# Biographical Narratives in Teaching: a Study of Professors on Postgraduate Courses

**Ana Maria Costa e Silva¹\***
**Miriam Aparício²**
¹Institute of Education and Center for Studies in Communication and Society (CECS), University of Minho, Braga, Portugal
²National Council for Scientific Research (CONICET), National University of Cuyo, Mendonza, Argentina
*Email: anasilva@ie.uminho.pt

**Abstract**

Literature and research have shown that professional development constitutes an essential dimension in constructing both work and professional identity. An important aspect in such development is training. In the field of adult education, different authors (Pratt, 1993; Mezirow, 1985; Schön, 1996; Silva, 2007) emphasize the importance of placing trainees at the center of the learning and cognitive processes and within their corresponding social and historical contexts. Training is supported by a comprehensive adult learning theory. Therefore, the acquired knowledge is not only the result of an external and objective reality but also of a complex construction in which the appropriation of experience plays a relevant role. This paper reveals the findings obtained through biographical narratives in a five-year work program with teachers at different levels (from pre-school to higher education) on postgraduate courses. The core issue is the importance of biographical narratives, as an identification strategy for personal experience, knowledge construction and professional identity. This strategy provided the opportunity for recognition of practical experience, as a provider of learning, as well as his/her own authorship, which are important conditions in the understanding of professional identity.

**Keywords**: Biographical narratives, Teaching, Experiential learning, Professional identities

## Introduction

This text focuses on the process of training that has been experienced over five years during the teaching of a particular discipline in an academic postgraduate university

course. The setting is in the area of the training of adults and professionals, who predominantly work in the field of education and teaching, that is to say, it is related to a discipline integrated in a Masters in Educational Sciences course that specializes in Curriculum Development and whose students are mainly teachers at various levels of education from pre-school to higher education.

When planning the syllabus of the discipline various aspects were taken into consideration. These aspects included the characteristics of the students, the designation of the discipline and the meaning attributed to them. Taking into account these elements, the course staff were not indifferent to the pedagogy for adults (Knowles, 1984, 1986; Pratt, 1993) with its specific characteristics and demands, which the trainers sought to highlight in the conception and implementation of the syllabus. As an essential aspect of the training plan, there was a preoccupation with placing the students - the subjects of the training - at the center of the learning and cognitive process with the topics located and situated in social and historical contexts (Pratt, 1993). That is, the training plan was underpinned by a comprehensive theory of adult learning (Mezirow, 1985) in which the structuring of experience had a fundamental place and, consequently, knowledge did not only result from an objective and external reality but also from a complex construction in which the trainee had an essential role (Silva, 2003).

In this way, it is possible to emphasize three elements of the syllabus of the discipline that are considered relevant: its content, its methodology and its evaluation. The reason for highlighting them is not because of the elements themselves, since they are part among other components of the conception and implementation of any educational or training syllabus, but because of the form and content that each one of these elements took, which had never been tried out with students in previous training situations.

Our proposition resulted in an investment in formative interventions distanced from merely cognitive and instrumental rationality. We sought really to develop instances of the piloting of well-considered moves and of the development of networks of complex and diversified interactions (Silva, 2004, 2015a, 2015b; Lepisto, Cronina and Pratt, 2015), which contributed to the adaptation of the complexity of the personal and socio-professional systems.

We focused on the challenges of teaching-learning experience training and especially on issues concerning the preferred methodologies in order to reflect the 'subject capable of taking advantage of situations' - according to the analytical proposition of Pastré (2011) - of his personal and professional experiences and recognize, as empirical knowledge, knowledge that is built throughout time not only socially but above all biographically (Dubar, 2004; Silva, 2015b). In this process, the work to turn the spoken or written narrative into usable content (Ricoeur, 1986; Gonçalves, 2000), where the work of each of pronouncement is to explain or to explain to better understand themselves, is recognized as the work of authorship. Furthermore, it is

essential work for the discovery of their experience, as it leads to the possibility to know and evidence the epistemic status of (his/her) experience.

