

Autobiographical Writing and Silent Reading (of Oneself): Critical Reflections and Personal Growth in Teacher-Training Courses at University

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Abstract

This article presents a pedagogical project developed within a university course in Social Pedagogy involving one hundred students of all genders. Participants were invited to write and read their own coming-of-age narratives (*Bildungsroman*), reflecting on formative experiences emerging from formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts. The educational design combined three interconnected phases: autobiographical writing, individual silent reading aimed at fostering critical self-reflection, and dialogic shared reading focused on reciprocal feedback and collective meaning-making. The impact of the project was assessed through a structured questionnaire exploring dimensions of self-awareness, reflexivity, and professional identity development. Findings suggest that the integration of individual narrative work and collaborative dialogue promoted multi-dimensional learning processes, strengthening participants' capacity to connect personal educational trajectories with future professional aspirations. The study highlights the pedagogical value of autobiographical and dialogic practices in supporting identity construction and reflective learning in higher education.

Keywords: autobiographical learning, narrative approach, storytelling, silent reading, coming-of-age narratives.

Abstract

L'articolo presenta un progetto pedagogico sviluppato nell'ambito di un corso universitario di Pedagogia sociale che ha coinvolto un centinaio di studenti e studentesse. Le/i partecipanti sono stati invitati a scrivere e leggere i propri racconti di formazione (*Bildungsroman*), riflettendo sulle esperienze formative nei contesti di apprendimento formali, non formali e informali. Il percorso educativo si è articolato in tre fasi interconnesse: la scrittura autobiografica, la lettura individuale silenziosa finalizzata a promuovere la riflessione critica su di sé, e la lettura dialogica condivisa, orientata allo scambio di

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feedback e alla costruzione collettiva di significati. L'impatto del progetto è stato valutato mediante un questionario strutturato, volto a esplorare consapevolezza di sé, riflessività e sviluppo dell'identità professionale. I risultati suggeriscono che l'integrazione tra lavoro narrativo individuale e dialogo collaborativo abbia favorito processi di apprendimento multidimensionali, rafforzando la capacità delle/dei partecipanti di mettere in relazione i propri percorsi formativi con le future aspirazioni professionali. Lo studio evidenzia il valore pedagogico delle pratiche autobiografiche e dialogiche nel sostenere la costruzione dell'identità e l'apprendimento riflessivo, nella formazione universitaria.

Parole chiave: apprendimento autobiografico, approccio narrativo, *storytelling*, lettura silenziosa, racconti di formazione.

Introduction

Reading has become a very useful learning tool widely endorsed by several international institutions during the past 30 years. It was especially included in policies fostering continuous learning and global socio-economic progress. *The Hamburg Declaration*, 1997, *The Dakar Action Plan*, 2000, *The Literacy Decade Resolution*, 2002, UNESCO annual *Report* 2004 and other documents have contributed to developing a massive international commitment to re-define reading and literacy as being crucial factors in promoting the good of the community. *Objective 4* of the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 considers reading a key factor in ensuring quality education and providing learning opportunities for all. The *Global Compact on Education* initiative Pope Francis launched in 2019 deemed reading a fundamental instrument in developing critical thinking and cultural understanding².

As part of a Social Pedagogy course at the Department of Education and Training of the “Mediterranea” University of Reggio Calabria (Italy), an innovative pedagogical project involving approximately one hundred undergraduate students was designed and implemented. Through the integration of autobiographical writing, silent reading, dialogic reading, and shared reading, participants engaged in both individual and collective meaning-making processes. These narrative practices fostered reflexivity, critical self-awareness, and dialogue, providing a pedagogical framework through which personal experiences could be examined and connected to broader educational and social contexts.

² Full bibliographical details of all the authors, documents, texts, and policy frameworks referred to in this section are provided in the References, Editor's Note.

Particular emphasis was placed on storytelling and reading as pedagogical practices fostering self-confidence, reflexivity, and dialogue. Through these activities, students were encouraged to critically examine their personal and educational trajectories, establishing meaningful links between individual experiences and shared learning contexts. The findings underscore the role of narrative and reading practices in supporting adult learning processes, identity development, and reflexive self-understanding (Ellis, Bochner, 2000).

