

Writing and the situated construction of teachers' cognition: portfolios as complex performative spaces

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With this paper, I aim to contribute to the understanding of the teaching portfolio as a genre. I analyse the linguistic construction and performative nature of the reflective voice in the portfolio of one pre-service teacher. The results reveal her voice to have been constructed upon the convergence of other voices and to perform diverse reflective actions. The portfolio is conceptualised as a complex performative space that is used to construct a complex thought about practice and, accordingly, verbally act upon the development of the teacher's reflective cognition. I finally equate some research questions that are set by this conceptualisation.

Keywords: portfolio; writing; genre; teachers' professional learning; reflection; performative acts; complex thought

Introduction

The portfolio has become a powerful linguistic tool in a wide range of social contexts. This paper will focus on one such case, namely teachers' education.

A lot has been said about portfolio writing as practice in teacher education. Topics such as nature, purposes, contexts, audience, characteristics, conditions of development, management process and assessment of effectiveness are among the most frequently discussed about the teaching portfolio practice.

The constructivist nature of the portfolio as a document for reflective understanding of teaching experiences is perhaps its most acknowledged or assumed feature (Wolf and Diez 1998; Lyons 1998; Jones and Shelton 2006). Besides, the teacher portfolio has been shown to suit multiple purposes, contexts and audiences (Zeichner and Wray 2001; Darling 2001; Jones and Shelton 2006; Berril and Addison 2010). Some agreement has come up about its essential characteristics or components, with particular incidence on purpose and audience, philosophy statement, context of development, evidence and reflections (Jones and Shelton 2006; Zeichner and Wray 2001; Darling 2001; Berril and Addison 2010). Its full integration in the social learning environment has been recognised as an essential condition of portfolio development (Imhof and Picard 2009); negotiation and sharing of characteristics and appraisal criteria as well as regular mentoring and feedback processes are claimed as fundamental (Zeichner and Wray 2001; Darling 2001; Berril and Addison 2010), and a role is acknowledged to the writer's final management of design, organisation and justification of contents evidencing the full development of an ownership stance about the learning represented (Zeichner and Wray 2001; Darling 2001; Jones and Shelton 2006). Assessment has been a major concern about the use of teaching

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portfolio (Lyons 1998; Darling 2001). On the one hand, research has revealed its effectiveness in the intellectual stimulation, understanding of education, autonomy and self-esteem among portfolio users. On the other, it has also underlined the challenges and tensions it generates, mostly in the form of anxiety (Wade and Yarbrough 1996; Bazerman et al. forthcoming), as its construction requires self-directed dispositions for learning, rather than passive teacher-directed modes of instruction, as well as writing competences, besides commitment and communion among learners and supervisors, which can be hard to meet (Zeichner and Wray 2001; Darling 2001; Jones and Shelton 2006; Imhof and Picard 2009).

The study I present in this paper about portfolio writing builds on Ivanič's (2004) theoretical framework about conceptualisations of writing (or 'discourses of writing'), and particularly on the idea that actual writing events are hybrid instantiations of different discourses of writing, to look into portfolios from a complementary, linguistic perspective.

In fact, the overview presented about teaching portfolios is exemplary of the 'social practices discourse of writing' (Ivanič 2004), as portfolio stands out as a situated linguistic practice that fulfils a powerful socialising role in the context of the participation in and doing of the teaching practice and teaching education. Comparatively, relatively less has been discussed about the teaching portfolio from 'the genre discourse of writing' (Ivanič 2004). Organisation, coherence, cohesion, intelligibility and communicative power emerge as its most usually recognised linguistic features (Darling 2001; Jones and Shelton 2006).

With this paper, I aim to contribute to a deeper linguistic characterisation of the teacher's portfolio as a genre that sustains teachers' situated learning and doing. In the 'Language and the situated construction of professional cognition' section, I situate my inquiry by briefly discussing the socio-cultural understanding of language in learning and development (Vygotsky 1986) in order to draw attention to the role of (written) genres (Bakhtin 1986) as mediating tools for the development of professional cognition (Bazerman 2009). The teacher's portfolio is then characterised, in section 'Portfolio writing and the situated construction of teachers' reflective cognition', as a genre for the development of teachers' reflective specialised form of cognition. In the remaining sections, a case study of the written portfolio of one pre-service teacher is reported, analysed and discussed. In section 'The study: context, object and methodology', I contextualise the study, which took place in the context of a pre-service education program in Portugal, and detail the qualitative analytical procedures that I followed, focusing on the linguistic construction of the teacher's *reflective voice*. In section 'The research: main results', I present the results of the analysis, and, in section 'Discussion of the results: the portfolio as a complex performative space', I discuss those results by introducing my interpretation of the portfolio as a *complex performative space*, a specialised genre which the pre-service teacher used to construct a *complex thought* about the practice she had experienced and, accordingly, *verbally act* upon the development of her specialised cognition as a practitioner. My main conclusions, including the discussion of some implications of the results for the conceptualisation of reflection as a polyphonic endeavour, of complex thought as teachers' specialised form of cognition as well as of portfolio as a genre, are presented in the final part of the paper.