## Methodology

The presentation about the discipline identified discusses – in a succinct way – the various pedagogical aspects that characterized it; namely, its purpose, aims and methodology. These were as follows: "The Curricular Unit Identity(ies), Training and Non-Formal Learning takes lifelong training-learning as an area for discussion and critical analysis and particularly non-formal learning. This area will not only be an object of study external to the actors involved in the process of post-graduate training but will also result in a system of self-analysis of the training-learning processes of the participants and of their (re)construction of identity(ies). It will favor an analytical and critical perspective of content and fundamental participative dynamics in order to develop and strengthen the self-analytical and self-critical dimension, which encourages the identification of training pathways and learning situations" (Silva, 2010). In this sense, a methodology based on the constructivist paradigm was favored with an emphasis on the biographical narrative method (Délory-Momberger, 2004).

## Objetives

The general objective of the pedagogical work was to develop and strengthen the self-analysis and self-criticism dimension for the identification of the training pathways and important learning situations throughout the training and professional path. For this they had to define some specific objectives; namely, i) to identify their professional pathways, contexts and learning situations; ii) to articulate their professional and identity dynamics and the processes for the production of knowledge; iii) to produce a written and reflective work focusing on learning situations in both formal and non-formal contexts.

## Population

A total of 70 post-graduate students attending Master and Doctoral courses in Sciences of Education at the University of Minho participated in the study. The majority of the students were teachers (95%) from pre-school to higher education, as mentioned earlier, and they were mainly female (93%) and Portuguese nationals (90%). However, throughout the five years of the implementation of this program of training students with Brazilian, Angolan and Mozambican nationalities also attended the discipline.

## Methods

The pedagogical work, which was carried out in an academic training context, focused on (self)reflective work about the contexts of the lives of the trainees and those that organized the process of self-training and co-operative training.

Work included the construction of an individual portfolio throughout the semester for presentation at the end of the semester and it included the production of three short written individual narratives for submission during the semester. The first narrative concerned *learning and training experiences*, the second *lived professional identity and attributed identity* and the third *socio-professional dynamics and construction of identity(ies)*.

The analysis and results presented are based on our experience of teaching and learning in the academic context of higher education and the qualitative analysis of various documents, both by the trainees (including biographical accounts and portfolios) and by the trainers. We will highlight the pedagogical factors, the learning process and the self-discovery in the personal and professional careers of the trainees, which had an impact on their personal and professional development.

This maxim was the point of departure and arrival. It was like a place of embarkation for a journey to be taken together by the trainers and trainees and where to return to at the end. It was a great pedagogical challenge!

With the objective of accomplishing this challenge some of the elements of the pathway were revisited, particularly elements inherent to the pedagogical process, which are essential in the process of (self)discovery and development.

In this way the content of the work is presented and it included the evaluation of the process, the learning of the trainees and the favored methodology. These three elements were united in the form that articulated the major pedagogical challenges and through them the (self)discovery, while the people and professionals fulfilled themselves by taking on an inevitable inter-dependence.

The content that was put into perspective from the beginning was like an aphorism for investigation, questioning, reflection and discovery. This field, as the focus that is going to guide its observers, is more than an object of external study for the actors involved in the process of training, as it constitutes a system of self-analysis of their own training-learning processes and (re)construction of identity(ies).

Retuming to the image of the port of embarkation, it is important to emphasize three maxims with which the journey is usually started. The first is the belief of Pineau (2004, p. 14), when he stated that "training times are too important to be only institutional training". This is a recurring maxim throughout the journey, and one that comes and goes continuously between the prospect and the process of reflection and (self)reflection of each actor about his/her own pathway.

The second is directly associated with the first and is reflected in the commitment: "to the discovery of non-institutional training times". Each trainee was invited to reveal their training periods by going over their own, personal and professional biography.

The third is a commitment to 'authorship', through the adoption of his/her emergence, as a witness to his/her individual passage from the condition of being the object to the condition of being the subject of a project (Gonçalves, 2000).

## Results

## The pedagogical challenges

The pedagogical challenges often left doubts for the students, who saw, as manifold, the challenges that they themselves raised and who were permeated with enthusiasm, uncertainty and apprehension. Taking up the perspectives and expectations of the trainees with respect to the discipline, two female students made the following statements about its purposes:

> "The presentation of the curricular unit looked attractive to me. I confess that, on the same day, I commented to a friend: "This subject was made for me! ... I am going to thrive with it!." ... For this reason, I had no hesitation in taking the option". (Student Portfolio, academic year 2010/2011).

