AND WRITING: PERCEPTION, EXPERIENCES, PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the relationships between academic, professional and personal writing among Italian university students. The specific focus is on educators trained as part of the degree course in Education and Training Science. A solid, evident link exists between educational professions and writing practices, as shown by the over two decades of research on this topic: writing facilitates the objectivization needed for sharing and, at the same time, makes it possible to distance oneself from the effort involved in the teaching professions.

KEYWORDS: academic didactics, educational writing, professional writing, educational professions, active learning.

1. Writing and education professions

In our knowledge-oriented society, writing is a key element, since it helps the creation of the various kinds of knowledge (Starke-Meyerring, Paré, Artemeva, Horne, Yousoubova 2011) and the performance of human activities. The intrinsic meaning of writing lies in its contribution to human relationships and to the enactment of textual actions. As stressed by Bazerman and Russel (2003):

Writing is alive when it is being written, read, remembered, contemplated, followed--when it is part of human activity. Otherwise it is dead on the page, devoid of meaning, devoid of influence, worthless. The signs on the page serve to mediate between people, activate their thoughts, direct their attention, coordinate their actions, provide the means of relationship. It is in the context of their activities that people consider texts and give meaning to texts. And it is in the organization of activities that people find the needs, stances, interactions, tasks that orient their attention toward texts they write and read. So, to study text production, text reception, text meaning, text value apart from their animating activities is to miss the core of a text's being (p. 1).

Within a professional context, these aspects gain an indisputable importance. Starting from the assumption that professional writing may take different forms (Tab. 1) – within the polarization between functionality to the performance of an activity, and reflection

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on the activity carried out, with these two targets likely to overlap – we can extend this multi-dimensionality also to so-called «educational writing», a series of writings all «connected to the performance of one’s didactic, administrative, organizational and institutional task» (Biffi 2014: 35).

Table 1 – A model for professional writing. [Source: reviewed by Sposetti 2011]

Macro-target	Subject	Target	Recipient	Text type
Communication of contents to improve the practical performance of the professional activity	Reports of specific activities	Improving internal communication	Internal	Presentation. Persuasion. Description. (<i>Technical reports, minutes, school register, indications etc.</i>).
		Improving external communication	External	
		Improving the practical organization of the activity (simplification of practices and procedures, streamline of times, etc.).	Internal/ External	
		Achieving recognitions for the activity carried out.	Internal/ External	
Improvement of the professional activity through reflections on the experience	Professional experience	Divulging the experience (Cognitive function.)	Internal/ External	Narration Argumentation (<i>Logbook, individual diary, life stories, reports, surveys, notes, etc.</i>)
		Reflecting on the experience (Inferential function.)	Internal/ The subject	
		Sharing the experience	External	
		Showing and controlling feelings and emotions (Restraining emotionality.)	The subject	

Since the early 20th century, the depth and evidence of the relationship between writing and professional activity has led to interesting reflections resulting from assorted studies and researches on the field. The general subject is the use of the writing process regarded as a professionalizing tool in different sectors and areas requiring the supply of services to other individuals: caretaking,

teaching, training, etc., i.e. all the contexts falling within education and training sciences.

The dimensions of professional writings in the educational fields can easily be investigated by highlighting the ability of written communication to provide useful help within professional educational contexts. In the introduction to a recent study on reflective writing, Cros (2014) offered an overview of the studies in this field starting from an engagement for training through the analysis of professional practices, which was developed in the Nineties. This context also fostered an interest in writing intended not only as a subject of communication but also as a training tool for educators. Logbooks, school works, narrations, reports, portfolios and any other written production act as general research tools and elements. Simultaneously, the concept of training changes as it is considered not only a mechanical learning of operational procedures necessary for the performance of a specific professional activity, but also a «development of an adaptive, creative, and critical intelligence, a distancing and an analysis, a development taking place on the same level of practice» (page IX, translated from the French by the author.) As a result of the onset of new needs and training requirements, writing seemed to be the most suitable tool to provide an answer, giving subjects the opportunity to confront both themselves and the external ever-changing reality. The characteristics of writing promote analysis, imply the possibility to take a certain distance and turn experience into words by reducing the implicit, unstable, and feeble element typical of oral transmission and allowing for a 'deferred' communication: thus, writing becomes a tool of knowledge and professionalization. Moreover, writing is also an economic instrument, since it is easily manageable and immediately available to the individuals being trained: everyone can write and conceivably they have already tackled professional writing.