Language and the situated construction of professional cognition

A socio-cultural understanding of professional learning and of the role of language in learning supported my inquiry into the teachers' portfolio.

One of the central tenets of socio-cultural epistemologies of professional learning concerns the social nature of human cognition, assumed to be community-generated, community-maintained and maintaining (Bruffee 1986). Accordingly, human cognition is acknowledged to have a (non-universal) situated character, to be constructed, shared and understood within the limits of each community of knowledge.

Another central idea is the acknowledgement of the role of language in such process of situated cognitive development. According to this view, concepts, ideas, theories, the world, reality and facts 'are all *language* constructs generated by knowledge communities' (Bruffee 1986, 777, my italics). The idea, originating in Vygotsky (1986), that people start by learning interpersonally, "talking through" our tasks with another person and then internalising that conversation as thought' (Bruffee 1986, 785) within the zones of proximal development that those interactions put us as learners into, is now fully assumed.

Language is therefore recognised as a fundamental cognitive tool for (self-regulated, life-long) learning and development of socially situated forms of cognition. Besides, language itself has been acknowledged to have a situated nature (Vygotsky 1986; Halliday and Hasan 1989; Gee 1992; Heath 1983/1986), and communities of practice are conceived of as communities of discourse (Swales 1988), each of which making use of specific and historically edified ways with words individuals must learn in order to fully develop as a community and community members. Recent developments concerning genres and writing, built upon this conceptual background, were fundamental in framing my study.

Genre theories (Bakhtin 1986; Halliday and Martin 1993; Bronckart 1999) have been particularly revealing about the socially specific nature of language. A genre is a prototypical textual format that is generated by the social context in which it becomes necessary and by the social purpose it serves, which is then empirically realised as text (Bronckart 1999). One of the most relevant contributions of the genre theory has been the recognition that the more socially stable a genre is as for its purposes, audiences and general structure, the easier its identification and the better its realisation as text and the accomplishment of social purposes it serves (Marcuschi 2002).

Genres have been characterised as tools for social cognition. Bazerman (2009) conceives of the process of being socialised into the various human activity systems (disciplines, professions and communities) as 'cognitive apprenticeship' (290), viewing the various genres as crucial tools for moulding the situated (and socially expected) forms of cognition. In particular, Bazerman considers genres to be powerful socio-cultural tools that guide thinking and the construction of situated cognition by placing learners in defined problem spaces (the 'genres' themselves) for which they provide the necessary solutions (Bazerman et al. forthcoming; cf. Bazerman 2009). As he sees them, once internalised, genres become new 'ways of expression, thinking, seeing, and ultimately remaking one's prior knowledge of the field and prior knowledge of the world'; once one internalises a genre, 'one learns to think and act as a member of one's profession or discipline' (Bazerman 2009, 289), as expected.

Writing-to-learn theories have also been relevant developments of the recognition of the role of language as a learning tool. According to these, by writing to ourselves we represent experience for our own understanding and learning (Britton 1970). In fact, by constructing a written representation, the contents of thinking and action are objectified, made concrete, stable, analysable, editable and liable to be shared and validated by others (Eisner 1987). Thus, writing opens up possibilities of (re)constructing thinking by thinking about thinking and about practice, thus of constantly developing new ideas for the

future (Eisner 1987, 2006). Writing is therefore recognised to have a powerful heuristic force because of its cognitive and meta-cognitive dimension: ‘[t]he act of making something 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, 109).

Portfolio writing and the situated construction of teachers’ reflective cognition

The concept of *reflection* has become prominent in the current understanding of practitioners’ cognition. It is conceived of as a critical inquiry stance of one’s professional experiences supported by deep theoretical knowledge, wide contextual awareness and serious ethical concerns (Dewey 1933; Schön 1983; Habermas 1986). It acknowledges the importance of the development of meta-professional thinking abilities, that is, of the capacity to analyse thoroughly practitioners’ own particular practical reality and conceptual background by using (otherwise non-contextualised or even implicit) knowledge in order to develop practical wisdom, be able to improve practice and transform themselves. This professional disposition is now recognised to be the most powerful driving force for specialised, self-monitored, conscious and conscientious *doing* (more and more understood as *reflection-in-action* (Schön 1983)) and life-long, autonomous professional *learning*.

Reflection has also become a central disposition to be developed in teachers’ professional arena. There has been a re-conceptualisation of teachers from ‘knowledge users and exemplary technicians’ into ‘conscious knowledge producers and transformers of their own practical epistemology’ through reflection (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993; Hatton and Smith 1995; Marcos, Miguel, and Tillema 2009; Moon 2004; Flores, Vieira, and Ferreira *forthcoming*).

This professional re-conceptualisation had important repercussions on teachers’ education, which is now seen as learning how to become reflective and be able to build a reflective practice. It has also impacted the role of language in such professional learning. Special attention has been given, for instance, to the supervision process and to the interactive conversations held between pre-service teachers and their supervisors (Shulman 2004), but also writing has been ascribed a renewed and enthusiastic role in the development of reflection and of professional learning in teacher education (Hatton and Smith 1995; Zeichner and Liston 1996; Zeichner and Wray 2001; Darling 2001; Shulman 2004; Doecke and Pereira 2012).