1. Aim and Scope of the university course

The course was grounded in an autobiographical and narrative approach to adult education across formal, non-formal, and informal learning contexts. Participants were invited to engage in an innovative educational activity centred on the writing, reading, and sharing of personal educational narratives. More specifically, they were asked to produce autobiographical accounts reflecting critically on significant experiences that had shaped their personal and professional development.

The class included both traditional undergraduate students aged 19 to 21 and working adult learners aged 26 to 38. This diversity of backgrounds and life experiences enriched classroom discussions and fostered the exchange of multiple perspectives. Younger participants drew inspiration from the educational and professional experiences of adult learners, while the latter were encouraged to revisit their own life trajectories through the fresh perspectives offered by their younger peers. The resulting intergenerational dialogue highlighted the lifelong and transformative nature of learning.

Writing and reading formative stories stimulates the students' self-reflection and helps them become aware of how greatly their variegated experiences have contributed to developing skills and competences and to defining teaching practices. Students consciously acquire and inhabit various social roles and identities intertwining in the various life contexts they have come across. Writing helps them recognize themselves not only as learners, but also as children, co-workers, friends and/or volunteers and explore the relational and empowerment dynamics intrinsic to each context in question. Their narratives will turn all these scattered fragments of identity into mutually-interrelated professional skills suitable for their future jobs (Bruner, 1991; Dominicé, 2002).

This approach follows the “guidelines” of Duccio Demetrio’s «pedagogy of memory» (2003, *passim*), whereby writing is a self-formative device that enables participants to “re-consider” themselves. Autobiographical practice becomes a civic-consciousness exercise for future educators to learn to read their own stories and constructively accept other people’s (Benelli, 2013).

2. *Methods and materials*

Students were first introduced to the manifold theoretical perspectives and educational applications of life stories, particularly those developed by the French-speaking scholars Josso (1991), Pineau and Legrand (1993), Ricoeur (1983), and Delory-Momberger (2009) through her concept of *biographization*. Then they were invited to start writing their own coming-of-age narratives from the following prompts:

- a) recall the experiences you have had in formal, non-formal and informal contexts and reflect on their importance in your private and professional development;
- b) give said experiences value and meaning as you write your story;
- c) identify your multiple selves and weave them together in a story starting in the past and still evolving today.

This methodology also draws on Demetrio’s autobiographical approach (1996), which conceptualises writing as a form of *cognitive bi-location*, where the student is simultaneously a narrator and a critical observer of his/her own life. Saverio Tutino’s influence (1999) can be evinced in the great importance given to spontaneous writing, which endorses popular culture and knowledge and genuine daily experience as legitimate sources of learning.

Building a personal narrative identity in a rapidly changing world becomes an endless project enriching itself with the personal story and giving the identity itself a stable sense of continuity in time and a certain openness to new experiences (Bruner, 1990; Brockmeier, 2002). Along with silent, dialogic and shared reading, writing about oneself emerges like a meaningful *lifelong-learning* practice from university classrooms to professional contexts. This process helps individuals reconnect with their inner selves and enables them to maintain a coherent sense of self while engaging meaningfully with the world around them.

The project aligns with the Italian *pedagogia autobiografica* (autobiographic pedagogy) tradition, which draws upon the work of Duc-

cio Demetrio and the Libera Università dell'Autobiografia (LUA) (Free University of Autobiography) and emphasizes the role of science and self-writing as transformational pedagogical tools for adult education. Personal writing can act as a vehicle of inner transformation and cure, which enables individuals to revisit and re-elaborate their own past to live the present with greater awareness and confidence (Demetrio, 1996; 2008). At University, writing about oneself is a unique opportunity to nurture criticism and reflection skills which transcend the mere act of writing and turn into competences that can later be used at work.

