

The use of the report in reflection groups on undergraduate practical work. “Between saying and doing there’s me...”.

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Introduction

The ability to report is an important aim in psychological competence. It seems of interest, when reflecting on this competence, to share a learning experience activated in the degree course in Dynamic, Clinical and Community Psychology at “Federico II” University in Naples. In this experience, reporting was the main methodology used to ensure that the students acquired the ability to give a clinical psychological sense both to the learning experience itself and to the practical work they were doing at the same time.

Premises

The compulsory external practical work envisaged by the new university reforms for students enrolled in the Faculty of Psychology puts students in contact with the Social Health Services and gives an anticipation of the relationship with the world of work. This means that the university and the Services have to cope with the need for shared aims in psychology training, overcoming the traditional split between theoretical and practical knowledge. Clearly a legislative reform alone cannot lead to any substantial change; it is necessary for the actors in these innovational processes to go beyond the merely formal aspects and the duties laid down by the regulations, to seek their transformational, developmental potential, from which the whole professional community can benefit. We know only too well how difficult it is for the student to integrate the learning of theoretical contents and practice, especially if the latter is seen not just as the mere practice of clinical procedures, but above all as a process of reflection and elaboration of personal experience in the light of models orienting the reading of contexts and the relationships involved in them. The University and the Services have to face a challenge between tradition and innovation, and the students unwittingly accept this challenge.

In keeping with these premises, the practical component is presented as an important part of the training of future psychologists. It can in fact be transformed into an experience that backs up the “natural” tendency to separate the institutionally academic phase from the more experiential training phase, or it may, if adequately supported, become an opportunity to start the process of integrating theory and practice. The slide towards the separation of the two poles may be made easier by the fact that the practical work is the students’ first experience outside the university, in the Services that they consider a favored place where, personally and “hands-on”, they can finally try out the clinical experiences that at university are imagined as belonging to the distant future at the end of their education.

The reflection groups

In keeping with these premises, the “Federico II” specialist degree course in Psychology decided to arrange the construction of a space for the suspension of productive work, whether it be connected to the acquiring of knowledge or to practical participation, so as to allow reflection on this activity. In this space a record of meta-reflection was set up, designed to weave a fabric of the threads of the experience in its emotional and operative components (Freda, 2007)¹. It was a frame with the purpose of enabling the students to

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¹ For an understanding of the methodological approach proposed in this work, besides this text, see Bion, 1961; Carli & Panizza, 1999; Carli & Panizza, 2005; Carli, Grasso & Panizza, 2007.

elaborate their personal and professional experiences in real time, without putting the task of systematising, understanding and interpreting them off to future clinical training. This intermediate space, called a reflection group on practical experience, is led by a clinical psychologist working in the Health Services, not entrenched in the university, with a supplementary teaching role. The reflection group that supports and integrates the external practical work, is composed of about 20 students and takes place in 10 2-hour sessions. For a better understanding of the initial premises that gave rise to the reflection group experience, here is a passage from the report written by the leader of one of the groups:

“My being an outsider to the university context proved to be a resource, because it immediately brought out some of the constraints of that context. Such constraints are obviously not the screws holding the chairs down to the floor in the lecture rooms², but the way students and teachers approach university life, as a duty, and the fact that a series of self-perpetuating rituals are taken for granted, often with the a-critical support of both parties. It seems to be taken for granted that the students are in a position of dependence and passivity, that relations based on dialog are not favored. The university training of psychologists is a process that could be read with clinical categories, to accustom the future psychologists already to “learning by experience” during their university studies, but this seems to be the exception and not the rule. In a situation of this kind, in theory, going to the places of practical work would seem to be a potentially highly disturbing experience (in the good sense of the term!), because in itself it has the possibility of putting an end to this relational set-up. This possibility is dreamed of by the students as a great opportunity to emancipate themselves from the university context that treats them as children, to be able to try out a situation as adults. However, since this process of emancipation has not been triggered within the university, the encounter with the places of practical work is often felt to be a demotivating, frustrating failure by the students. In cases where it is described as being positive, it reveals characteristics similar to those of the university context: it prompts in the student an a-critical approval of the rituality typical of the Health Services where the practical work takes place; such a-critical modalities have the advantage of making the student immediately feel part of the context itself. Evidently, this happens because the change of context (from the university to the health services), with its implications of repositioning within relationships on the student’s part, is either not perceived at all, or is too threatening and is therefore immediately eliminated and not thought about. All these are good reasons to set up a reflection group on the experience of practical work. Such a setting will enable the student to re-interpret his practical work experience in the light of the parallel experience in the reflection group sessions, and to reconnect the practical work to his own university pathway”.

