Reporting the pre-degree practical work: the experience of tutoring on the 3-year degree thesis

by Barbara Cordella[*]

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Once upon a time
a poor comma
due to a pupil's
carelessness
found itself in the place of a full-stop
after the last word
in the composition.
The poor little thing, all alone,
had to bear the weight
of a hundred big words
some even with accents[1].

Gianni Rodari, *La tragedia di una virgola*
[The tragedy of a comma].

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In the Faculty of Psychology 1 of the "Sapienza" University in Rome, and in particular in the degree course for "Science and Psychological Techniques of the clinical intervention with the person, the group and the institutions", for several years[2] the students have been given the possibility of doing their third-year thesis[3] in the form of a report on their undergraduate practical work.

I have worked with various students on elaborating their thesis, and in this article I will give a report on the tutoring activity in this area.

To get a clear picture it may be helpful to consider first of all the meaning the third-year thesis has assumed in the Faculty of Psychology.

Let us think of the recent past. Three-year degrees (D.M. 509/2000) were intended by the legislator to offer a complete course and a possible access to work. After three years therefore the students could place a full-stop in their education. If they wanted to keep studying, however, they would not be tied to choosing a specialist degree course from the same faculty where they took their basic degree.

It is common knowledge, however, that in the Faculty of Psychology, the Legislator's intentions were quickly "re-elaborated". The Three-year Degree thus became in most cases only a step needed to get into the Specialist degree in the same Degree course.

In this perspective, the three-year thesis and related degree did not serve to place a full-stop which then allowed a new line to be started; instead, they took on the role of a comma, in the continuation of the discourse. A comma which some wrote with great care, others very hurriedly, seeing that "the three-year degree mark does not affect the Specialist degree result".

In brief, while in the recent past there has emerged a broad consensus on the wisdom of using five years to train as a clinical psychologist, the idea that the three-year degree was

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[1] Taken from the rhyme "The tragedy of a comma" / "La tragedia di una virgola", http://www.filastrocche.it/scuola/filastrocche
[2] It has been possible to present a "reporting thesis" in this degree course since the 2001/2002 academic year.
[3] The "reporting thesis" is just one of the alternatives offered to students for their three-year dissertation: according to what was decided by the Faculty Board on 25 March 2003 it is also possible to do bibliographic research on an issue of international relevance or present and discuss data collected by others.

the space/time needed to lay the foundations for the following two years has not necessarily been accepted by the students[4].

As far as the future is concerned, on the other hand, it is reasonable to believe that the same problem will affect the new Degree Courses (D.M. 270/2004) and it will be valorised by regulations envisaging the three-year degree not as a professional qualification but as a foundation course.

Given these contextual premises, what meaning do we as the teaching body intend to convey concerning the three-year thesis?

As far as I am concerned, the purpose of this thesis is to facilitate the passage from the three-year degree to the final two years, so as to achieve the final aim: to train as clinical psychologists.

For this reason I think it is useful to use the period of thesis preparation to try out the clinical role, putting what has been learnt to the test and, in view of one's difficulties, managing to clarify what one expects of the training in the following two-year course.

In this sense, writing the thesis becomes an opportunity to use one's ability to make sense of the relationships in which one is involved (eg with the coordinator) or has been involved (the relationship with the practical work context), accounting for the work done. It is an opportunity to find connections between what has been studied and what has been experienced: to try, therefore, to use what has been studied to interpret one's practical work context, the role of psychologist that one has encountered, the trainee role one has played and, last but not least, the way one deals with reporting.

It is an opportunity, as we have said, for monitoring one's training in view of the two-year degree. This is the context in which a thesis in the form of a report on one's experience of practical work experience finds its place. The discussion of this thesis before a panel of teachers involved in Three-year training will enable the evaluation not only of the individual student, but also of the training pathway offered.

In fact I think that by sharing the criteria for the drawing up of reports, it is possible to verify the kind of report usually presented in the degree course and on this basis I feel it is possible to orient the teaching in the three and two-year degree courses.

I am obviously hypothesising that the writing of a report should follow a process that at one extreme sees "recounting facts" and at the other extreme, the codification of new categories of interpretation of the phenomena observed (Carli, 2007). In the middle there is the process of becoming aware of being involved in a relationship with the aim of making it productive; there is the process that can be monitored.