> "To participate in this Curricular Unit meant for me at that moment, the possibility of being rescued from a subterranean chamber" (Student Portfolio, academic year 2010/2011).

It was possible to frequently 'read' – in a certain sense 'foretell' - in the attitudes and commitments assumed by the students (at least by the majority of them) that their option had a significant added value for them, as people and professionals and not only as pure trainees. There was, therefore, in some way a 'tacit' but also an explicit commitment, which they adopted as trainees in order to contribute to their growth, as people and professionals.

This is a central condition and a demanding commitment, which - for some - is more important and more significant than for others but which everyone always recognized as essential:

> "... to tell, as an author, is not easy and it demands of us a position of detachment and self-reflection that infers the condition of being responsible for our faults, weaknesses and self-assuming conflicts, which are important for the building up of our lived and attributed identities" (Student Portfolio, academic year 2010/2011).

These maxims, which were presented at the start of the journey, were kept in mind throughout the journey and were the links uniting the content, methodology and evaluation process. The methodology of evaluation, which they received with a mixture of curiosity and perplexity throughout the different years of the course, for the trainees had results that were innovative, interesting and appropriate for the learning process that they decided to undertake. Also it assumed the commitment of co-operation and of continuous feedback in the face-to-face sessions and in the written commentaries in each one of the narratives delivered by the trainees on the

dates that they agreed, as a group, in the first working session. This was an essential condition in the construction of authorship and in the production of knowledge in interaction but also an important element for the progressive acquisition of self-confidence in the unique and (self)reflective processes that each trainee was generating.

As they always stressed, it was a totally unknown journey for them. For they also assumed command, as authors, of their own learning and of the production of new knowledge. They needed to learn to confide in themselves and to have 'anchors of support', incentives, (re)direction and questioning. This was our essential work throughout the journey. Even more of a challenge for the trainers was that many times they were confronted, interrogated and questioned by the students and it was necessary for them to give appropriate feed-back at the right time. The trainers were pleased, when they received the opinions of the students, about the impact of their comments. These were moments of (self)discovery and mutual growth - both personal and professional. As one female trainee stated at the 'end of the journey:'

> "What can be said about this journey that started tentatively and with high expectations? What balance did I make of these months during which I was called upon to reflect on, to comment critically about and to analyze carefully and pertinently about all that surrounded me, being aware that the training emerges out of multiple contexts and is not limited by formal, institutionalized training? ...
>
> This journey now ended but marked by joy, surprises and doubts, made me understand, like a poetic person, "what is important is to start, not to arrive" (see the poem Viagem (Voyage) by Torga) ...
>
> On balance, I consider that the making of this portfolio constitutes an important moment for my professional and also my personal development.
>
> ... it was an opportunity to 'visit' dark alleyways that now are illuminated ... it was a way of descending to my depths and finding lost reminiscences in the ship of my fantasies, aspects that helped me in the process of writing and that reflected my characteristics of identity ...
>
> Therefore, the writing about my person and professional experiences...the writing of this portfolio made it possible for me, without doubt, to experience feelings of joy and calmness, which did not always happen when we carried out work of a scientific nature" (Student Portfolio, academic year 2005/2006).

This last statement highlighted with clarity something essential in the learning experience and in the value of knowledge, which the writing of Sousa Santos (1988, p. 54-55) also underlines. In other words, "the quality of knowledge is evaluated less by knowledge that controls or functions in the outside world than by the satisfaction

that it gives to who gets access and shares it. (…) This way – subjectively again - scientific knowledge shows how to live and results in practical knowledge".

At the end of each journey, working jointly with the group of trainees, their uniqueness is reviewed. Despite always leaving from the same portal, each one is permeated with doubts and surprises that have helped the author to explore other horizons and to run the risk of new challenges.