In the reflection groups on undergraduate practical work there is the convergence of two ways of looking at psychological competence: that of the University and that of the Health Services. Two different experiences of work, with an important element in common: the attempt to make sense of the things one does, by connecting them to recognised, shared goals. It is no accident in fact that in 2004 a group of psychologists from the Naples ASL NA 1³ (of which one of the authors of the present article is a member), had organised a conference in which the ASL met the University to begin a debate on the issue of the training and practical work of future psychologists. Below is a passage from the intervention of this group, which seems to exemplify the spirit with which the question of future psychologists’ practical work was dealt with in the ASL:

“The university has the task of “regulating” the mechanisms of training for a profession so that it is not limited to the choice of an epistemological model of reference and so that it is anything but obvious in its possible forms. On the other hand, the local health services are dealing with trainees full of expectations and fantasies that are not easily fulfilled in the institutional reality of the Services. If there is no provision for moments of reflection during the training process, the risk is that the students will leave disappointed, without having had the opportunity to experiment with a thinking function that is fundamental for the acquisition of psychological competence” (Iacono, Rubino, & Tamajo Contarini, 2004).

² Referring to the difficulty encountered initially in finding a room where we could sit in a circle: in fact, the seats in the rooms are attached to the floor.

³ ASL Azienda Sanitaria Locale (Local Health Service); ASL NA 1 indicates one of the 5 ASLs in the Naples municipality.

The report as a working tool

The reflection group adopts the report as the main methodology of the activity: during the sessions all students are asked for 4 reports related to their practical work experience, to be shared and used in the reflection group.

“This reporting process in the working group is guided by a grid to interpret the context in which several points of view are envisaged:

the context; the exploration of the structural aspects of the practical work context, its goals, the legal aspects and the relevant laws;

the role; the exploration of the role of the psychologist in the health service, the relations with other members of the team, his/her functions and procedures;

a case history: the account of an intervention one has participated in;

being between: a report about the experience of practical work considered as a whole. *Between the saying and the doing there's me...*

The sequence proposed is based on a logic of progressive broadening of the viewpoint, which from focusing on the object, on the structure of the context, proceeds towards an involvement of the self in the relationship with the tutor (in practical work, taken as a role model), with the other person/the client, and lastly, in the relationship with the training context” (Freda, 2007).

The students are also involved in reflecting on what happens in the group sessions, in the attempt to identify in a more and more conscious way, a goal in the activity of practical work and to compare the experiences occurring in the “there and then” of practical work with the “here and now” of the reflection group. This activity is carried out through the drafting, on the part of a volunteer, of reports about the group meetings, to read and discuss at the beginning of the following session.

The experience of reporting in reflection groups on practical work

Starting from the experience of a reflection group that finished in the 2007/2008 academic year, we will outline some steps in the progress made through the reading of the reports produced by the students over the 10 sessions. On the one hand, the scenario of the experience is characterised by a youthful university context - a degree course that has not yet become a Faculty - and on the other hand, by a health service structure that is often marked by a lack of resources to cope with a growing number of clients and more and more complex requests. This makes emergencies the order of the day in the Services and reduces the possibility of debate, dialog, reflection and supervision. The report is the tool linking the two realities, University and Services, because it enables the students to position themselves and to see themselves in relation to both contexts, capturing the crossover elements.