In this renewed epistemological understanding concerning teacher cognitive development and appraisal of the role of written language, new, demanding and situated literacy practices have emerged in teacher education programmes. Portfolio writing has become one such practice.

Referring specifically to pre-service teachers, Darling (2001, 111) defines the teacher’s portfolio as a:

narrative that tells a coherent story of student teachers’ learning experiences (...) and highlights thoughtful reflection on, and analysis of, those experiences. It is not simply an accumulation of pieces and products; it is an unfolding [of their] understandings about teaching and learning, and about their development as a professional.

The purpose of producing such personalised analyses of beginning situated practice is to lay the foundation of teachers’ specialised reflective cognition and their autonomy in future action. In fact, according to this perspective, student teachers are the main audience

for the meanings and theorisations they make of their practice through portfolio writing. The ‘learning portfolio’ (Zeichner and Wray 2001) is thus assumed as a tool that supports pre-service teachers’ construction of their reflective cognition and practical epistemology, the development of their professional identity and belonging to their community of practice (Darling 2001). As any other genre, it is a tool for social action (Marcuschi 2002).

Although this is a very well accepted understanding of the teachers’ portfolio, it stays short when we try to identify the linguistic features that define it as a socially situated genre (Ivanič 2004). To begin with, the definition of the teacher portfolio as a genre is not a straightforward one among teachers themselves (Anderson and De Meulle 1998). Wolf and Siu-Runyan’s (1996) discussion of teachers’ portfolio models is a valuable contribution to the understanding of this genre as an array of possibilities. They identify the *ownership model of portfolio*, which serves students’ ownership of their professional growth (therefore quite close to Darling’s [2001] and Zeichner and Wray’s [2001] definitions); *the guidance of the learning process model*, assumed to be a facilitation tool of the very process of teachers’ practice through collaboration, supporting the communication and feedback between pre-service teachers and supervisors; and the *documenting, evaluation and professional ‘certifying’ model*, which serves mostly assessment and accountability aims in teacher education. Zeichner and Wray (2001) also identify *showcase portfolios*, mostly developed for job appliance. The disparity in the aims that the teacher’s portfolios fulfil and audiences they serve clearly illustrates the potential plural realisation of the portfolio as a text and the consequent way in which the teacher’s portfolio defies one of the basic features of what a genre is, namely its conventional and stable nature (Bakhtin 1986; Bronckart 1999). And I believe that the *ownership model* of the portfolio, which will be the focus of discussion in this paper, can hardly be expected to be a stable text precisely because of its personal character.

In effect, as I see it, one of the most challenging linguistic dimensions (Coutinho 2007) that make a portfolio recognisable as *such* lies precisely in the author’s voice, which is to be heard in the first person. The portfolio is a text in which one expects to listen to a voice that speaks about herself – that is reflective – and such voice is a specialised way of dealing with words teachers must learn in order to fully develop as members of the teachers’ community. Building on Bazerman (2009), I suggest that the portfolio is a powerful socio-cultural genre that scaffolds the construction teachers specialised thinking and situated cognitive development by placing them in a defined problem space (the construction of reflection, and, thus, of professional learning) but also by providing the necessary tools for its solution, reflective voice being one such tool.

The reflective voice is the linguistic dimension of the teacher’s portfolio that I analyse in this paper. I present and discuss a case study of the portfolio of one pre-service teacher with the intention of contributing to a better understanding of the linguistic features that characterise the genre.

The study: context, object and methodology

In Portugal, teacher education has been profoundly transformed since 2005, when the Bologna Process, a European Community declaration, was legislated (Decreto Lei 42/2005, regulated in 2006 by Decreto Lei 74/2006). The transformations were explicitly sustained by the conception of teachers’ education as the development of an inquiry stance ‘through research activity’ (Decreto Lei 74/2006, 2247) to be developed in the context of experimented practice, thus valuing the knowledge produced by teachers themselves in such contexts (Flores, Vieira, and Ferreira forthcoming). Such stance is assumed

to support the construction of professional abilities future teachers need in order to adapt to the singularities, specificities and challenges of their profession (Decreto Lei 43/2007).

The regulations of the master courses at the *Universidade do Minho*, in Portugal, are currently structured by this legal framework. Master courses are explicitly assumed to be edified upon:

a constructivist, cultural and critical conception of the teaching profession, which is developed through a dialogue between theory and practice, thinking and action, in which it is necessary to introduce ideas of consciousness and reflection. (Instituto da Educação 2010, 25)

The teacher is explicitly conceived of as a ‘critical intellectual and reflective practitioner’ (Instituto da Educação 2010, 10) and pre-service teachers, like any other professionals, receive their professional certification when they demonstrate to have become able to use and integrate knowledge in the comprehension and resolution of complex practical situations, communicate it in a clear and unambiguous way and show evidence of being capable of life-long learning (Decreto Lei 43/2007). Practicum periods have thus become key in the process of teacher education, being the central object of pre-service teachers’ inquiry (Flores, Vieira, and Ferreira *forthcoming*), and written language has assumed a very important role in this renewed professional learning process.