Together with silent, dialogic, and shared reading, autobiographical writing (Bakhtin, 1981) is a formidable self-assurance tool particularly suitable for students designing their own future. Students are invited to look back to their past experiences. With their challenges and discoveries, school years can prove decisive in triggering a passion for teaching in the prospective facilitator. Students can then explore their own routes, understand the present and consciously plan their future teaching jobs. After the coming-of-age narrative production stage, three different reading techniques were presented (first silent reading, and then dialogic and group reading) in order to foster narrative text sharing and discussion. The three reading modes are successive stages in the student's reflexive growth.

Silent reading is the stage of pure introspection: a dedicated space and time for self-reflection in which, soon after writing, students revisit their own coming-of-age narratives. They can critically re-examine the meanings and interconnections of their life experiences across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. Reading becomes a transformative experience engaging both cognitive and emotional dimensions, enabling students to reconnect with themselves through the text and to gain a deeper understanding of their personal trajectories.

Various authors and scholars have investigated its effects and proposed a deeper understanding of what happens when one's mind is engaged in such peculiar interaction with the text concerned. Several authors from both sides of the Atlantic such as Wolf (2007), Lodge (2002), and Willingham (2017) neatly explored the potential of silent reading, namely gaining insight as to how it impacts our brain's neuroplasticity. People reading good books "in in-depth mode" (Silva, Lencioni, 2023) could become rapt in imaginary worlds and develop empathetic abilities toward characters and situations. Silent reading has positive effects on our stress and emotional well-being. Since it enables us to explore new thoughts and challenge our convictions, it widens our intellectual and cultural perspectives.

When they had finished their coming-of-age narratives, students were introduced to dialogic reading (Bakhtin, 1981). In dialogic reading, the text becomes a live entity, i.e. some sort of dynamic dialogue between reader and author that poses new questions and discloses hidden meanings. In this stage the students feel encouraged to promote a form of interaction that discloses multiple hidden meanings. Reading enables one participant to formulate new interpretations of the experiences that other participants have just narrated. By spawning new critical ways of looking at the world, this approach enriches one's comprehension of other people's texts and stimulates one's deep reflection on one's own experiences. The dialogue can remain an intimate confrontation between the author's "multiple selves" or start "protruding out" and "paving the way" for the shared reading stage.

Shared Reading is the collective "hetero-biographical" stage. Participants share meaningful fragments of their own texts in a safe facilitator-coordinated space. This task favors mutual learning and social cohesion – when listening to other people's stories, the student activates an osmotic process which enriches his/her own identity and enables him/her to recognize his/her own uniqueness. Mutual feedback consolidates the participant's sense of belonging and turns individual experience into a common educational resource.

Reading is an instrument of intimate exploration and shared growth which supervises the transition from one's private self to one's future professional identity. Coming-of-age narratives in an educational setting find important support in Freire (1968, eng. transl. 1970), who emphasized dialogue and critical reflection as essential instruments for students' empowerment. By telling and listening to stories, individuals can

- a) learn mutually in a context promoting the diversity of the experiences narrated;
- b) reflect on past experiences;
- c) make these more meaningful;
- d) trace future personal and professional routes.

By linking personal experience to theoretical knowledge, students can amplify their understanding of the world and improve their interpersonal and academic skills.

All three reading modes lead students beyond the mere linguistic decoding of words, engaging them in processes of critical reflection and expanding their self-awareness. Research in cognitive neuroscience has

shown that reading activates neural networks associated with both emotional and cognitive processing, fostering a dynamic interaction between affect and thought. Through narrative engagement, individuals can recognise aspects of themselves in stories and construct their identities through encounters with diverse experiences and perspectives.

In addition to mitigating feelings of isolation, such forms of emotional and cognitive participation contribute to the development of self-awareness, autonomy, and critical thinking (Fitzgerald, [1920], 1996).

Reading aloud to a group fosters social cohesion and encourages one's reflection on one's own future and consolidates one's sense of belonging. Reading autobiographical stories to a safe and cozy coordinator-assisted class stimulates listening student's memory, attention and critical thinking, thus enabling him/her to train himself/herself and compare his/her own story with other people's (Dehaene, 2007; Gallese, 2003).