Over the last decade, reflection on the features of professional writing in the educational context has been extended to the possible specificity of this professional means¹. This extensive and transverse research activity has emphasised two typical elements

¹ In the attempt to assess this assumption, various researches have been conducted on the writing-based training instruments in various professional contexts (training of trainers and educators, teaching, training of social workers, etc.) with the purpose of understanding whether writing can actually generate professional competences, whether a specific kind of writing can lead to a professionalisation process and, if so, what are the peculiar characteristics of these writing forms. The main international and intercultural results were collected in two works carried out by Cros together with Louise Morisse and Martine Lafortune, published in 2009 and 2011.

of writing regarded as a professionalizing tool: a) writing belongs to a well-defined training context in terms of deadlines, support and clear identification of the targets; B) writing implies a reflection and an intensification of professional activity, in the form of 'reflective writing'.

2. *The functions of educational writing*

Writing has several functions; for the purposes of this paper, it is worth mentioning three of them in particular: communicative, epistemic, and heuristic function (Cros 2011).

The communicative function is immediately clear. The purpose of communication is to share something with the others such as information, experiences, and moods, which thus become known to others. Moreover, writing also has an epistemic function, i.e. the production of thoughts and knowledge:

Through writing, experience – turned into the subject of reflection – can interact more easily with individuals' knowledge and competencies and be integrated by them. Thus, a form of epistemic writing can be recovered, namely a writing leading to a change in and growth of knowledge (Bereiter 1980), 'Where composition helps the writer acquire a higher comprehension' (Bereiter, Scardamalia 1987, 1995: 86) (Salerni, Sposetti, Szpunar 2013: 12).

As stated by Cros (2011)

We may say that we write to know our thought [...] We are our first readers and the words written on the paper ask this reader (ourselves) some questions and suggest interpretations other than the original intentions towards the others. Through the reading of our own writing, we reveal ourselves to ourselves. The sense of a text is never ultimately reached; therefore, we must carry out an exegetic activity on our own texts. This activity can be scary and may result in split thoughts ... Actually, it is wrong to say that writing consists of two different steps: first the processing of thoughts and then the correct transcription in writing of the thoughts (p. 2, translated by the author).

The heuristic function of writing is connected to the epistemic one, since it helps identify innovative ideas and the links between facts and thoughts, culminating with important discoveries. After all, heuristics is one of the seven functions of language as defined by Halliday (1975), through which men perform a linguistic exploration of the surrounding world based on questions such as «Why...?»

or «How...?»² This function is further enhanced by the written expression, especially among adults, with the purpose of recalling, telling, and sharing experiences. Furthermore, within the learning of writing, Halliday (1993) refers to a specific linguistic shift from the general to the abstract, which helps transform experience into systematic knowledge. Writing – learned as a secondary symbolic system – offers a synoptic insight into reality. With reference to our study of professional writing³, this aspect is connected to the specific ability to shape the world around us by putting down in writing the flow of events through their selection, combination, and a creation of new possible meanings.

Therefore

Writing proves to be [...] a tool suitable – probably the most suitable – for a reflective elaboration and sharing of experiences, since writing helps distance oneself from the past, just as it enables a symbolic representation of the experience through thought, with reference to the emotional and cognitive sphere (Mortari 2003). Therefore, writing fosters the objectification process underlying sharing and, at the same time, helps distance oneself from the adversities of the education professions. As evidenced by Fiamberti (2006: 3), ‘The purpose of a worker’s writing is to rely on a mirror (reflective need) as well as on a bank (containment need) to face the complex situations and emotional involvement in everyday life’ (Sposetti 2011: 267).