**The process of discovery and authorship**

The assumption of authorship in the process of training-learning is, as has already been mentioned, a fundamental commitment, which places the trainees at the centre of the learning process. In this sense, it gives them "on the one hand, the assignment of a sense of a complex reality, an assumption of what is not the cognitive, affective and social story of anyone else (Barth, 1996) and, on the other hand, his/her mobilization for the self generation of his/her own life (Pineau, 1983), by using him/herself as a resource in the process of training and learning (Charlot, 1997)" (Silva, 2003, p.60).

This mobilizing of the adult, who assumes his/her own responsibility for training and learning, takes as its point of departure the statement of Pineau (2004, p.14) mentioned earlier. An assumption that the trainees generally recognize as particularly important in their process of self-discovery, as is indicated in the following records:

> "…this week, the quotation of Gaston Pineau, the paired work about the recovery of memory of knowledge and, afterwards, writing my "Personal Narrative" and "(In)Visibility of Training and Learning: Knowledge, Experiences and Authorship" made me clearly understand that this was the way that I hoped for my professional reconstruction – I did not only hope that the reconstruction would also be personal – it was, perhaps, even larger and deeper than I could have imagined …

> Throughout the path that now emerged I perceived not only the profundity of the questions but also the importance of this type of work" (Student Portfolio, academic year 2007/2008).

The inclusion of experiential knowledge in the training process, namely, through biographical narratives and self-reflection, gives access to the subjects under training not only in terms of the recognition of knowledge and of knowledge accumulated throughout their life pathways (Silva, 2003) but also to the reworking of their personal and professional identity in accordance with the acknowledgement of the trainees cited above.

The exercises and suggested readings bring together, little by little throughout the training process and with more or less difficulty for the trainees, their capacity of detaching themselves personally and from the world in which they live, since

detachment is essential for the reconstruction of knowledge already acquired, the production of new knowledge and their own 'professional and personal reconstruction'.

This process of (self)discovery is frequently the most demanding exercise and more gratifying for the trainees, because they gain their authorship, particularly through the drawing up of their biographical narrative(s) and they recognize that the knowledge that they produce themselves is essential for the appropriation of their personal and professional identity.

In this process, (self)reflection constitutes a fundamental element, which though the trainees recognized they were not used to the exercise, they also acknowledged its importance for accessing (their) knowledge, transformation and personal and professional development, as can be read in the following statements:

> "Writing narrative is my process of identity, it enabled me to re-evaluate my memory, my life story, my subjectivity and to reflect about the meaning and the relevance of writing as a training practice, self-training and the transformation of my own self" (Student Portfolio, academic year 2008/2009).

> "I was very grateful for the opportunity of living through this process and could not imagine how much richness the methodology of reflection would bring me" (Student Self-evaluation, academic year 2010/2011).

Summarizing, the process of (self)discovery and authorship did not excuse the (self)reflective dimension which - in our case - was fundamentally practiced by the periodic elaboration of written biographical narratives, which simultaneously allowed for (self)recognition of knowledge and the discovery of personal and professional identities.

## Personal and professional development and (re)construction of identity

The point of departure, which was the initial 'course outline' of the syllabus of the discipline, and the commitment of contributing to the personal and professional development of the trainees were progressively consolidated and perceptible to the trainees throughout the process of training. They recognized in it the measure that their co-participation and consequences in the work of (self)training was becoming more evident and indispensable for themselves and for the group with whom they shared this experience.

In this process, they progressively acquired self-confidence for establishing themselves as authors and, when they felt it consolidated, they were able to detach themselves and their subjective world and choose to be 'observers' of their own selves. The following statement bears witness to this pathway:

> "Having passed a semester of work on themes that were not part of my usual reading, I congratulated myself for the learning that I achieved. I observe, now, my professional identity with more maturity and a much sharper critical eye not

only the concepts that I understood, which gave me this support, but also the participation in the reflective work that was proposed for me" (Student Portfolio, academic year 2010/2011).

The narrative dimension is fundamental for the creation of meaning and the construction of knowledge, because it makes possible the recognition of responsibility for the experience, turns it into themes and organizes it spatially and temporally, through the creation of a meta-cognitive consciousness that is essential to the development of the individual subject of a project (Silva, 2004), as the following female trainee recounts:

> "I put in motion the forms of expression and knowledge that I had been silencing. To collect the fragments that I was composed of was to find myself in a territory of questioning, of production of meanings and of recognition, for myself, about that which constituted me" (Student Portfolio, academic year 2010/2011).