The whole transition from writing to shared reading alludes to Benelli's biohistory practices (2010), which feature the intertwining of individual narration and collective listening. This particular educational moment turns the classroom into a narrative community whereby autobiographical fragment reading is a process of mutual recognition and social validation of the participant's life experience.

3. Analysis of formative experiences and methodological framework

100 autobiographical stories were collected and analyzed. The following subsections detail the analytical process and the epistemological framework adopted.

3.1. Data analysis criteria and methods

The analysis specifically focused upon content quality as suggested by Mortari's «phenomenological perspective» (2007, *passim*). The process entailed:

- a) initial reading (a global immersion in the texts to identify recurring narrative nuclei);
- b) coding (identifying themes such as coming-of-age progress, the impact of interpersonal relationships and resilience notwithstanding adversity);

- c) synthesis (grouping these themes into an integrated framework that reveals how genuine learning transcends formal traditional textbook-centered settings and, in the end, proves most successful in non-formal and informal contexts).

Learning is not confined to formal contexts; non-formal and informal contexts enrich it with practical experience and transversal competence.

3.2. *Epistemological reflections – Epoché and subjectivity*

Given that analytical impartiality is practically impossible and ‘situatedness’ is unavoidable, we can delve into Husserl’s *epoché* (1913, It. transl. 2002) as the wisest and most viable tool for reflexive monitoring. By “bracketing” pre-conceived notions, the facilitator seeks to:

- a) acknowledge their unavoidable situatedness within a cultural and social context;
- b) reach a higher level of awareness regarding personal biases (thus enabling the students’ authentic voices to emerge more clearly);
- c) turn the analysis into a “reflexive interpretation” where stories are placed within their specific socio-cultural contexts rather than being treated as objective data points.

The de-codification of the stories was assisted by:

- a) *epoché* as a listening tool – judgment suspension was implemented to let student narratives emerge without being hindered by academic bias;
- b) recursive themes – besides student resilience, the analysis has revealed that switching from formal academic contexts to informal life-experience contexts and/or vice-versa is far from obvious; it actually has to rely upon continuous negotiations that contribute to the *biographization* of the subject involved.

4. *Results – The questionnaire as an activity-assessment method*

After handing in their autobiographical stories, the students were invited to answer a structured questionnaire aimed at assessing the activity and suggesting possible future improvements. The questionnaire included a basic demographic data (participant’s age and gender) section and closed and open questions and answers. It was administered

anonymously online through Google Forms. Anonymity was to ensure the student's maximum freedom of response. The data gathered were analyzed through uni- and bi-variate descriptive statistics techniques on MS Excel. The closed question and answer section was to yield data that would provide a clear and objective overview of student experiences.

Specific aspects of the educational activities in question were evaluated, such as perceived usefulness, impact on educational routes, parts of the activities that were considered more meaningful, benefits of reading, etc. Open questions and answers were to allow students to express themselves more personally and in more detail. The questionnaire was designed to gather meaningful feedback on their learning process and personal and professional development within the various educational activities proposed.

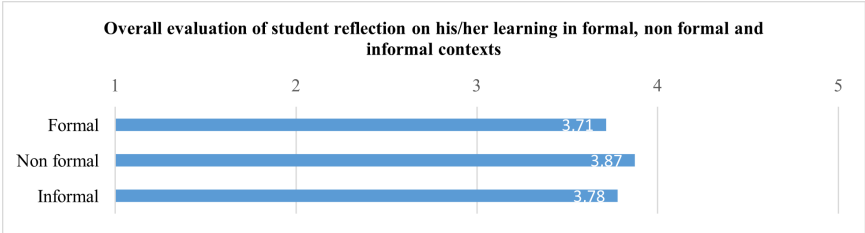
The feedback has revealed a general appreciation of the activities – the respondents have considered their experience precious for deepening the students' awareness of their own life experience and of what factors can contribute to nurturing their own professional identity, through:

- a) writing and sharing narrative fragments;
- b) comparing them between and among the various groups.

