Reading and writing in graduate teacher education. Learning processes reported in portfolios in a master's thesis proposal writing seminar.

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Cita:

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Abstract

Our study aims to describe and characterize the process that students go through in the Thesis Proposal Writing Seminar of a Master's Degree in Teacher Education. The master's students are teachers with years of professional practice, although with no or little experience in research. The master's degree requires them to engage in the research on professional educational practices through a final thesis with specific theoretical and methodological characteristics. They have to observe and analyze the professional activity (challenges and learning) of an educator (teacher, school principal, librarian, advisor, etc.) in a workplace situation.

In the thesis proposal writing seminar, which lasts for a year and a half, participants are therefore confronted with new social practices, typical of communities that produce knowledge in education. They begin to explore these practices especially when they face the written elaboration of a thesis proposal in the writing seminar. The seminar accompanies the process through multiple ways, in particular collective oral discussions of their successive drafts. Joining this new community of practice, with their typical ways of doing, reasoning, writing and valuing their tasks, entails a great deal of dedication from all participants, with attempts and reattempts, full of tensions. The seminar guides and supports them so that they begin to participate in these practices through the elaboration of their thesis proposals and the reflection on the tasks involved.

Our research aims to characterize this process. To do so, we will start with the content analysis of the portfolios submitted by the master's students at the end of the seminar. These portfolios include a selection of written drafts and accounts of situations experienced in the

seminar that they consider particularly significant for the advancement of their thesis proposals, as well as a reflective justification of why they have selected them. Based on their points of view, we will study the situations they have chosen, for which we will examine the corresponding documentary and observational material: video recording of sessions, drafts of the proposal, written participation in the virtual platform, etc. The analysis will relate a) the selection of significant moments made by the students in their portfolios, together with their reflection on these moments, and b) the situations pertaining to the seminar to which they refer in the portfolios.

The results of this study will thus contribute to understanding the processes of teacher professional development (the constructive activity) involved in the elaboration of a research proposal (the productive activity). This genre is typical of research domains and unused in the teaching profession. We aim to identify the challenges and tensions that students experience, and the facilitating resources that help them in their way.

Key words: teachers in training for research - professional learning process - thesis proposal - academic reading, writing and orality.

NOTE: We have included in blue some questions or comments to IRC Workshop colleagues.

Institutional description
Primary school teachers and high school teachers in Argentina are trained in non-university higher education institutions through four-year programs. They seldom do research or read and write research texts. They rarely pursue postgraduate studies.

In contrast, the National Pedagogical University (UNIPE), created in the last decade, offers a Master's program in Teacher Education for in-service teachers who in turn teach future teachers in non-university higher education institutions.

This master's degree, which is public and free of charge, aims to train reflective teacher educators. It seeks to teach them to analyze teaching practices, through a specific theoretical and methodological framework based on Professional Didactics (Pastré, 2008, 2011) and the Activity Clinic (Fernández y Clot, 2007).

The present study will focus on the experience of master's students who attend an 18-month thesis proposal writing seminar.

Our research problem
Students enrolled in the Master's Degree in Teacher Education at UNIPE, coming from the field of teaching, encounter the field of research, which requires them to begin to position themselves as analysts of educational practices, and as authors of texts related to the production of knowledge.

In particular, writing a thesis proposal often conflicts with other demands, since designing research corresponds to a system of activity that coexists -and collides- with other systems in which master's students participate (Lundell and Beach, 2002). We are interested in

examining, through the journey of the master's students during the 18-month Master's Thesis Proposal Writing Seminar, in what ways they experience and cope with the tension between the activity system of the teaching profession and the activity system of those who plan to research educational practices.

The main objective of the seminar is to accompany the process of elaborating a thesis proposal, a new genre in the field of research.

Students pass the seminar with the completion of successive writing tasks aimed at the thesis proposal, collective and peer review, reading of supporting bibliography, and with the delivery of a final portfolio, which compiles their intermediate productions, made throughout the workshop, along with reflective comments on their journey.