At the University of Minho, written language assumes two major genres in master courses in teacher education: the report and the portfolio. The report accounts for a carefully designed, implemented and evaluated action—research plan. It obeys a shared structure and is to be presented and discussed publicly, thus providing the certification of the master’s degree. Eventually, it is made available to the whole academic community through the university’s repositório (<http://repositorium.sdum.uminho.pt/>). The portfolio has a private character, being shared only by teacher students and their supervisors. Although students receive general guidance as for its structure and contents, the portfolio is conceived of in a less strict way. In effect, most of the directives are in accordance with the overview above presented, and, in particular, with the ‘ownership model’, discussed earlier (Darling 2001; Wolf and Siu-Runyan 1996; Sá-Chaves 2009; Shulman 1998; Vieira 2006): it ought to be comprehensive, authentic and reflective. Its structure is expected to be flexibly managed by student teachers, although they receive the indication that it should include an introduction, the clarification of the aims it fulfils, the characterisation of the context of practice, the exposition of the teacher’s epistemology of education; a synthesis of the main activities that were carried out, unit plans, pedagogical materials and other data that illustrate the pedagogical process, and a final balance of the learning achieved through the professional learning experience.

At our university, mentoring is part of the process of portfolio development during practicum. Once a week supervisors and student teachers discuss the work to be done each week, after which student teachers write a reflection that the supervisors comment back. Besides, student teachers are also mentored by the teachers with whom they are working at schools. The process of portfolio preparation takes a whole semester or a whole year, depending on courses, and in some cases includes a public presentation among students and supervisors, during which discussion happens. The practicum is, therefore, a process of data gathering, of which students make sense through portfolio writing (Darling 2001). No specific task is dedicated to portfolio development as the work done throughout the practicum is understood to prepare portfolio construction. Portfolios are the first of these two written reflective texts to be handed on.

In the academic year 2011–2012, I supervised the first edition of the practicum of the *Master in Pre-school Education and Teaching in the First Grades*. The two pre-service teachers that I supervised developed their one-semester practicum periods with second graders (7–8-year-old children).

One of the portfolios of my teacher students struck me for being a very good example of a reflective text. She followed no models, as this was the first year the master was functioning. For a whole semester and by having had the opportunity of sharing the responsibility for practice with the teacher at school and a practicum partner, she had experienced a wide variety of teaching practices in different curricular areas: language and literature, maths, sciences, arts and drama, which she referred to in her portfolio.

I supervised this student's practicum and was in a position to appreciate the authenticity of the text. She had stood up as the leader of the practicum group, and this was one of the reasons of my interest in her text. It fulfilled the requested and it was coherent, cohesive and clearly written. I found that her portfolio captured the *active learning stance* that she had experimented, the *interaction* that she had been involved with, the *thinking* she had engaged in, the *meaning* she had made of her experience and an active *disposition to go on with the practice of re-writing herself* as learner of how to be a teacher (Darling 2001). In brief, this text called my attention because it was 'a point-in-time development as a learner' (Jones and Shelton 2006, 1), the documenting of an emerging autonomous professional identity (Darling 2001). It was a communicatively effective tool, in which her reflective voice was quite well moulded and clearly audible. For those who had not participated in the supervisory process, her text might seem as accommodating the dominant discourse of teacher reflection in order to present to university tutors the kind of written account she had been told to present, but I knew the text was genuine. Other portfolios I knew about only indirectly didn't sound like this at all, amounting, as far as I know, to collections of unanalysed practice, which transpired no ownership of experience at all.

This case immediately challenged me to question the reflectiveness that imbued her text. As a teacher educator expected to scaffold the situated writing of reflective pre-service teacher portfolios, I found myself in the need to further enquire into how my student's professional knowledge and professional autonomy had been constructed through her portfolio.

A second reading helped me realise that her reflectiveness had much to do with the process of writing that had been developed during the practicum, starting well before the writing of the portfolio (either immediately before or after her experiences at school), since many other prior written texts were traceable in her final text. That is to say, her portfolio was replete with other voices besides the portfolio's, and I hypothesised that there lay one of its most powerful sources of reflectiveness. That instigated me to enquire into such particular textual dimension, trying to answer the following questions:

- (1) Which other voices (or texts) are merged in the construction of the teacher's reflective voice and how are those voices inscribed in the text?
- (2) What does the teacher 'do' with her own discourse (upon her professional learning) in the context of calling up those other voices?

The case study (Stake 2000) that I carried out in order to answer these questions had an interpretative nature (Miles and Huberman 1994). The analysis focused on two

linguistic dimensions of the reflective voice (Martin and Rose 2004), namely the process of its construction (by identifying the origin of voices (or texts) that intersected to build up the teachers' reflective voice), and the nature of the acts performed by such voice (that is, what she did when she evoked those other voices to speak in the first person).

For the analysis of this latter dimension, I used a typology of categories of teachers' reflexivity, namely *report* (the narrative of the experienced practices), *information* (the theorisation of such practices), *confrontation* (the critical questioning of the practices that were constructed and of the theories that were used attending to the socio-cultural, political and historical context that situated those practices) and *dialogue* (the evaluation of the theory, the practices and the professional learning achieved). Whereas the definition of the former three categories was closely inspired by Smyth (1989), the definition of the latter was inspired by Hatton and Smith (1995).