First phase: from the illusion of doing to the delusion of not being controlled.

From the stories reported by the students during the first reflection group session, the impact with the Health Service is difficult. They are disoriented and stunned on coming into contact with contexts very different from the University world. The tutors of the Service – in the students’ experience – do not devote enough time to providing orientation and do not have clear ideas about how to ensure their training experience is fruitful. The university culture dominates the relationship with the Services; the first reports read and discussed in the group seem to be part of a prescriptive, duty bound logic that favors “the objectivity” of the story, and is reduced to a detailed chronicle of the facts from which emotions are excluded. The group is not recognised in its function of control (admittedly it is only just been formed); the relationship is two-sided, with the leader, in a strongly a-symmetrical dimension. The request to report on the session makes the students fall into a state of disorientation. The students themselves try to make it seem unimportant, but it is clear how frightening the prospect is.

“(…) we were told to draw up a report on the experience of the reflection group; it was a moment that, at least personally, I felt was very embarrassing. In fact there was a long silence in response to the request for a brave person to take on the task of writing it. My concern, like that of many others, I think, was actually about the concrete difficulties we would meet in writing a report, not having the specific competences for that task (…)”.

“The report is not easy or difficult, it does not take either a short time or too much, we could all do it, but ... it has become the task that nobody wants to take responsibility for, the “persecutor”, as it was once called, that we all flee from in view of the anxiety and terror it can inspire (…)”.

The report does not respond to criteria or theories known and taught in the university context; instead, as the leader tries to introduce in the first sessions, it calls for practice in autonomous forms of thought and of re-elaboration. In this re-elaboration the theoretical models need to be directed towards the interpretation of the experience, and an increasingly broad perspective needs to be adopted to enable one to keep oneself, the group and the contexts in mind. In this first phase, in which the students are anchored to the university culture, the Services are blamed, in a persecutory manner, for being responsible for their not learning. This experience is fostered by the fantasy of judgement and evaluation towards both the services and the university and is expressed in complaints and demands often addressed to the leader. The disorientation due to a situation that does not guide the students to a precise practice, nor does it provide the interpretative tools that can quickly make sense of their confusion, is projected onto the leader. The latter is however identified as the referent of the university context and they expect control and clarity. In these experiences, the proposal to participate in a group and use the report as a methodology to construct autonomous modes of interpreting the experience is configured as an element of severance compared to the previous position as a student, it is felt to be hardly tolerable. This is for the critical distance, seen as disorientation, that the group and the report call for in relation to both the extremes underlying the practical work experience: the university and the health services. Disappointment and frustration are amplified:

“(…) I think of the meaning of our meeting and I wonder if the reflection group serves to manage the absurd swindle of the practical work. Let us reformulate this in more technical terms: the group helps to cope with and elaborate the emotive drive connected to the practical work experience. So we are still talking about disappointment and frustration: but how do these presumed categories help to solve the problem? (...) We say: “They send us to a place to do no-one knows what”. The university responds: “It was for your own good”. The fantasy is that a strong and competent Other does all this for our own good, without our understanding. We ask the University to support us and help us to get out of the mess the University itself has got us into. We all want Dr. R⁴ to magically transmit to us the meaning of what we are doing and to make us understand that we can become good psychologists even by watching someone taking notes on the phone⁵. I have the feeling that this will not happen and I’m sorry for those who expect it: I really have the feeling that nobody will ever tell us how to behave. Another disappointment. I feel envious like Klein’s infant. Why doesn’t this big breast tell me what I have to do, how I have to behave? Does she do it for our own good? Perhaps she wants to stimulate our autonomy, help us to become good, “thinking psychologists? Then why does she send us into these situations that seem unsuitable to future psychologists? Why does she frustrate us like this without letting us understand why? Another disappointment ...”.

There is no sense in the practical work, because the “mother” institution, the university, prescribes the practical work but does not explain it; the student is “sent” to do it, but is then abandoned. In this experience the report itself can be presented more as an acting out than as a re-elaboration, proposing categories that are not thought and are “stuck” onto the account of the experience “to make it look good”. In this case it is a tool for the purging of

⁴ The leader.