Our study will start performing a content analysis of their portfolios to explore the learning process that seminar participants go through as they engage in writing, reading and oral practices typical of the research field. It will also examine the situations referred to in these portfolios.

Research Questions

1. What situations, experienced in the 18-month writing seminar, do the master's students report as being significant for advancing their thesis proposals?

2. What challenges do the students face, how do they approach them and what do they recognize that they have learned in the process of writing their thesis proposal through their participation in this seminar?

3. What are the attributes of the situations selected by the students?

Our hypothesis

-The students in the seminar report in their portfolios that they experience different challenges, throughout the course of the seminar, which involve the need to learn research and writing practices, as well as to develop new attitudinal and affective capabilities.

-The students express that they approach these challenges with the support of different resources provided by the seminar. They find it useful to identify their processes of change with respect to the moment of the beginning of the course. They note their own progress in the drafts of their research proposals. They gradually make relevant comments to the work of their peers.

-The analysis of the video recordings of the sessions as well as of the exchanges in the Moodle virtual platform shows that many (but not all the) students progressively appropriate the logic and criteria for thinking about writing which were addressed over the seminar.

Key Theorists

This study is theoretically framed in two lines of research. An Anglophone one linked to the rhetorical genre studies, complemented with research related to the elaboration of a thesis and the process of socialization in a research domain. The second line comes from research

carried out in France and Argentina related to the reflective practitioner, which extends Donald Schön's contributions.

The process that the master's students participating in the writing seminar go through involves entering an unknown community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or system of activity (Russell, 1997) linked to a research domain, unknown to them because they come from non-university environments. To understand this process we turn to research that has shown that the appropriation of new disciplinary genres brings with it challenges and learning that exceed the domain of writing and entail ways of doing, thinking and valuing, typical of the disciplinary communities in which these genres circulate (Bazerman , Simon, Ewing, y Pieng, 2013; Bazerman, Simon, y Pieng, 2014). This research has shown that participation in unfamiliar writing practices of a given disciplinary community, entails a process of disciplinary socialization (Bazerman, 2009; Carter, 2007; Danielewicz et al., 2021; Miller, 1994; among others), which goes beyond the acquisition of mere linguistic forms and methodological techniques. This process involves discursive, thinking and also subjective or identity challenges (Stierer, 2000a, 2000b).

We also draw on research that sees the experience of writing a thesis not only as a cognitive, methodological and discursive challenge, but also as a vital challenge (Carlino, 2008, 2012; Eveline and Booth Eveline, 1996). Doing a thesis involves developing personal attitudes to cope patiently and tolerantly with uncertainty, insecurity, repeated inadequacies, and the slow provisional production of written drafts that require numerous successive rewrites (Delamont y Atkinson, 2001, Morrison-Sounders et al., 2005; Lovitts, 2005; Manathunga, 2002; Miller y Brimicombe, 2004; Ngcongo, 2000; Styles and Radloff, 2000; Vogler Urion, 2002; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Crighton, y Warnes, 2003; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Lilly, y Warnes, 2004).

On the other hand, and recognizing that the writing seminar embarks them on a new system of activity (that of becoming analysts of teaching practices, in addition to teaching), we appeal to studies on reflective practitioners. Reflection on this process is necessary because of the magnitude of the transformations undergone. The francophone contributions of professional didactics (Patré, 2008), which extend the work of Donald Schön, show that professionals learn not through a theoretical course but through active participation in situations, on which they reflect within the framework of a formative process (Mayen, 2017). Central here is the opportunity to return reflectively on the activities carried out to promote learning (Pastré, 2011).

Within this conceptual framework, reflective writing is a key issue, which is promoted in this seminar by requesting a portfolio. Writing about the experience passed through in the seminar over 18 months would help to become aware of the challenges and transformations undergone (Crinon and Guigue, 2006; Buysse and Vanhull, 2009; Jorro 2007; Vanhulle, 2016).

We have yet to review the literature to theoretically frame our analysis of the portfolios elaborated by the master's students. We welcome bibliographical suggestions from the International Researchers Consortium Workshop participants.