This analysis motivated me to conceptualise the portfolio as a *complex performative space*. In this interpretation, two further concepts were determinant, namely *performativity* (Austin 1962) and *complex thought* (Morin 2003, 2007).

The philosophical notion of *complex thought*, as developed by Edgar Morin (2003, 2007), defines one specific epistemological stance for guiding human practice in any field of action (Pakman 2007). As Morin theorises it, *complex thought* consists of a way of thinking in which diverse sources of knowledge are merged without confounding themselves and opening way to an emergent knowledge, one that is different from its sources. Morin conceptualises this holistic thinking procedure as a powerful tool to be used to face the uncertainties caused by the crash of the dogma of the universal determinism, which he denounces as representing a simplifying dimension of thought:

The parcelled, self-contained, mechanical, separated, reductionist intelligence destroys the world's complexity, produces pieces, fractions the problems, separates what is related, makes unidimensional what is pluridimensional. (...) It annihilates any possibility of comprehension and of reflection, ending up with any possibility of corrective assessment or of long-term vision. (Morin 2003, 25, my translation)

For Morin, complex thought does not oppose any form of simple thought but integrates and strengthens it: 'As Hegel would say, the union of simplicity and complexity operates in it (...), it unifies at the same time that it distinguishes them' (Morin 2003, 29, my translation).

Performativity is a central notion in the area of linguistic pragmatics and it is due to the philosopher John Austin (1962). Austin studied speech as a specific type of action that is carried out with language. Reyes (1995, 31) sums up the concept of performativity by saying that 'to speak is literally to do'. The central thesis of speech acts theory is that language is used to do other acts besides representing the world. One of my aims was to know what my student actually *did* when she spoke in the first person, that is, the illocutionary force of her personal speech (in the context of invoking other voices), and this linguistic concept (*performativity*) allowed me to achieve that by fully embracing the typology of teachers' reflective acts, referred to above.

The notion of *complex performative space*, emerging from the use of these categories (complex thought and performativity) to interpret the results of the analysis, became central as an integrative conceptualisation of the portfolio as a linguistic tool scaffolding the construction of teachers' reflectiveness, as I explain in the following sections.

The research: main results

In order to answer the first question, I identified textual units in which other voices were audible, either because they were explicitly mentioned or because they were recognisable although having been diluted. Those textual units were further identified in the context of (and related to) the teachers' use of the first person singular or first person plural. In order to answer the second question I categorised those stretches of text using the code of reflective acts presented above. No quantitative analysis was done, except for the result of the use of one category to answer the second question, as will be clear below.

The analysis showed that my student teacher built up her voice in the portfolio by merging varied other voices and that those other voices were inscribed in the portfolio either explicit or implicitly. She mentioned and even explicitly quoted theoretical and regulatory texts as well as texts that she herself constructed in the context of her practice, mostly in the form of unit plans and written reflections. The portfolio itself was explicitly referred to in a very revealing way. Besides, it was possible to infer the presence of super-vised texts (mine, at least) as well as other reflective written pieces that the teacher wrote during the practicum process.

The analysis of the case I present below is illustrated by excerpts that I found exemplary of the issues under analysis, which however could be found in many other instances throughout the text.

Explicitly inscribed texts

There are several moments in the portfolio in which the teacher refers to content area texts as well as to texts about curricular, pedagogical or specific didactics. In many moments, she quotes those other voices in her own discourse. For instance:

The socio-constructivist conception "is used as an instrument of analysis of the learning situations and as a useful tool for deciding intelligently about the planning, development and assessment of teaching" (Coll et al. 2001, 9). Following this idea, I can say that this theory has helped me to plan my activities, to analyse its development and impact, and to take decisions about the adequateness of my practice to the specific context in which they took place. [Portfolio, Section: Philosophy of education and learning, p. 4, my italics]

The teacher also refers explicitly to the contents of other texts, such as legislation, curricula of specific areas or theoretical texts without quoting them:

[about the planning of tasks on mental calculation]

Therefore we looked for what is mentioned in the National Curriculum of Mathematics in Basic Education (2007), because it refers to the need to offer children [...] diverse situations de mental calculation, which must be practiced in class. [...] Although I had some theoretical knowledge [...] that I had learnt during my initial degree, I felt the need for more background in this area in order to choose the best strategies [...]. Thus, I went back to theory to inquire and develop my knowledge in this area. [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection about the most significant activities, p. 40, my italics]

Besides, the teacher also refers to texts that she herself had constructed during the practicum. In one of those cases, she refers to the first lesson plan that she wrote:

[...] from the beginning until the end of my practice, I consider that lesson planning was one of the dimensions in which I have developed the most. One crucial situation in this judgment

was the elaboration of *the first unit plan about 'the senses'*. [Portfolio, Section: Observation, planning and reflection, p. 11, my italics]

Another interesting example can be found when she refers to the reflection she had written about the 'story hour' activity, as well as to the written feedback that she received from me regarding her written reflection:

