

The Diary as a Tool of Critical Knowledge Production

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Abstract: One challenge in teacher education is to provide strategies which equip students to examine, critique and evaluate their own understanding and beliefs about teaching and learning. This paper reports the development of a research conducted with students of Letters in a federal university in the north of Brazil and the use of diaries as a tool for critical knowledge production. The classes were conducted in different moments and the diaries were written after each event. The data analysis revealed that diaries give opportunity to students rethink and reconceptualize their understanding and beliefs about teachers' actions. The framework provided us to understand how the use of diaries could contribute to the reflective process of learning and the types of reflection during the process. The analysis of the data also showed that the way the classroom was conducted provided an easy way of understanding the theories studied.

Key words: diary, critical reflection, knowledge production

1. Introduction

The literature indicates that to facilitate the development of the process of reflection and reflective learning, many education programs engage students in reflective writing as one of the learning activities (Conner-Grenne, 2000; O'Rourke, 1998, Romero, 2009).

As pointed for several researchers, such as, O'Rourke (1998), Romero (2009), Liberal (1999), Sinclair & Woodward (1997), writing diaries promotes professional growth, once it enhances reflection, critical thinking, the integration of theory and practice, besides of making possible critical self-reflection and self-awareness.

While developing work with reflective teacher training *in* and *pre* service, I realized that professionals have difficulty to integrate theory and practice in their activities. To discuss about teacher training, Celani (2000) points that regarding to teachers' formation it is necessary to give basic conceptual and operational instruments that make them to reflect about their work and their social construction, developing this way a critical comprehension from their job.

From that perspective, this work aims to report the development of a research conducted with students of Letters in a Federal University in the north of Brazil and the use of diaries as a tool for critical knowledge production and as a tool that could provide evidence of understanding of content knowledge, relating to theory and practice.

2. Language in the Reflective Process

For working with teacher training process we need to provide ways that allow the organization of language actions which promote the evaluation of the actions and roles. Within this framework, we understand that language is an important instrument of intervention that allows the development of ideas, construction, transformation and reconstruction of new actions.

Leont'ev (1959), by studying the language as constitutive and relevant for individuals, argues that the language does not play only the role of means of communication between individuals, since it is a form of consciousness and human thoughts. According to the author, the transformations that occur through the language configure, initially, as image-conscience, acquiring the characteristic of activity-consciousness from the moment in which the individual becomes aware of the actions of others and of their own actions.

Vygotsky (1934/2001) points that the meaning of a word is the sum of all psychological facts that awakes in our consciousness, having as fundamental a dynamic training, fluid with multiple zones of instability and spatio-temporal constraint. In this point, the sense would mark the individuality in the consciousness that would be precisely the way that historically meanings are internalized and externalized by individuals. Therefore, the understanding that individuals have potentiality of acting, feeling, thinking, planning, wishing, creating the cultural world, the capacity of meaning and establishing meanings become important since it takes us to understand how individuals use language to achieve a critical object of transformation.

To MacLaren & Giroux (2000), by putting language reflexively in the speech, we historicize our role as social agents, since the role of language is central to construct knowledge, and as presented by Romero (2009), "language is a system that offers its users a number of alternatives to express meanings and users reveal different meanings, depending on the written or spoken linguistic forms they choose to employ".

Departing from understanding that the role of language is central to constructing knowledge, and from the Vygotskian perspective, the language presented in the diaries is understood as a space of expressing and reconstruction since through it social identities are built and social agents are formed.

3. The Context of the Case Study

The data analyzed was produced in the first semester of 2010 with students of fifth level of Letters Course from a Federal University in the north of Brazil enrolled in module "Special Topic I: Critical knowledge production — focus on pre-service teacher". The subject is an elective module and its main aim was to approach the process of teacher formation and its entailment to the teaching-learning; and to approach the inseparability between theory and practice as basis to teachers' role.

As pointed before, developing work with reflective teacher training *in* and *pre* service, I realized that even students have difficulty to understand and integrate theory and practice. This way, in order to help them to understand the theory of learning studied during the course it was proposed that they would write a diary after each event presented during class.