⁵ The student who reports evokes situations the trainee might find himself in, situations not requiring any psychological competences, but in which the trainee is caught up in the routine of the health service.

emotions poured out and not thought out. Some examples in which the evacuative function is found, but is beginning to be reconsidered:

“(...) Rereading what I wrote I realize that more than a report, it was an outburst. Not about Dr. R, or my tutor⁶, but about myself, because all this is the result of a hasty decision”.

“There couldn't be a better day to talk about the experience of my practical work...just this morning in fact I finally understood what nonsense my presence in the health service is. At the beginning of this new process, we were all beset by doubts and worries, our role wasn't clear, it wasn't clear how we could actually be useful for those kids⁷, how we could feel like “psychologists” while pretending to apply the methods we've heard so much about. Even during the reflection group we often had the impression that it was the same old abstract experience that we had to include in our training, only halfway between theory and practice. In actual fact we only wanted to know how to use “psychological tools” without getting involved. Especially in the early sessions this was discussed; then, at least personally, I started to notice something different, but it was hard to realize it. At first I imagined it was just due to the fact that DR.R. had started to talk more, since that was what we wanted from her, that she would give us more answers (...)”.

“Doing” can compensate one's own emptiness and uncertainty about the profession, but it can also become the “theory”, when fake interpretative categories are offered in the absence of a conscious experience. An example:

“(...) This report will therefore be seen as a tool through which to reflect on my experience of practical work, on the emotionality of the experiences, so as to outline the evolution of my progress, which saw emotions changing from facts to information coming from the context, thanks to which I began to construct a thinking, by means of which to explore my representations and fantasies, also coming to know the extraneousness of the contexts which up until that moment had been the object of neo-emotional symbolizations. What emerged was therefore a development, a construction, both of meaning and of goals, which also involved the dimension of presenting oneself and recognising oneself in possession of competences representing tools that can be used in being in contexts, in positioning oneself and beginning to relate to them. (...)”.

For the students the leader becomes the person who, representing the “mother” university, has to take the place both of the tutor in the Service, seen as being incapable and incompetent, and of the students themselves, unskilled in interpretation, by providing reassuring responses of control, to give the experience a meaning, making it digestible apart from the personal involvement

“(...) Dr. R gives us the task of identifying both the purpose and the goals of the organisations we are doing our practical work in, as well as the professional aims of the psychologists working there, to try to understand what their relationship with each other is like. Perhaps it is a useful pointer in the search for the meaning of the practical work? The breast is not as bad as it seems? Perhaps she has given us a useful tip? We'll see ...”.

Second phase: “but it's not only my fault!”

The work of sharing the practical work experience in the group by reading reports gradually enables the students to recognise transversal categories organising the experience, thus reducing the sense of isolation and loneliness that characterises them. This allows a shift from the devaluation of the Service tutor to the recognition of the weight and meaning of his/her expectations of the experience underway. There starts to be a possible link between one's complaints, demands, resignation and disillusionment, and the frustration of the fantasies one had when entering the Services. The group begins to be recognised as a possible container. Some examples:

“(...) Gradually I found the place to elaborate inside myself, but above all in the reflection group , where by discussing with colleagues and Dr. R., I managed to find my meaning (...)”.

⁶ Within the Health Service.

⁷ The clients of the Health Service.

"(...) I have often been chasing answers, and I could never find them. I understood that expecting those answers derived from my experience and that there had been a promise, which the practical work itself seemed to have made, and was now failing to keep. In actual fact the Service did not respond to my expectations based on that promise because that promise was never made, it was part of my feelings. My eyes and my mind had to make a shift. In the group, in this set of people engaged in something shared, this issue could be understood, and could be a resource to exploit (...)"