Here are the five most relevant aspects of the project:

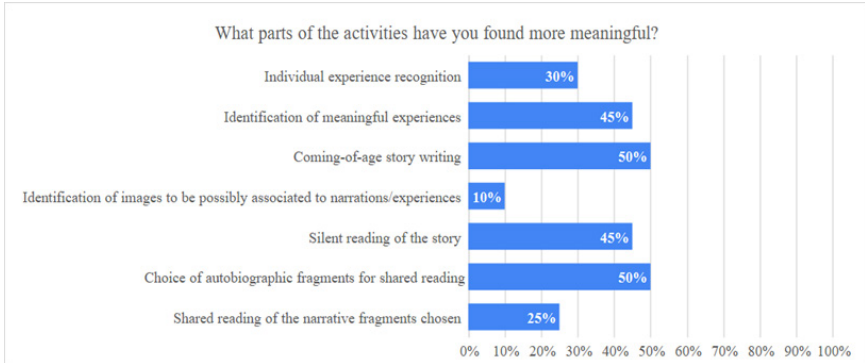
- 1) the student's perceived coherence of the activities proposed with his/her educational routes;
- 2) his/her experience in the reflection process activated during the activities proposed;
- 3) which parts of the activities he/she considered more meaningful;
- 4) the benefits of silent autobiographical fragment reading;
- 5) to what extent group reading has enriched one's own learning experience.

Regarding perceived usefulness evaluation, 69.8% of the students considered the activity extremely useful, which indicates a high level of general appreciation. To evaluate their overall reflections on learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts (*Graph 1*), the students were asked to express their opinions on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 meaning "very negative" to 5 meaning "very positive". The results reveal an averagely positive assessment for all the learning contexts analyzed.



Graph 1 – Comparison of the evaluation of the student’s reflection on his/her learning process according to the context

This difference in average values between the three contexts reveals the student’s tendency to prefer more fluid and less regulated learning experiences encouraging personal growth through less conventional interaction-based activities.

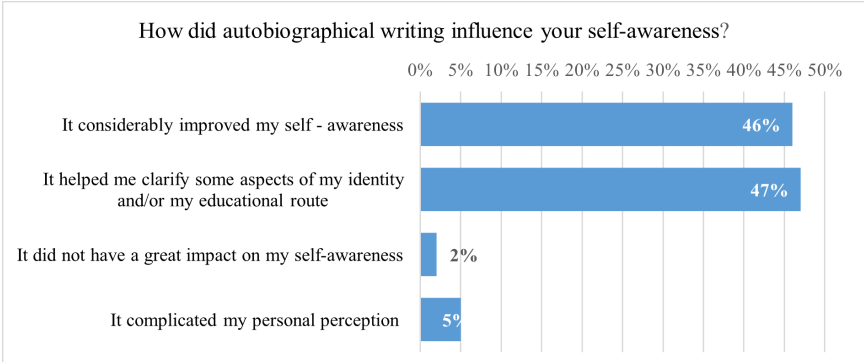


Graph 2 – Comparison of the importance given to the various activities

50% of the respondents (*Graph 2*)³ refer personal story writing and choice of fragments for shared reading as the most meaningful activities. The identification of meaningful experiences and individual reading ranked second (both at 45%). Individual experience recognition scored 30%.

The above-mentioned percentages provide us with clear student preference indicators and stress greater valorization of interactive and reflexive activities. Preference distribution suggests we promote more practices encouraging personal involvement and experience sharing.

³ *Graph 1* evinces a multi-answer distribution: two options per student at most, which allowed for a greater and more variegated range of the data analyzed.