3. Research on educators being trained and writing

In line with the issues concerning writing within the education professions, this section presents the data collected during the 2015–2016 year during an interview with some students enrolled in the Master’s Degree in Pedagogy and Educational Sciences at The Sapienza University. The interviews fall within a broader investi-

² The other six functions are: instrumental (meeting needs: «I want»); regulatory (controlling others’ behaviour: «Do this»); interactional (interacting with the persons around us and creating a dialogue: «hello»); personal (introducing oneself and one’s tastes: «This is me»; «I like»); imaginative (being creative and building worlds: «let’s pretend that»); informative (sharing information: «Today is sunny»). The scholar has identified these functions based on an investigation of the development of language among children.

³ Halliday (1993) reflects on the writing learning process among children. His thought focuses on the relationship between learning and language and, in particular, on evidence suggesting the interpretation of the former (learning) based on the latter (language).

gation of written productions and of the attitude towards writing among the students attending the first year of the Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (PSEF) course, started in the 2011–2012 academic year. These students had taken a three-year degree in Pedagogy and Education Techniques, thanks to which they were able to work as educators with children aged 0–3 years at group homes, post-school, and social institutes as well as with people of various ages and unique needs (the disabled, the elderly, foreigners, immigrants, etc.)

The investigation relied on the assumption that these students were fully aware of their relationship with scientific and professional writings, including any evolution, changes, and difficulties. In fact, they had followed a growth path during their academic studies together with a considerable experience in scientific writing during the drafting of their final dissertation and apprenticeship reports.

Based on the outcome of the first years of the research, in the 2013–14 and 2014–15 academic years, the author of this paper conducted analysis on the entrance exams that the PSEF students had to take. This analysis was backed up by short interviews on the academic writing⁴. In 2015–2016, detailed interviews were conducted to better understand the meaning of the writing process for the individuals and have an insight into this phenomenon based on the participants' perspectives⁵. The students interviewed accounted for almost two-thirds of the people enrolled in the first year of the Master's Degree Course (42 students), equal to 25 students plus 4 students enrolled in the second year. They were all professional educators since they had taken a three-year Degree in Education;

⁴ The survey was conducted using mixed methods, by using specifically designed grids, T-Lab 9 software for text analysis, and an examination of the contents of the interviews, which required an initial brainstorming with the students culminating in the 2015–2016 academic year with a more detailed interview draft to help the interviewees give their opinion on their relationship with writing.

⁵ The interviews were conducted with students who attended a workshop within the PSEF Degree Course, coordinated by the author of this paper. The research method consisted of training the interviewers through theoretical references and simulations. Then interviews were conducted in pairs with a single speaker, so that notes on the interview could be written down without disturbing or interrupting the advancement. In the 2013–14 academic year, the interviews were conducted by: Chiara Cacciotti, Marta Cecalupo, Elena Cefaloni, Piera Del Prete, Federica Flammini, Ilaria Frabetti, Valentina Maddion, Elisa Toni, Simona Trombetta, Roberta Magoni, Federica Pezone, Martina Pasquali, Lidia Tavani; in the following academic year more in-depth interviews were carried out by: Alessia Ballato, Tiziana Bonanni, Giulia Caccia, Marco Cadavero, Arianna Chiaravalle, Erica Cozzolino, Martina Ferretti, Alessia Giacomini, Maria Cristina Grosso, Roberta Guidano, Claudia Iacovacci, Laura, Masala, Giulia Rocchi, Sara Sannella, Martina Squadrilli, Annamaria Strabioli and Elena Trevisan.

