

INNOVATIVE WRITING PRACTICES AS LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN A VULNERABLE SCHOOL CONTEXT. A SOCIAL DESIGN INQUIRY TITLE

Paolo Sorzio, & Caterina Bembich

Department of humanist studies, University of Trieste (Italy)

Abstract

The contribution presents an innovative social design research (Gutiérrez and Jurov, 2016) carried out in a vulnerable school context, to contrast students' school exclusion and underachievement. The project unfolded in a 10-hour group activity, consisting in the working out a collaborative written text (Thompson, 2014) about the social consequences of hostile communication among peers and the value of friendship, a sensitive topic of students' lives. This was considered a step to connect the students' repertoires of writing practices, developed in their everyday lives, to the academic register (Gee, 2004). The aim of the contribution is to present the learning opportunities that emerged in the collaborative writing processes in promoting relational and cognitive competences in students, in particular cohesive conversation, and reflective skills.

Keywords: *Social design research, learning opportunities, collaborative writing processes, vulnerable students.*

1. Introduction: theoretical framework

Literacy is a pivotal competence to be promoted in classrooms to contrast school failure, since educational activities are strongly based on writing and reading processes. Students are required to read textbooks and other sources of information; they are expected to express their reasonings in written expository texts. However, texts in schools are organized according to a specific literate genre: they are closed systems, in which all the relevant information can be inferred by reference to other explicit information; they differ from popular texts that are open artefacts, further developed and incremented by the reader's knowledge (Olson, 1991; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Heath, 1986). According to Olson, writing systems create specialized categories of thinking and communication, rather than simply transcribing speech (Olson, 1991).

Freebody and Luke (1990) consider textual production as the integration of 4 dimensions (called "4 Resources Model"):

- Syntactic: the expressive rendition of the intended meaning of the text; it requires competence on the linguistic code, the correct use of pronouns, the selection of the information to be made explicit and the connection of different aspects into a consistent whole.
- Semantic: the intended meaning, characterized by a core idea and the related information; the appropriate lexicon to highlight different aspects of the meaning.
- Pragmatic: the social objective the author intends to provoke in the community (to inform, to convince, to call for an action, to request, ...);
- Affective: how to express feelings; how to provoke emotions in the community.

Traditional schooling tends to overlook the practical competencies people develop in their reading and writing activities in their everyday lives and tend to introduce students into literacy practices that are based on a western/schooled used of texts, at the expenses of different approaches to literacy.

The idea is to offer the students more opportunities to learn (Greeno and Gresalfi, 2008), based on the recognition of their writing repertoires they have developed in their out-of-school activities, on valuing their personal and social experiences and through the mediation of collaboration among peers.

2. Methodology

21 students attending the second year of a professional school in North-Eastern Italy (21 females; age $M=16,5$; $SD= 0.28$) participated in the project. The composition of the class was

complex: 6 foreign students with low knowledge of Italian language, 9 were repeating the year, 6 present special educational needs.

The context in which the professional institute is located present a high rate of immigration, especially from Bangladesh; it is a phenomenon linked to the development of the shipbuilding industry that characterize the economy of the town.

The school has a high percentage of non-Italian-speaking students, most of them coming from culturally and economically disadvantaged situations. The school organization provides for an Intercultural Commission "with specific tasks for welcoming and for planning personalized interventions" and a Working Group for Inclusion. Every school year then Italian L2 courses are activated both as initial literacy and as a language suitable for study.

In the school practice, the classroom communication is based on students sitting individually in front of the teacher, who frames the topic and the pace of the lessons, although they are encouraged to put questions, ask for clarifications, and express their views; students have little opportunities to work together in developing topics. Consequently, they have little opportunities to be engaged in complex competencies such as working out complex ideas, recognizing the main ideas of a topic, relating it to the contextual information, designing and producing the text, respecting the formal rules of production.

The social design research we proposed in one group of students departed from that established classroom organization and we proposed small group activities in which the students are invited to jointly reflect and write a text as a commentary on a meaningful and authentic theme for them. To construct a positive students' attitude towards school literacy, a perspective based on their existing repertoires of writing is proposed¹.

2.1. The framework of the classroom activities

The students responded to a small questionnaire about their literary practices in their everyday lives and were invited to collaboratively write a text as a commentary to the Manifesto of non-hostile communication, published by the 'Parole O_stili' association². The Manifesto can be considered an appropriate choice, since it refers to meaningful experiences in the lives of the adolescents (i.e. hostility; microaggressions, misunderstandings, deception); they have an affective tone that should be communicated and require a composition both at the semantic as well at the syntactic planes. The tool has stimulated students to reflect on the communication styles adopted by young people, the possible consequences of the use of non-empathic language, and on the importance of considering the point of view of the other.