According to Woods (1987), there are three typical problems associated with teacher education programs. Firstly draws on the content is based on epistemologies (psychological, philosophical, sociological, and so on) and teachers see them as divorced from the practical problems they deal with their daily routine. Secondly the knowledge produced seems, theoretical and abstract, too distant for teachers to engage in. Thirdly, knowledge is

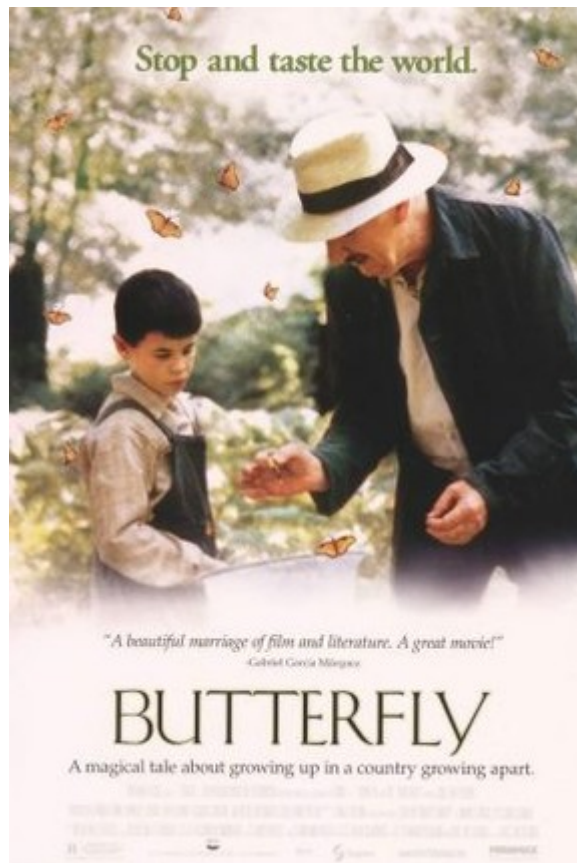
an “alien”, constructed through discrete and uncontextualized aspects.

Taking that in account, instead of presenting theories that should be studied and discussed in class; the work was conducted in a different way: (1) students had to watch a movie and do a first reflection; (2) read the theory chose for discussion, proceed with a new reflection doing a connection to the theory and the movie watched, (3) reflective discussion in class.

4. Evidence of Reflection in the Reflective Diaries

For this analyze six diaries were assessed and the first three reflections developed by students were chosen. As the students had never developed an activity like that, the choice of these reflections will allow us to verify whether the diary content addressed the module objectives or not.

The first movie watched by the students was a Spanish movie — “La lengua de las mariposas” (Butterfly’s Tongue).



After watching the movie, they were told to write a reflection about it. It is important to say that they were free to write since any direction was given to them.

In assessing the diaries, it is possible to realize there is a small evidence of reflection in only two of the diaries where the students tried to engage in a reflexive process at the beginning of the writing. However, this reflection wasn’t carried through since the written was based, as presented on the other diaries, on retelling the movie.

“The Butterfly’s Tongue shows us how we use our knowledge in a wrong way. Sometimes we have the power to change our reality but we don’t do it by having fear, by not knowing or by society that doesn’t give us liberty to show our experiences [...]” (Student A).

“The movie shows how other stimulus can have influence over our understanding and that our knowledge depends on the way we understand and with whom we live in our daily life” (Student B)

In the following class it was presented to them the historical context of Spain on the eve of Civil War (1936). After that, they were asked to reread the first reflection and later they would develop a new reflection making a relation of the new presented topic with the movie. This work aimed to assess if the new information could provide a change of sense and meaning.

The analysis shows that the knowledge of the historical context provided a better understanding of the facts and behavior of people, and helped them to look at the movie with a new view.

Aside from two diaries that show the students didn’t have a big progress on reflection, the others ones show a change of sense and a better understanding of facts in the movie.

“We can see through the movie how the human being doesn’t feel secure, the circumstances of live take us to destroy what could be the most precious thing in the human being’s life — the integrity and the friendship with people that are around us. [...]”