27 had attended a Degree Course in Educational and Training Sciences at the Sapienza University and 2 a Degree Course in Training Sciences at the Roma Tre University; over two-thirds of these professional educators being trained already had work experiences. This was a sub-group made up of 21 students, 8 of whom regularly work as educators. Thirteen participants had professional writing experiences at work, 6 interviewees had gained professional writing experience for the drafting of the apprenticeship report required by the three-year Degree Course in Educational and Training Sciences⁶, while 10 students declared that they had no writing experience, neither for work nor for apprenticeship purposes.

The interviewees were asked to reflect on three fundamental issues: their relationship with a) writing in general, b) academic writing, c) writing specifically for educational activities⁷.

As for the last aspect, they had to define professional writing by mentioning the differences with respect to so-called 'leisure writing' so as to gather information on the perception of specificity and the recognition of a specific text form. The participants largely agreed on the peculiarity of leisure writing, since it is characterised by emotionality, confidential contents, personal expressions, spontaneity, low formality and attention to correctness, familiarity with the interlocutor, who is treated as a friend. Only one interviewee found a slight difference between these two forms of writing, while another assumed that it might be equally challenging; finally, one student provided no answer to this question.

According to the participants, the intimacy of leisure writing contrasts with professional writing, which is speculatively intended as more accurate in terms of compliance with the rules and text form, with some differences being observed between those who had writing experiences within their educational work or apprenticeship and those who had none (Tab. 2). Educators subjected to training with writing experiences mainly believed that professional writing is characterised by compliance with language rules (9 students, only 1 of whom had no writing experience), the use of a specific terminology (4), the role of the addressee, the work context, and the subject in question. Those who had no writing experience tended to provide generic answers: professional writing is more immediate (4), more accurate and requires a formal register (4).

⁶ For a description of the apprenticeship in this course refer to the contribution provided by Anna Salerni and Silvia Zanazzi to this paper.

⁷ This essay could not dwell on the series of data collected. For an insight into this issue, see Brusco, Lucisano, Salerni e Sposetti (2014) and Sposetti (2017b, forthcoming) also for an explanation of the tools used.

Table 2 – Characteristics of professional writing (28 participants).

<i>Professional writing</i>	Experience of professional writing			Total
	At work	For the uni- versity apprentice-ship	No experi- ence	
strictly complies with spelling and syntactic rules and well-structured form	6	2	1	9
deals with different topics, has a more specific context and a well-defined addressee	5	2	-	7
is more accurate and “reflective” [sic]	-	-	4	4
must refer to a precise field and feature a formal register	-	-	4	4
has a more complex language and terminology	2	2		4
Total	13	6	9	28

In most cases, the educators being trained who were interviewed for the purposes of this research believed that writing is an important work tool; as for usefulness, the answer provided by those who had writing experiences was different from those who had no experience at all (Tab. 3) 5 participants said that writing is almost or totally useless, while 4 people had never written texts for professional purposes. The latter tended to give quick and assertive answers like «It’s not important» (int. nos. 1 and 28) or «It’s unnecessary» (int. 29); those who had already had writing experience believed that educators should be able to face specific kinds of writing (such as a *logbook*), whose drafting does not require exceedingly difficult skills. The other reflections recognized the importance of writing for the acquisition of important instrumental skills (9 interviewees, 1 of whom had never had writing experience), relational competences (8, 2 of whom without any writing experience) or professional growth (7, 3 of whom with no writing experience.)

Finally, educators were asked to interpret their relationship with professional writing in relation to the three-year Degree Course, including the fulfilment of sufficient professional writing criteria by the graduates in the educational sector (Tab. 4). The answers mostly indicated the need to acquire further competences, both general and specific. This was the opinion of 17 interviewees, 14 of whom with

writing experiences at work or during their apprenticeship; 6 of these stressed that the burden of the acquisition of these skills should not be on universities. Only 4 participants – equally distributed among the two categories – believed that the new educators did not have the writing skills necessary to meet professional obligations.

Table 3 – Interpretation of the importance of professional writing for the educators (29 interviewees).