They were free to choose the genre (expository or narrative), modality (written or graphic text), and then to integrate the texts in an artefact that could circulate, be discussed, and further integrated. The proposed perspective is consistent with the 4 resources model by Freebody and Luke (1990).

The activity was organized in 6 lessons oriented to changing the practice of writing through the mediation of collaborative processes. Students work together in the production of a text: collaboration allows students to connect personal ideas and work out a text, to make explicit different writing functions (planning, execution, revision), assessing relevance (what to make explicit on the background of presuppositions); by sharing ideas on an interpersonal plane, students may develop metalinguistic awareness.

We adopted the micro-ethnography observations on the writing situations, in order to highlight the opportunities to learn emerging during collaborative writing.

2.2. Results

Questionnaire: Writing as a practice

The students' answers to a short questionnaire highlight they use writing in their daily lives for pragmatic reasons: some use writing as a support for homework, some express pleasure in writing ("it is a way to blow off tensions" (answer 16); "I like to write at home, where I am quite and more inspired" (answer 21); "It is an opportunity to escape reality" (answer 19); "Writing makes me understand better what happens to me" (answer 15); "I write my daydreams" "In writing I throw out my bad feelings"; "Writing helps me to understand homework" to a dislike "Because it is like at school" (answer 4); (Table 1).

¹The study was developed within the FAMI-IMPACT FVG 2018-2020 project, funded by the 2014-2020 - OS2 Migration and Integration Asylum Fund. The project is carried out in collaboration with the University of Trieste and the University of Udine with the proponent Friuli Venezia Giulia region, to promote research and teacher training to combat early school leaving, in particular for foreign students in Italy.

²The manifesto is available on the site of the Parole O_stili association: <https://paroleostili.it/manifesto/>; it is made up of a 10-sentence handbook, which identify the fundamental principles of a positive, respectful, empathetic and responsible speech.

Table 1. Questionnaire: Writing as a practice.

| Question 2: why do you write? | | Question 3: Whom do you write to? | | Question 4: Which are your preferred topics? | |
|---|----|-----------------------------------|----|--|----|
| To overcome my difficulties to express orally my thoughts | 01 | Just write down | 04 | No | 09 |
| In conducting some activities | 05 | To myself | 02 | Everyday facts | 03 |
| To Imagine, to think | 06 | Messages | 01 | Schooling | 01 |
| Dialogue | 04 | Friends and relatives | 08 | My dreams | 01 |
| No answers | 05 | No answers | 06 | What it emerges | 02 |

Micro-ethnographic observations: Analysis of the process of writing

The collaborative writing activity is an opportunity to develop a relevant unit of analysis of the process of learning literacy (Greeno and Gresalfi, 2008). In our micro-ethnographic observations, we gathered data on:

- the organization of the setting,
- the interactions among students, each with her/his personal writing experiences and repertoires,
- the material and informational resources they use,
- the rules of the activity and the evolving talk in interaction. Talk is not only a means to express ideas, but more crucially is a means to construct ideas together (Mercer, 2000).

The products of two groups are selected to highlight both the students' expressive potentialities and their difficulties in managing the four dimensions of formal writing.

In the first group three students (Alessia, Giada and Veronica) worked out collaboratively on the Manifesto and co-constructed the final text:

[5] Giada: what can be done?

[6] Alessia: if I talk to someone about a concern of mine, but she doesn't listen to me

[7] Alessia (dictates to Veronica): if I have a concern, the other has to listen to me =

[8] Giada: =anyway, not that she has to=

[9] Alessia: =then (0.4)

[10] Giada: I expect her to give me an advice, not making comments (0.3) uhm (0.3) talking about her concerns:

[11] Alessia: comparing her problems to mine

[12] Giada (looks at Veronica who is writing what the peers are saying and proposes): without the comma (after 'comments') I mean=

In this extract, Alessia introduces one rule of kindness and friendship [6], on which Giada further elaborates [10], meanwhile supports Veronica in her writing effort [7]; also Giada helps Veronica in correcting her syntax [12].

Veronica writes down the text of the discussion; she is joined by Alessia who takes the role of the revisor: "If I have a concern, the other person should listen to me and give me advice, without interrupting me or comparing her concerns to mine. Do not give a comment on something you don't know. Before attacking someone, reflect and understand her". The girls worked out collaboratively the ideas by interpreting rude and hostile social acts in terms of consequences in the states of mind of the others (humiliation, vulnerability, confusion, ...); the group decides to give itself the name of "Listening is above anything else".