I consider important to say that children had some difficulty to be able to infer the lesson learnt from the story. After this task, I reflected about that and, honestly, I couldn't find a reason why. Many questions came to my mind: Why did this happen? Is it a difficulty in the reading processes, perhaps in the integrative processes? Is it possible that they are not used to make inferences? Then I could not find an answer these questions, but *in one of my reflections I mentioned that "in order that children understand stories it is necessary that they make inferences so that they can give meaning to the information in the texts. In order to attain that, it is necessary that the teacher offers situations with a high inferential level, facilitating the development of competent readers"*. In spite of that, after I received the "feedback" of [my supervisor] about this situation and after a new reflection . . . [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection about the most significant activities, p. 33, my italics]

The portfolio itself is also referred to explicitly:

The construction of this reflective portfolio was an essential tool in my professional learning, since it lead me to think again about the path that I have followed, especially by clarifying the plurality of situations that may come up in my future as a teacher. [Portfolio, Section: Conclusion, p. 52, my italics]

Implicitly inscribed texts

The portfolio reunites many other voices or texts that, nevertheless, are not explicitly referred to by the teacher. These are texts the origin of which is completely diluted in the final reflective text. Yet, my position as her supervisor has allowed me to identify some because I had read and commented on them before.

An interesting example can be found when she reports the first class she imparted, referring to the first lesson plan (about *the senses*), referred to above. In the portfolio, she integrated the reflection that she had written after the class. Thus, the reflective voice one listens to in the portfolio had its origin well before the portfolio was written and it is amplified by integrating some of my feedback about the need to detail the task she was referring to:

Original reflection:

The reading and presentation of the expositive texts [to the whole class] were the parts in which children were more involved due to their active role in the task. [First written reflection; 19 December 2012]

Final written reflection in the portfolio:

We divided the class into five groups of children, assigning one of the five senses to each of them. Each group read an expositive text about the corresponding sense [. . .] in order to select and organize new information [. . .]. In my opinion, this was the part in which children were more involved, more motivated and enthusiastic due to the active character of their role. [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection of the most significant practices, p. 20]

The answer to the second question has allowed me to verify that, in the context of such multiple textual inscription, the teacher carries out all the reflective acts included in the typology that guided the analysis. Another way put, in her reflective discourse there is evidence for all the meta-professional linguistic acts, although, as expected, she performed them in an unequal way.

Report

By reading the portfolio, one reads the narratives of what she constructed in her classes:

We divided the class into five groups of children, assigning one of the five senses to each of them. Each group read an expository text about the corresponding sense [...] in order to select and organize new information [...]. In my opinion, this was the part in which children were more involved, more motivated and enthusiastic due to the active character of their role. [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection of the most significant practices, p. 20, my italics]

Information

Besides, we understand that the narratives she constructed in and of her practices were theoretically anchored:

Although I had some theoretical knowledge [...] that I had acquired during my degree, I felt the need of further orientation in this area so that I could choose the best strategies. So I resorted to theory to do some research and further develop my knowledge in this area. [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection of the most significant practices, p. 40, my italics]

Confrontation

In the section in which she refers to the ‘Story hour’, the teacher lets us hear her questioning the curriculum as it is officially defined. Her confrontation results from her knowledge of the pre-school curricular reality, which she had also experienced as a pre-service teacher the semester before. She wrote about this in a post-experience reflection, the content of which she also implicitly recovered in her portfolio:

I consider that it is important to introduce a comment about my practice in the pre-school level. In that context, I carried out the story hour many times [...]. *When I compare that to my experience in the first grades of school, the inexistence of any initiative that is similar to the story hour, aiming to promote children’s contact with books, becomes evident [...]. However, I believe that the first grades of school do have a very important role to play in this respect, because such daily experiences are very enriching in children’s daily lives.* Bearing all this in mind, I ask myself this question: *why did the story hour not make regular part in [this school year]?* [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection of the most significant practices, p. 34, my italics]

Dialogue

She dialogues with herself with an evaluative stance and she does that quite often: she evaluates the theory that she herself resorted to, the practice that she constructed and her professional learning. In this latter case, it is also possible to differentiate between the evaluation of the final result (the product of her learning) from the evaluation of the

process that lead to such learning, including her judging about the process of portfolio writing.

Evaluating the theory

The socio constructivist conception “is useful to make intelligent decisions that are inherent to planning, developing and evaluating teaching” (Coll et al. 2001, 9). Following this idea, *I can say that this theory has helped me to plan my activities, to analyse its development and impact, and to take decisions about the adequateness of my practice to the specific context in which they took place.* [Portfolio, Section: Philosophy of education and learning, p. 4, my italics]

Evaluating practice

- Positive evaluation

We divided the class into five groups of children, assigning one of the five senses to each of them. Each group read an expositive text about the corresponding sense [...] in order to select and organize new information [...]. In my opinion, this was the part in which children were more involved, more motivated and enthusiastic due to the active character of their role. [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection of the most significant practices, p. 20, my italics]

I think that through the reformulated task students had the opportunity to begin to develop their autonomy and their ability to learn how to learn. Besides, with this task I helped them to construct knowledge related to their daily lives and to identify them on the basis of their daily lives. In this way, learning happened through action and the construction of significant learning. [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection of the most significant practices, pp. 22–23, my italics]