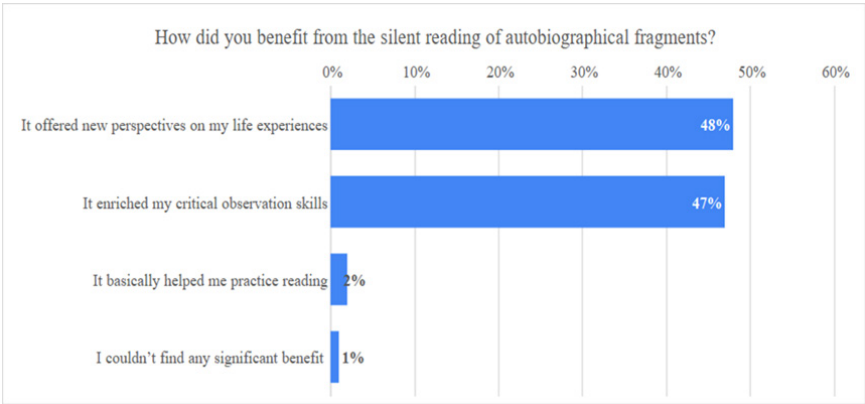


Graph 3 – *Relevance of autobiographical writing to self-awareness*

Analyzing the effects of autobiographical writing on self-awareness (*Graph 3*) has yielded interesting results, as it evinced specific perceptions between and among the participants. 46% of them said that these activities definitely helped them improve their own self-confidence. 47% referred that these activities helped them clarify and better expose key aspects of their own identity and/or educational route. The aforesaid percentage distributions show that autobiographical writing is basically perceived as a useful tool for enhancing personal introspection and clarification – coupled with silent/dialogic/shared reading, autobiographical writing is a valid educational instrument leading the individual through a series of transformational steps toward productive self-fulfillment.

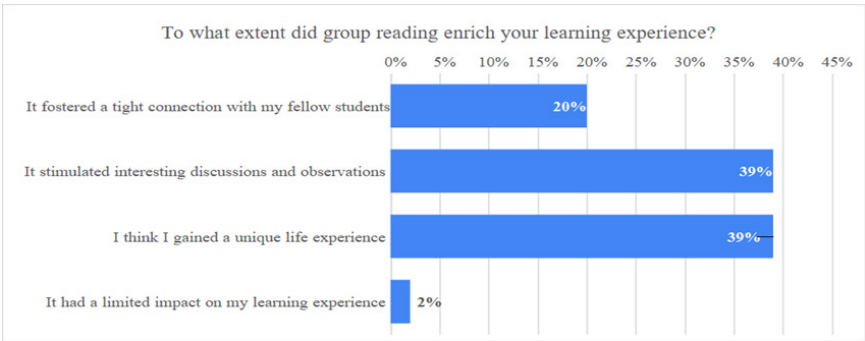
Examining the perceived benefits of silent reading (*Graph 4*) reveals an interesting distribution of participant opinions. An eloquent 48% found that silent reading offered new perspectives on their life experiences, which widened their critical scope and fostered a more complex and less simplistic understanding of their personal vicissitudes: silent reading enhances empathetic and relational thinking. 47% of the students referred that silent reading consolidated their critical observation, evaluation and assessment skills.

Reading is therefore deemed vital for providing the student with notions and concepts and for helping him/her improve his/her analytical skills.



Graph 4 – *Benefits of silent reading*

Silent reading greatly contributes to the student’s personal growth and academic development by widening the scope of his/her critical thinking and enabling him/her to examine human experience in greater depth.



Graph 5 – *Relevance ascribed to group reading*

Analyzing the perceived benefits of group reading (*Graph 5*) revealed various levels of impact on learning. 39% of the respondents considered group reading a significant catalyst stimulating interesting discussions and observations. Shared-reading-generated dialogue apparently helped them develop in-depth understanding of the uniqueness of their own biographic experience. 20% of the students stressed that group reading fostered their tight connection with their fellow students – collective re-ading helps strengthen group dynamics and social cohesion.

This data distribution evinces that integrating educational syllabi with cooperation activities maximizes student engagement in the education process.

5. Discussion

Discussing these data has yielded precious insight into the students' educational routes and showed the main factors of their learning and personal growth. Together with writing, reading will play a crucial role in helping the student to productively look at the world around and sharply identify the key links between knowledge and experience. The analysis of the educational activities revealed their multifaceted impact on the student's personal knowledge, experience and self-awareness. Coming-of-age narratives planning and design offer a unique opportunity to connect past and present, which facilitates the development of a formative project harmonizing the student's past and present life with his/her future goals.