If these are the factors that lead to a reporting thesis being offered, let us now see which students ask for it.

- In my experience, some students choose the reporting thesis and then the coordinator. Among these, there are some who offer to report right through the practical work, and at the same time want to discuss the ongoing process with the teacher.

- Others, the majority, seem to choose the coordinator, without being necessarily aware of the type of thesis.

According to the regulations in our faculty, in fact, all students inform a special commission of their desired thesis, indicating three possible coordinators. In view of the preferences expressed by each student, this commission assigns a certain number of theses to each teacher. The meeting between teacher and student is therefore not necessarily the result of a prior agreement.

In these cases, when the teaching administration communicates the names of those starting a thesis, a preliminary meeting is called so as to get to know the students, understand their ideas on the thesis, and introduce the reporting thesis. During this meeting, the "unaware" are bewildered and often say their practical work was pointless, but when they understand that the thesis can be done anyway, they agree to it; there are others who when presented with the idea of the report, give up the idea of asking for the thesis; and lastly, there are

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[4] Suffice it to think for example of the marks given for the degree, which tend to be low, both due to the work done on the thesis and to the candidate's academic record.

those whose expectations on their thesis are fulfilled, and among these, some who are very happy to be able to do a thesis that is "the quickest and easiest".

The quickest and easiest? One immediately notices the disparaging view. In these cases, everything seems to come down to the amount of time and effort required to eliminate the last "less": one exam less, two exams less .....the degree less[5]. The 'less' mentality seems to consider the university course as an obstacle race, each exam is one more to cross off. It is not a "plus" related to gaining something.

The students who share the "less" mentality seem to view research into practical work in the same light, as one more duty required to clock up the credits.

Students often express their disorientation at being faced with the long list of organisations accredited for practical work. Looking for a criterion of choice is already an initial task, but one comes to consider it pointless when one finds that many of the organisations cannot be contacted by phone; one may end up taking into consideration those that offer "just any" practical work, in the duty-bound mentality

It is an onerous duty, at times described by those who have done it, as "six months' slavery"[6]. This evokes the power relationship in which one side has the power to reduce the other person to menial work. This is the only type available, as both the student and the organisation seem to say, since it is undergraduate activity. And so the circle closes: the thesis on practical work, the quick and easy one, seems possible only if one has been "lucky" enough to "do something meaningful".[7]

Briefly and without claiming to generalise, we can say that the three-year degree is a race towards what is "beyond" (the Specialist degree? The specialist practical traineeship? Qualifying as a Psychologist?) which, without particular attention to the aspect of process, enables one to redeem oneself from the state of "slavery" and to "be a psychologist".

And yet, I cannot help thinking that slaves, as such, have a role and functions and in the organisations where they are engaged, and are undoubtedly useful. I say this considering the theses of some female students who were faced with precisely this issue. One of them for instance worked as a cleaner in a halfway house for teenagers, another as a babysitter in a refuge for single mothers. In these cases, the students came out of the University to try to understand how a psychologist works in the various social sectors, and found themselves acting as maids and babysitters, with all the disillusionments that this entails.

Without looking at their theses in detail, their elaboration showed that the role attributed and assumed was consistent with the organisation of the individual center and offered a specific configuration of the trainee. For instance, in the organisation of the halfway house there was no home help, since it was considered useful for each person to do his/her share. In actual fact, however, the single operators and the guests have numerous activities and those that are less busy deal with the running of the household, according to a well-known family model in which the person "who doesn't work" takes care of the housework.

Otherwise it is found that, when there are no professional objectives, the distribution of roles follows the "big-small" mentality, whereby the trainees work with the children, the graduate psychologists work with the single mothers and the "super" psychologists work with the graduates, in the area of supervision.

The problem therefore is not slavery but the sense of the slavery, which leads us to wonder about the demeaning functions, about the need to demean, about the assumption of the demeaning and the wisdom of constructing oneself a role that is not 'given'. In this perspective – but it can be seen in hindsight and it can be useful for the second period of practical work – one does not go to see how people work, but how it is possible to construct oneself a socially useful role.

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[5] Notice that in this mentality it is not the exams left to do for the end of the course that are counted, so one could say for instance "I've got two to go"; it is the exams passed that are counted, one less, two less, etc.