- Negative evaluation

I consider it important to say that children had some difficulty in being able to infer the lesson learnt from the story. After this task, I reflected about that and, honestly, I couldn't find a reason why. Many questions came to my mind: Why did this happen? Is it a difficulty in the reading processes, perhaps in the integrative processes? Is it possible that they are not used to make inferences? Then I could not find an answer these questions. [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection of the most significant practices, p. 33, my italics]

Evaluating professional learning

- Reconstruction of the teachers' practical theory

After the feedback of [the author of the paper] and of our supervising teacher at the school and after a personal reflection about the initial planning, *we realized that [the initial planning] did not put into practice the concepts that we had learnt during our academic experience, and this did not correspond to the path we wanted to follow. With this [initial] planning, children would have a passive role during the learning process, as they were not given the opportunity of finding nor of researching, that is to say, of constructing their own knowledge. Therefore, we reformulated the whole task so that it stopped being so traditional and began to have an authentic socio constructivist character. Through the reformulated plan, students had the opportunity, for example, of looking for information about the senses,*

work in group and present their findings to their classmates. In this way, they had an active role, developing their learning in interaction and with the support of their teachers.

[...] From the beginning until the end of my practicum, I consider that planning was one of the aspects in which I have developed the most. The first planning about the senses was the turning point in this development. [...] The process of construction and reflection about that planning was a big challenge, but it turned out to be very important for the development of my capacity to learn and to learn how to learn as a teacher. [Portfolio, Section: Observation, planning and reflection, p. 11, my italics]

- Identification of decisive factors in the teacher's learning: practice, reflection, collaboration and portfolio writing

Practice, reflection and portfolio writing:

My aim is that this [portfolio] shows all the process of observation, action and reflection that I developed during my practicum. Thus, it will be a learning text, one that will allow me to reflect and be aware of the educative and formative process as a whole [...]. [...] Being aware of the importance of reflection about practice [...], in this portfolio I will reflect about my learning, the difficulties that I experimented and the aspects that I must improve in future. [Portfolio, Section: Introduction, p. 2, my italics]

The diverse situations in which I found myself during my practicum, my practice and my reflection about that gave me the opportunity to enlarge my knowledge by incorporating new learning into the ones I had constructed before, as I have affirmed in this portfolio. [...]. Besides, the writing of this portfolio was an essential tool in my professional learning since it made me think again about all my way, clarifying especially well the plurality of the situations that may turn up in my future as a teacher. [Portfolio, Section: Introduction, p. 52, my italics]

Collaboration:

After the feedback of [the author of the paper] and of our supervising teacher at the school and after a personal reflection about the initial planning, we realized that it did not put into practice the concepts that we had learnt during our academic experience, and this did not correspond to the path we wanted to follow. [...] Cooperation in this class planning was very important for me because it allowed me to learn many things. [Portfolio, Section: Description and reflection of the most significant practices, p. 33, my italics]

These results are schematised in [Figure 1](#).

Discussion of the results: the portfolio as a complex performative space

The analysis revealed that the pre-service teacher does a dense set of reflective operations in her portfolio. She reports the practice that she constructed, informs it theoretically and dialogues with herself about such practice by evaluating the theory that she (re)visited and her own learning, by identifying the role of reflection, practice, collaboration and of portfolio writing in her learning as a member of the teachers' community. In a more limited way, she also shows some confrontation in her critical positioning about the curricular context that framed her experience, which she considers to have limited her performance. The embryonic critical capacity that she shows is not, however, unusual among pre-service teachers (Day 1999; Hatton and Smith 1995).

The analysis also showed that this complex tissue of reflective operations is performed by a voice that emerges from the confluence of many other voices/texts into the portfolio.

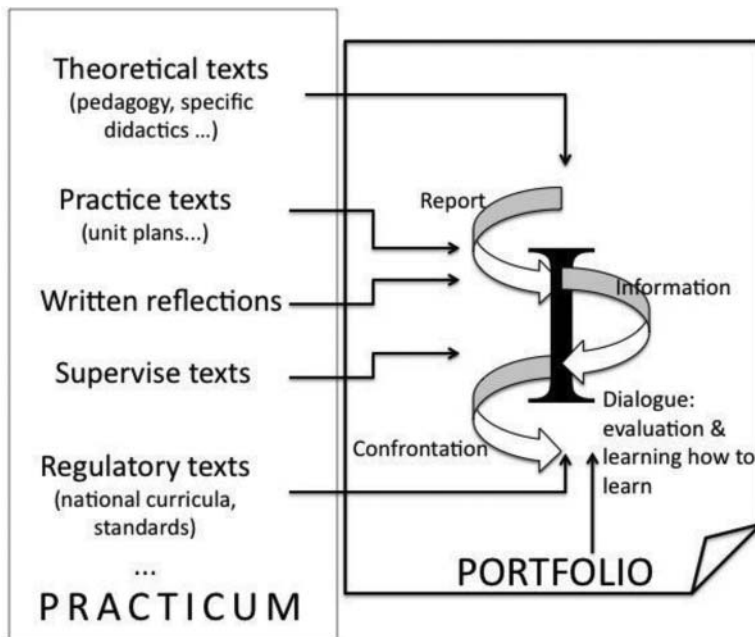


Figure 1. The origin of the pre-service teacher's reflective voice in the portfolio.