<i>Is professional writing important for educators?</i>	Experience of professional writing			Total
	At work	For the university apprenticeship	No experience	
Scarcely or no important at all for work purposes	1	–	4	5
Very or sufficiently important since educators must have writing skills suitable for their reports and projects	6	2	1	9
Very important, since it improves competence and fosters human interactions	4	2	2	8
Important also per professional and personal growth	2	2	3	7
Total	13	6	10	29

Table 4 – The competences of the graduates (29 participants).

<i>Are the professional writing skills of the new educators suitable for their activity?</i>	Experience of professional writing			Total
	At work	For university apprenticeship	No experience	
Absolutely	2	–	2	4
Yes, in general	1	2	5	8
These skills are gained over time and do not depend on academic studies	2	4		6
Some specific skills are necessary for professional activities	8	–	3	11
Total	13	6	10	29

4. Final remarks

The data relating to the interviewees' opinion on writing for education professions should be seen in the context of the relationship with writing *per se*, and with writing as part of a training path. The use of writing was regarded as positive by most of them with reference to a generically expressive or functional (writing for study purposes) and more complex dimension, when it came to coping with the different writing opportunities included in the academic path, together with the drafting of the final dissertation.

These students saw writing as a sort of double-headed herm, resulting from the formal vs. informal polarization, where formal writing is associated with compliance with spelling, grammatical and syntactic rules as well as proper terminology. They regarded formal writing – whether intended for university or a work context – as 'accurate writing', a kind that complies with morphosyntactic and lexical rules. Yet the forms taken by writing within the education professions can fall within divergent genres, ranging from scientific writing to a more confidential writing of a diary; sometimes multiple forms coexist in the same text. Within educational writing contexts, it is easier to find texts where narration, description and argumentation tend to overlap. Professional writing often shows features associated with spontaneity and poor planning which the interviewees attributed exclusively to personal writing, defining a dichotomy between the latter and professional writing which emphasise production in one case and planning in the other.

In this regard, the educators being trained involved in the survey seemed unable to perceive the complexity and versatility of this tool or the *continuum* between formality and informality, especially considering the marginality of stylistic aspects in the professional educational writing: what really counted was not the aesthetic properties of the writing, but its ability to report experiences in a detailed manner. To achieve these goals, educators must undertake a complex path which starts from their experience and culminates with its verbalization, thus leading to the production of texts that must be readable by external readers and rely on narration and description, on one hand, and argumentation and reflection, on the other (Cros 2014).

These writing forms are crucial for educators' work and their acquisition requires training and support, as stressed also by the interviewees. The professional writing skills described above do not and cannot result exclusively from a curricular academic course: similarly, they neither manifest spontaneously during professional activities nor do they arise from the routine drafting of documentation. Writing intended as a professional growth and development tool includes

some rules, and its learning is based on a path consisting of deadlines, assessments, discussions, and support from experts or the group itself.

This means that professional writing involves both the institution requiring the production of a certain kind of writing and the path for the acquisition of writing skills. Professional writing cannot be decontextualized or abstract. For educators, writing should be a means and not an end in itself, since it should act as a professional and practical support to concrete situations. The relation between university and work (Pollet 2001, 2004; Reuter 2004; Chartrand 2006; Ganobscik-Williams 2006; Lillis 2006; Hyland 2007; Blaser 2008; Lillis, Scott 2007; Lea, Jones 2011; Baudet, Rey 2012) as well as between academic education and leisure and work contexts (Ivanič, Edwards, Barton, Martin-Jones, Fowler, Hughes, Mannion, Miller, Satchwell, Smith 2009) is key, and requires reflection on the necessity to create specific and well-structured learning paths. Within educational Degree Courses, apprenticeship is regarded as a special occasion also for training aiming at the production of 'professionalizing' writings closely connected to the work, and acting as a connection and shift from training to work. The reflections of the participants moved precisely in this direction, recognizing the importance of the apprenticeship report for the orientation of professional writings.

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