Analyzing the recurring factors in a story told helps the facilitator identify patterns and values guiding the student through his/her life choices and in his/her personal interest areas. Silent reading plays a crucial role in enabling in-depth self-reflection and a detailed understanding of the experiences narrated. It becomes a tool for consciously exploring these recurring elements, thus contributing to designing an educational route in line with students' past experiences and future goals. Autobiographical writing has been deemed effective in fostering introspection (46% of the respondents) and improving personal clarification (47%), which stimulate critical thinking and self-awareness respectively.

The results of silent reading argue for a perceived positive diversified impact – 48% of the students stated that silent reading offers new life experience perspectives, whereas 47% referred improved critical reflection skills. Apart from fostering the student's understanding of the world around, silent reading would also strengthen his/her analytical skills by stimulating community sense and personal awareness.

This data was corroborated by 39% of the respondents, who referred stimulating discussions and greater awareness of the uniqueness of their own experience. A further 20% referred tighter connections with their fellow students. At least according to student perception, personal experience narratives facilitate mutual understanding, awareness, growth and development. The construction of our inner-self takes place through our interaction and confrontation with the other(s) in a process called hetero-education and self-education. In introducing the concept of *hetero-biography*, Delory-Momberger (2009) described a dynamic whereby we appropriate the experience another narrates and integrate it with our world of notions, concepts and learning. In so doing, we widen the scope of our

own critical thinking (Capo, 2021). The transition from silent reading to shared reading turns individual stories into group learning devices.

During this *osmotic* process, one student actually discloses parts of his/her own identity which are reflected in other students' narratives. Judging from the analysis of the stories, 39% of the students perceived their own experiences as unique just thanks to comparing them with those of the group. Future educators build their professional identity not upon isolated experiences, but by comparing and contrasting them with the experiences of their peers. In this context, hetero-biography serves as a bridge between understanding oneself and understanding the world.

Moreover, the data gathered suggest teaching strategies be diversified to meet the students' various educational and personal needs. Writing and reading have been considered effective in promoting self-awareness, critical reflection and social cohesion. A heterogeneous group of students needs an educational approach that integrates various learning experiences and adjusts to multifaceted learning options, priorities and styles.

Focusing on methods which include both individual and group work positively impacts the student's educational experience and promotes an educational setting that is rich, variegated and inclusive.

Conclusions

Students engaged in critical self-reflection through the writing and reading of their own educational narratives, exploring and making sense of their personal, educational, and developmental trajectories. This operation has sensitized them to their personal experiences and to the impact of different timings and settings (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017; Ricoeur, 1983) on their personal growth. Writing and reading these narratives has enriched their self-assurance and motivation by showing what they learned in which contexts. The findings suggest that practical out-of-the-classroom experiences, workshop activities, volunteering, autobiographical writing, and silent reading have proven fundamental to students' personal and educational development. This integrated approach prepares students to face future challenges with resilience and open-mindedness.

Analyzing one's own story lets one identify the guiding principles orienting one's future professional choices. The integration of writing and reading (silent, dialogic and shared) acts as an empathy and critical observation lab that helps the future facilitator to operate effectively in complex educational contexts.

In a contemporary society increasingly characterised by action over reflection, speaking over listening, and communication over genuine self-expression (Rossi, 2017), the opportunity to pause and engage in self-reflection becomes particularly valuable. Autobiographical writing and silent reading emerge as powerful pedagogical practices for reconnecting individuals with their inner lives and fostering deeper self-understanding. Within this perspective, educational spaces play a crucial role in promoting both personal and collective growth, expanding knowledge, and enhancing self-awareness. Accompanying individuals throughout their lifelong learning journeys means supporting the development of agency, critical thinking, and reflective engagement with experience.

This approach fosters both cognitive and emotional development while encouraging processes of self-recognition, self-care, and lifelong learning. Every educational context can become an opportunity for individuals to explore and redefine their identities, appreciate their uniqueness, and develop a greater sense of responsibility toward their own life trajectories and future development.

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