To conclude, it is possible to state that the access to the personal and professional development, which the trainees desired and recognized, was in large measure achieved by the narrative route. This enabled the necessary distancing for the desirable appropriation of their 'story' of various experiences, by giving them meaning(s), the subject to be considered in order to understand themselves better at a given moment of their existence, thus establishing a relationship, so that they can try diverse experiences in the various fields practiced by themselves, when developing and (re)constructing their personal and professional identity.

## References

[1]   Barth, B.-M. (1996). Le savoir en construction. Former à une pédagogie de la compréhension. Paris: Retz.

[2]   Charlot, B. (1997). Du rapport au savoir. Éléments pour une théorie. Paris: Anthropos.

[3]   Delory-Momberger, C. (2004). Les Histoires de Vie. De l'invention de soi au projet de formation (2ond édition). Paris : Anthropos.

[4]   Dubar, C. (2004). Régimes de temporalités et mutation des temps sociaux. Temporalités: Productions, Usages, Figures, nº 1, 100-109.

[5]   Gonçalves, Ó. (2000). Viver narrativamente. A Psicoterapia como Adjectivação da Experiência. Coimbra: Quarteto Editora.

[6]   Knowles, M. (1984). Introduction: The Art and Science of Helping Adults Learn. In M. Knowles and Associates, Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[7]   Knowles, M. (1986). Using Learning Contracts: Practical Approaches to Individualizing and Structuring Learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[8]   Lepisto, D., Crosina, E. and Pratt, M. (2015). Identity Work within and beyond the Professions: Toward a Theoretical Integration and Extension. In A. M. Silva and M. Aparício (Eds.), International Handbook about Professional Identities (pp. 203-222). USA: Scientific & Academic Publishing.

[9]   Mezirow, J. (1985). A Critical Theory of Self-Directed Learning. In S. D. Brookfield (ed.), Self-Directed Learning: From Theory to Practice. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Educations. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[10] Pastré, P. (2011). La didactique professionnelle. Approche anthropologique du développement chez les adultes. Paris: PUF.

[11] Pineau, G. (1983). Produire sa vie: autoformation et autobiographie. Paris: Edilig.

[12] Pineau, G. (2004). Temporalidade na Formação. S. Paulo: TRIOM.

[13] Pratt, D. (1993). Andragogy After Twenty-Five Years. In S. Merriam (ed.), Un Update on Adult Learning Theory (pp.15-24). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[14] Ricoeur, P. (1986). Du texte à l'action. Paris: Le Seuil.

[15] Silva, A. M. C. (2003). Formação, Percursos e Identidades. Coimbra: Quarteto Editora.

[16] Silva, A. M. C. (2004). (Re)Inventar a formação de adultos: controvérsias e desafios. In A. F. Moreira, J. A. Pacheco and R. Leite (Eds.), Currículo: pensar, sentir, diferir (pp.57-76). Rio de Janeiro: DP&A Editora.

[17] Silva, A. M. C. (2007). Formação: espaço-tempo de mediação na construção de identidade(s). Coimbra: Ariadne Editora.

[18] Silva, A. M. C. (2010). Programa da disciplina de 'Identidade(s), Formação e Aprendizagens Não Formais. Plano do Curso do Mestrado em Ciências da Educação, área de especialização de Desenvolvimento Curricular. Braga: Universidade do Minho.

[19] Silva, A. M. C. (2015a). Assistentes Sociais e Mediadores: construindo identidades profissionais. Lisboa: Chiado Editora.

[20] Silva, A. M. C. (2015b). The Construction of Professional Identities in the Contexts of Work. In A. M. Silva and M. Aparício (Eds.), International Handbook about Professional Identities (pp. 203-222). USA: Scientific & Academic Publishing.

[21] Sousa Santos, B. (1988). Um discurso sobre as Ciênciaiscurso sobre as Ciências. Porto: Edições Afrontamento.