Methodology

This is a descriptive and interpretive qualitative research about the experience of the participants of a Master's Thesis Proposal Writing Seminar within the Master's Degree in Teacher Education at Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UNIPE) in Argentina. The writing seminar is developed throughout 3 semesters.

We will start with the content analysis of their portfolios submitted at the end of the seminar. These portfolios include a selection of written drafts and accounts of situations experienced in the seminar that they consider particularly significant, as well as a reflective justification of why they have selected them.

Based on their points of view, we will focus on the situations they have chosen, for which we will examine the corresponding documentary and observational material: video recording of sessions, written participation in the virtual platform, drafts of their proposals, peer comments they have received about their texts, etc.

Case study

The Master's Thesis Proposal Writing Seminar was delivered in Spanish as it is usual in Argentina, in two parallel classes, each in charge of one instructor. It meant 60 class hours divided into 15 monthly synchronous lessons on Zoom, 4 hours each, plus 90 asynchronous hours via Moodle, during three semesters. This schedule allows the instructors to follow the students in their writing of a 7,000-word thesis proposal that should be submitted to an external board before they can start their research project. The seminar is framed within a situated pedagogy, i.e., non-propaedeutics (Carlino, 2012; 2013).

Data were collected between August and November 2020. Due to the pandemic and the social distancing measures implemented in Argentina, universities turned their on-campus classes to remote teaching (Carlino, in press). Consequently, the synchronous exchanges during the Zoom classes and the asynchronous exchanges in the Moodle classroom were recorded.

In the seminar, students were guided, supported and given feedback so that they could progressively and recursively formulate a research problem, relate it to relevant bibliography, specify objectives and research questions, detail the methodological approach with which they will collect and analyze data, as well as estimate the theoretical and practical relevance of their study, foresee ethical issues and a schedule, and list bibliographical references. Students passed the seminar when the thesis advisor endorsed the proposal, and by delivering a portfolio that included a selection of the work done during the seminar and their reflection on their learning experience.

At the beginning of the course, the instructors ask students to write an "autobiography as writers." Under their guidance, approved thesis proposals are analyzed. Students are given assignments that will help them advance progressively with writing each section of the thesis proposal and rework them recursively. In every lesson, students' inquiries are addressed, some students' drafts are collectively reviewed, so they receive multivoiced comments from their peers and the instructor. Supporting bibliography was also offered (which was

commented on in forums by the participants). Two or three times each semester, the students meet in small groups out-of-class time to review their drafts. On Moodle, they post questions arising from this self-managed work, which are later collected and discussed in the following synchronous lesson.

The participants

Students were between 35 and 55 years old, most of them women who have been working as teachers to train future teachers in non-university higher education institutions for more than 10 years; some of them also teach in high schools. They have little or no research experience and attend the Master's program part time and without a scholarship. We will examine the work of 22 students who completed the seminar.

On the other hand, the instructors in charge of the seminar have participated in numerous research projects, have directed dissertations and coordinated research writing workshops for almost two decades, and have extensive experience in teacher training.

Collection, recording and transcription of data

After collecting the digital portfolios submitted by the master's students for passing the seminar, we will repeatedly read them to identify themes and situations pertaining to the seminar referred to by the students. Thus, this content analysis will point to written drafts and situations, developed within the seminar, which have been highlighted as significant by each student. Guided by these references, we will examine the seminar observational and documentary material that we have also gathered:

- video-recording of 15 synchronous sessions of 4 hours each, in two classes. These sessions are focused on collectively commenting on the students' drafts.
- documentary material, derived from the interaction between students and teachers, and among students:

  - each student's thesis proposal drafts,
  - reflective writings (autobiographies as writers, posts in the Moodle classroom, retrospective considerations about the whole experience at the end of the seminar),
  - written productions of self-managed groups organized along the seminar (questions addressed to the teachers, written comments to the text of the peers),
  - written posts in the Moodle classroom in different forums by students (comments on the bibliography read, general questions, and by the instructors (instructions for assignments, information about each lesson, comments on the posts, answers to doubts, etc.).