Although the teacher has certainly made use of diverse other sources of knowledge and information beyond that in the portfolio (e.g. fragments of her experience which had not been written before as well as other pieces of thinking), I believe that it is now clear that the construction of the final reflective voice depended by and large on all the other voices/texts that converged into it, its unison emerging from their meeting in this way. In fact, the voice that emerges in the portfolio is clearly an autonomous one, renewing and expanding those other voices/texts, giving them new meanings. Accordingly, I conclude that the teacher carries out and represents, through the writing of her portfolio, an example of *complex thought* (Morin 2003, 2007) about her professional experience. On such concept, Morin comments that:

The systemic idea, as opposed to the reductionist one, understands that the *whole is more than the sum of its parts*. From the atom to the star, from the bacterium to man and society, the organization of the whole produces new qualities or features in relation to the parts when considered in situation: *the emergencies*. (Morin 2003, 15, my italics)

Furthermore, the analysis shows that, when she uses written language to construct and represent a complex thought about the professional practice that she experienced, the pre-service teacher is *linguistically performing upon her own professional learning and development*. The portfolio thus appears as a powerful edifying instrument for professional cognition. The specialised voice that emerges in the portfolio *performs acts* upon the (inner) development of the pre-service teacher's practical knowledge, structuring her future professional performance in her social community and her future learning. I believe the pre-service teacher could not have constructed this learning without such linguistic space.

Last but not least, the teacher shows a considerable degree of awareness about the role of portfolio writing. She shows to be aware of the potential of the portfolio as a space to perform multiple linguistic acts at the service of her professional learning. By doing that, she occupies a space that the portfolio-as-text leaves open for its author, in which she goes ahead of the thinking about her practice and learning and evaluates the process of thinking created by the portfolio as a learning tool. This way, the teacher shows her conception about the portfolio as a space to shape a holistic meta-thinking about the meaning/significance of all she experienced and thought, thus, as a tool for professional learning.

My main interpretation of the answers that I got for the research questions is therefore that this teacher's portfolio offers itself as a *complex performative space*. It is a genre in which the teacher uses written language to (1) construct and represent a complex thought, which emerges from the melting of multiple voices that are relevant in her understanding of her experience, and, as such, to (2) consciously act upon her own specialised professional cognition and construe herself as a practitioner. As a genre, the teacher's portfolio thus emerges as a professional empowering tool, and the polyphonic (Bakhtin 1984, 1986), reflective *voice*, with its complex performative nature, seems to me to be one of its defining linguistic dimensions.

Conclusions

Portfolio writing is a practice that proves challenging for pre-service teachers. Building on the arguments presented in the text, there is reason to suggest that challenges may be due to the ambiguity of the linguistic features of the portfolio genre.

The analysis of the portfolio of the pre-service teacher that I have just presented allowed me to reach some conclusions regarding the aim of my inquiry, which was to contribute to a deeper linguistic characterisation of the teacher's portfolio as a genre.

I have focused my attention on the construction and nature of the reflective voice that is heard in this genre. The case study I carried out allowed me to conceptualise the portfolio as a linguistic space in which the pre-service teacher constructs her voice upon other voices, a process which allows her to elaborate a complex thought about her experience and, thus, to act upon the development of her specialised, reflexive cognition.

As I see it, the characterisation of the voice that is heard in the portfolio as resulting from the convergence of other voices is relevant to the characterisation of the linguistic parameters of the genre 'portfolio', at least for the *ownership model* (Wolf and Siu-Runyan 1996). My conclusions thus point to the idea that polyphony (Bakhtin 1984, 1986) is a defining feature of teachers' reflection.

Furthermore, the study confirms understanding of the complementary nature among the discourses of writing put forward by Ivanič (2004) as it brings fundamentals to the idea that an integrated approach makes sense to the understanding of the portfolio-writing practice. The linguistic features that I traced were implicitly learned and put in practice by the student teacher, thus supporting a 'social practices discourse of writing'. However, this was a very good pre-service teacher, and others may benefit from making the features explicit or from learning them through reading this example, as in fact it has happened, thus justifying a 'genre approach to portfolio'. I intend to proceed with such linguistic research.

Furthermore the characterisation of the portfolio as a *complex performative space* contributes to a deeper understanding of the teacher's reflective epistemology as the development of a complex thought. This idea needs now further inquiry, enlarging the

study to other data, including in-service use of the portfolio. It will be interesting to see whether it does have the potential for making specialised professional thought more and more complex in such contexts as well.

Although in my professional context the teacher's portfolio is a private document, I am in the position to hypothesise that the knowledge that the pre-service teacher was able to construct by writing it and the potential questioning that it produced about different aspects of professional practice were relevant in her writing of the final *report*, in which she showed publicly the inquiry stance about practice that she had developed. Thus, portfolio writing does seem to have this additional formative advantage, which also deserves research.

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