Finally, the definitive text is the following:

A says (angrily): you tripped me!

B: No, you are wrong

C: you are quarrelsome

B: No, you are unfair, you lie

C: if you give a gift, you cannot ask it back

B: she had pushed me

the moral of the story is "You take part to a quarrel, without even knowing why"

In the text, the students introduce different layers of meaning: The girl C takes part in favor of A, on the basis of what A said her about a previous situation in which C didn't take part. However, A was

unfair in her report to C, and therefore C does not know some relevant information of the situation that made B angry (A was rude to B).

The students used all the dimensions of writing as they are proposed by Freebody and Luke (1990):

- Syntactical: the girls were able to support each other. Other girls took the role of attentive listening (looking at the talking peer, smiling at jokes, offering postural hints of agreement about the unfolding of the activity). They silently participated and their peers never perceived their presence as an obstacle, an opposition or as a condition needing an explanation.

- Semantic: they try to introduce different levels of complexity, that is the different frames of understanding each character is following (A: knowing the situation but having said only a partial truth to B; B: knowing only a part of the situation; C knowing the situation but not knowing what B knows). However, the group was not able to manage all that complexity and did not make the relevant information explicit in the text, and therefore a reader loses its complexity.

- Pragmatic: they rely on a very rhythmic dramatic genre to show the consequences of deception on others.

- Affective: they are interested in deception, lie, misunderstanding.

Students' collaboration creates opportunities to learn elements of writing (working out the semantic aspects of the situation: Alessia and Giada jointly elaborate the consequences of lack of close listening [utterances 7, 10, 11]; furthermore, Veronica receives help in her syntactic competence. However, they are not yet able to compose an effective text. Many elements of the intended situation are left implicit and a reader faces many difficulties to understand which is the correct frame of reference and therefore to attribute the correct meaning to the characters' utterances.

The second group called "Kaliumbapé" works out a text based on the joint analysis of the concept of "embarrassment":

"We have learned that in given situation, embarrassment is normal; in other ones, it produces uneasiness (in other people). There are different types of embarrassment: when two or more people quarrel, embarrassment arises because one person would like to say something, which in turn produces offence in the other; when two people who are not enough close, stay together for a period of time.

It could be embarrassing also the situation in which a group is formed by people who do not know each other".

In their text, the students create a list of different types of "embarrassment". In their text, they use mental verbs which refer to individual mental states as consequences of social situations. Their definitions open up to either the possibility of the reciprocal understanding of people, or to misunderstanding and conflict, if the interpretation of others' embarrassment is failing.

The students are able to write down sophisticated strategies of understanding of the psychological consequences of specific social situations. Dealing directly with their experiences and personal reflections, they were able to elaborate on the 4 dimensions of writing:

- Syntactical: the dimension is developed in terms of a series of definitions of a psychological concept ("embarrassment").

- Semantic: they work out the conceptualization of the different conditions that compose the meaning of "embarrassment".

- Pragmatic: they present a text that can help other to reflect on embarrassment and uneasiness.

- Affective: they make systematic connections between social situations and psychological states.

Their use of the writing process enables the systematicity and organization of their reflections, leading to a structured text. Through their collaborative activity, the students in this group have developed a strategy of joint design of the text. Each student proposed an aspect of "embarrassment" (related to her experience) and together they searched a hypothetical social situation in which embarrassment was a consequence. In the fieldnotes, also other stereotypical situations were considered such as the adults asking adolescents about their boyfriends, or parents urging their children to make visit to grandparents. However, those situations were considered too obvious and discarded.

3. Discussion / conclusions

The results highlight that co-designing a collaborative writing activity in a vulnerable school context can be effective if teachers and researchers recognize and value the non-formal writing repertoires that students develop in their everyday lives and connect them to academic writing on relevant topics in students' experiences.

For the students, writing is more an informal practice (directed to oneself, to relatives and friends): they use some writing repertoires to achieve practical goals in their everyday lives; it supports interiority, or deeper understanding of daily experiences.

During the collaborative activity in the classroom, the writing process appeared more difficult; the students reasoned by prototypical scenarios and some relevant elements in the writing were not sufficiently developed. However, they showed a sophisticated analysis of the consequences of hostile communication on others' feelings, self-confidence, and interpersonal relationships: students were able to identify different layers of meaning and introduce different levels of complexity.

The practice promotes the development of expressive repertoires, which may be recognized and encouraged also in school. More educational practice is needed, in order to promote their competence in designing a complex text.

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