The situations mentioned by the students in their portfolios corresponding to the observational material (video recordings of the online classes) will be transcribed in files to be analyzed as text. The rest of the documentary material (progress drafts, posts in the forums, comments on the virtual classroom, etc.), already digitalized, will be ordered as

transcripts and temporally dated for analysis as they are pointed out by the students as milestones in their training.

With all these materials, a synopsis corresponding to the three semesters of the seminar will be compiled, which will be used to situate in a timeline the work carried out and the reflections of the master students, included in the portfolio.

1. **We will welcome any comment about what we foresee as a challenge in the <u>organization of the data</u> considering that we have 22 portfolios, that in addition refer to 4-8 situations experienced during the 3 semesters of the seminar.**

2. **Do you have any suggestions to combine these different sources?**

Data analysis

We plan three stages for the data analysis. The first one will be devoted to reading and analyzing the content of the portfolios in order to identify the significant situations related to the writing seminar that the students indicate. The second stage will be devoted to examining the written pieces and situations developed within the seminar highlighted by the participants. These comprise the observational and documentary material. The third stage will relate a) the reflection that the students make in their portfolios about the significant moments (milestones) of their experience, with b) the situations that occurred as part of the seminar and to which they mention in their portfolios.

In other words, the point of view of the students, expressed in the written reflection in these portfolios, will lead us to examine certain situations that took place during the seminar. Thus, we will select and examine some observational and documentary materials related to the activities carried out during the seminar.

The analytical approach will combine categorizing and contextualizing strategies (Maxwell and Miller, 2008), in order to identify similarity and difference relationships between the data, as well as time-space contiguity relationships. We will begin with successive readings of the material to initiate a process of open coding. Then, we will carry out a refinement of the categories under which we will group the codes, a process that will involve redefining, including or excluding codes. In this instance, the research team will participate as interjudges (Denzin, 1970; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

3. **We will welcome any comment about what we foresee as a challenge in the <u>qualitative analysis of the data</u>.**

4. **What biases should we anticipate and avoid in the analysis, and how?**

5. **How to take into account and coordinate the perspective of the students, authors of the portfolios, and that of our analysis of the teaching situations? In other words: how to combine the perspective of the participants and the analytical perspective of the researchers?**

Contribution

We hope to provide a description and characterization of the process of these participants in learning to write a thesis proposal. We hope that the results of our study will contribute to the design of future graduate programs for non-regular participants, such as teachers and teacher educators in Argentina. In addition, we intend to identify what learning results involved in writing a thesis proposal are relevant to the teaching task of these participants in their professional contexts, beyond the requirement of writing the thesis proposal in the master's degree. We are interested in recognizing what professional teaching competencies are developed when master's students engage in research writing practices.

Glossary:

Elementary school in Argentina: elementary level of compulsory education attended by children between the ages of 6 and 12.

High school in Argentina: middle level of compulsory education attended by adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17.

Initial teacher education: formal four-year education for teaching at the initial, elementary or high school levels. In Argentina this teacher education takes place in non-university higher education institutions. After this qualification, teachers can access a university degree through a two-year complementary cycle.

Thesis proposal: document in which the problem and objective(s) of a research are made explicit, as well as its conceptual and methodological framework, schedule and feasibility, to be assessed and eventually approved before starting.

Portfolio: collection of written pieces elaborated within the writing seminar, together with reflective notes of their authors.

Reflective practitioners: professionals who carry out a systematic analysis of their own or their peers' professional activity. To this end, they document and analyze their professional performance.

Professional didactics: francophone line of research that studies professional learning in the workplace.

Reflective writing: writing practice that encourages reflection on one's own action in a specific situation.

Note:

The research team of this project is composed of P. Carlino, L. Calderón, G. Cordero and C. Roni. Carlino, although only Carlino and Roni will take part in this International Researchers Consortium Workshop.

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