[...]

“Today we live in a society that is not able to love because we are deluded and ridden by aggressive reactions of live. The world is full of rules and laws where we can’t decide what we want but we have to comply with orders to us without choice”. (Student B)

“The movie shows how the War can militate, interfere and cause damage to the healthiest union among human beings [...]”. (Student C)

Although the student D developed a similar reflection of his/her friends focusing on the social context of the period, in the course of writing it is possible to verify that he/she could realize the main objective of the activity, that is, focusing the attention to teacher’s action and his relationship with his students.

“Butterfly’s tongue is a Spanish movie that shows not only the beginning of civil war, but also the relationship between student and teacher, a relationship of trust and fellowship, providing us an interesting reflection about school and education”.

[...]

“We can identify at the end of the movie some negative aspects that for the boy are points for questioning, by the fact he is a child and doesn’t understand what is really happening”. [...] All that wonderful relationship between teacher and student lived before had finished, a new reality was growing, political and religious events were emerging and a new scenario was taking place. (Student D)

For the third reflection, they were asked to read two books: *Educação e Mudança* (Education and Changing) – Paulo Freire and Vygotsky – quem diria?! em minha sala de aula (Vygotsky — who would have thought it?! in my classroom) – Celso Antunes. They were asked to develop a new reflection making a relation of theory studied and the behavior and teacher’s role in the movie.

The aim of this new reflection was to observe how they related the theory studied and the practice of the teacher in the movie and verify if a work developed like that could provide an easy way to understand the theories of learning.

The new analyses of the diaries showed that students could have a better understanding of the theories studied when they identified or related those theories in the practice/action of the teacher in the movie.

“We can identify the teaching-learning process in the movie. The teacher Gregorio shows us that by using ordinary tools we can promote learning, by starting with well-known points it is possible to acquire a learning quality.” (Student D)



Student C brings this discussion in a more scientific way when related the use of ordinary tools by the teacher in the movie as way to promote/create a Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP), showing the understanding of a complex theory applied in practice.

“The Butterfly’s Tongue also shows us that the teacher was a Zone of Proximal Development’s creator. As pointed by Celso Antunes (p. 38), ‘For this reason every teacher can’t limit their actions by simply filling in a diary class’ [...]

[...]

[...] A good teacher identifies the ZDP of a child and help him/her go beyond of it. We can do this relation with the teacher in the movie when he develops the ZDP of his students, although the period was of total repression he taught with motivation giving to his students means of learning.” (Student C)

Student D to reflect on teachers’ role shows his/her understanding of how should be the practice and action of a teacher, that is, teachers should be creative and not follow established rules.

“As an unfinished being the man has itself a creative impetus. The teacher also knows or should know how to apply that in everyday work. The teacher can’t be on a leash in an established rules box, but must insert to each class that one according to the intellectual students’ needs, not going to the easy way, but without success”. (Student D)

5. Concluding Comments

As we have seen, teacher in service and students have difficult to understand and put theories in practice, but as pointed by Celani (2000) we need to provide them with tools that could help them to understand the theories studied and their role as teachers. There are several researches and literature that have shown that reflective diaries are useful tools to facilitate not only reflection but also as a tool of reflective learning, since the writting of diary requires the author to think on events that they have taken place providing the opportunity to express its personal thoughts.

Normally the diary is used during teacher training in service sessions, but as we could realize during this work, the use of diary in the academic context could become an effective means to facilitate and assess reflection, since it provides opportunity not only to think back on learning activities but also give opportunity to identify what they have learned relating to teaching practice, since it allowed them to express their learning in a personal way. This experience make possible to see and understand how new meanings emerged to each new information introduced during the process and how students produced knowledge in each step.

The reflections developed in the subsequent activities that weren’t object of analysis show that students were more attentive to the movie. This provides a better way to introduce and discuss new theories.

This experience provides evidence that reflective diaries can be used not only during continuing teachers’ formation but as a learning and assessment tool of reflection in educational contexts to achieve the objective of the activities.

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