[6] The expression is taken from one of the theses: <<I started my research .... with a sense of confusion and fear due to the fantasy of a supposed "trainee slavery", borrowed from the local culture of psychology students.

[7] Recently I received an e-mail from a female student, asking if I was willing to coordinate her thesis: she wants to do a report, "since her experience was interesting and gratifying".

To see this, however, it is necessary to shift from identifying with the tutor of the practical work, who has supposedly "arrived", to thinking critically about what one is experiencing, perhaps by passing through the claim that one should be recognised as being more competent than the tutor. In this latter case, I am referring to some of the students who do not feel that the choice of place for the practical work is important, because they expect to encounter an incompetent tutor, far removed from university studies, and from whom there is nothing to learn.

Whether one takes the road of an obvious identification or relates on the basis of a preconception, no attention is actually given to the relationship that is being established. This is the very complex step that some students do not even imagine that they have to take and, even less, that it is the foundation of their profession.

Lastly, let us see what work pathway is offered to those who ask for a reporting thesis.

After the preliminary meeting I mentioned, each student is assigned to a tutor for the elaboration of his/her work.

In parallel, there are also meetings in which the single tutors report on the work they are doing. This is a particularly good learning experience, in which the tutors, through the report, have the chance to examine the relationships they are involved in, looking for interpretations of the phenomenon and strategies of relational debate.

Let us get back to the students, however. To facilitate the breaking down and recomposing of their experience, a skeleton plan of the thesis is proposed, made up of the following chapters:

- the report as a methodological tool in clinical psychology; a theoretical chapter which requires the literature on reporting to be discussed in depth, in order to outline the objectives of the work one is about to do;
- the choice of practical work; in other words, the beginning of the experience, the categories through which the organisation was chosen, the interview with which contact was made, the practical work contract;
- the host facility; an analysis of the organisation one entered, the clients and the way of operating;
- the activity carried out; the roles played and their meaning;
- conclusions; this chapter may vary depending on the work done in the previous chapters, offering in some cases, personal reflections on the usefulness of the report, a rereading of one's own way of acting in training contexts, suggestions for the development of the structure of the trainees' practical work experience.

In general, the work is considered finished when, on the flat sea of recounted facts, there appear some waves of understanding of the experience.

The composition and the recomposition of the chapters should also lead to an interpretation that connects the various fields of discourse producing a global pattern.

We can ask ourselves what pattern is outlined (at the beginning of this article I underlined that the type of report could be considered that proposed in the thesis discussions) and above all how one gets to assemble it. I think the inevitable answer is that the type of report produced is the result of the Degree Course/student relationship, but also, at a lower level, of the single teacher/student relationship involved in completing the thesis. I think that both the teacher and the student are engaged in the same activity: identifying clues to understand the experience of practical work.

Let us give an example: in the chapter devoted to her choice of practical work, one student says she wanted to contact her local Mothercraft service. She says she collected information about this service and then devotes a page to describing it. On reading this, I found a page containing a long list of points which immediately gave me a sense of extraneousness. I looked at it and thought that the long list told me nothing about the local facility and therefore decided not to read it. I went ahead and discovered that the student had decided to apply for practical work at a private cooperative that she already knew, but there was no explanation of the shift.

When I met the student I told her about the sense of extraneousness conveyed by her description of the Mothercraft service and I supposed that the "treatment of the subject" tended to convey what she herself had felt on reading the Service's leaflet. The student agreed and added a series of elements that help to account for the way she decided not to approach the Service and made her own choice.

At times however it must be admitted that the work done is not enough; on the flat sea of relating facts, there is only a vague ripple, and I think that this, to return to the beginning of my article, raises issues for the Degree Course[8].

Earlier, I talked about the shift in the representation of the third-year thesis as the change from full-stop to comma. I do not think such a "transition" is in itself a problem.

I think, however, that it becomes a problem for those that write their "comma" in great haste and have to "bear" the weight of the big words and accents (as Gianni Rodari[9] reminds us) typical of our profession. And this seems yet again to underline the need to conceive the training as a clinical intervention, designed to consider and develop the relationship offered in the encounter (Carli, Grasso, & Paniccia, 2007).

References

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[8] Obviously as well as my level of "ripples", in the role of teacher in the Degree Course.
[9] Cfr.the poem quoted at the beginning of this article.