It is, however, still a phase marked by uncertainty and by a great crisis of categories for the interpretation of the contexts. Long silences, a lot of absences, the refusal to report, boredom and resignation towards the practical work experience. Some examples:

"(...) there are a lot of long silences in the group .. why doesn't anybody speak, why doesn't anybody respond to the questions asked by Dr. R? Perhaps the group doesn't want to think "about its problems". Thinking and stating our disappointment would mean coming to terms with it ... perhaps it is easier to deny it? (...)"

The students' aspiration is still oriented to doing, which is considered the best source of learning. This generates attacks and envy towards those who are in contexts that seem to allow more operative opportunities, whatever they may be. For instance, administering tests, of which one may not even know the purpose or the meaning within the Health Service. Some examples:

"(...) My anger and disappointment were uncontrollable, I felt like the victim of frustrations that I didn't deserve. And there was no figure to help me to control all this. This was all amplified from hearing, during the reflection group sessions, the experiences of my other colleagues, who, if anything, complained about being too involved in the activities of the facility they had been assigned to (...)"

"(...) During the days when I observed my tutor's work, I got to know different types of tests that were administered to patients, and to understand the different personality areas that were investigated through them; it was very interesting and extremely good experience to see in the field what had so far been just theory (...)"

From the students' words it can be understood that developing psychological competence means operating in contexts that allow one to learn techniques without any involvement critical of their use. This makes learning deriving from reflection group discussions "2nd rate", as well as the activity of reporting. Meta-reflection on one's own position and that of one's colleagues is not considered useful for training. Even the psychologist-tutor's activity is divided into "1st rate" activities, when it is in the clinical stereotype (interviews, psychotherapy), and "2nd rate" activities if it is supervision, support to families of adults with serious handicaps, planning and monitoring activities connected to the organisation of the Health Service. Some examples of these problems, but also of their initial elaboration:

"(...) My discomfort sprang from the fact that my activity in the facility consisted only of "reflecting" with my colleagues and the tutor on various kinds of question, including our personal feelings about the practical work experience which, in my opinion, is still suspended, still awaiting a meaning (...)"

"(...) I am becoming convinced that new categories of interpretation enable a stereotyped knowledge of the psychological identity to be overcome, so as no longer to make the clinical-psychological intervention coincide with the "treatment" of some disorder, "distress", or "suffering"; this treatment serves, without any other considerations of the organisational role, to justify the performance of the psychologist in the Health Services (...)"

"(...) I discover that, besides the psychotherapy sessions – which I cannot take part in, for obvious reasons – the role of my tutor is mainly organisational, that of coordinating the Center's activity. She creates projects and manages them by meeting with staff and parents. I am quite struck by this: previously, in fact, I had never thought of the psychologist's work in all its complexity, I imagined the psychologist working with his patient, not as the real coordinator of the facility where he works (...)"

In this phase the report describes the dynamics of the context, but still gives an aggressive evaluation of the operation of the psychologists in the Health Service (judged as being capable or incapable). The trainee takes a point of view external to the Service itself, does not identify with the relationship to the context. Some examples:

“(...) There were three or four very nice, friendly social animators, who however only wanted not to do anything. In fact when they could, they were happy to avoid going upstairs to get the patients, for whom this was the only way to get out of their rooms and do something different. Most times they invited them to come down only after they had been out to the bar for breakfast (...)”.

“(...) I noticed that my idyllic representation did not correspond to reality, but was only a dimension I had constructed to respond in my way, perhaps to reassure myself, to what was happening ... the therapists are not as efficient as I imagined, the young people spend a lot of each day doing nothing. Some of them, who if stimulated could become a bit more autonomous, like learning to tell the time, are left to themselves ... (...)”.

At the same time there is the discomfort of being outside, of not being considered important, just passing through:

“(...) I still feel this mentality that “we are just passing through”, while having started the practical work again after the summer, I am in a reception centre. I wonder why I feel like this. In this period I have noticed that essentially I don't agree with the way the operators intervene, and how this has nothing to do with the training the university is giving me, based mainly on psychoanalytical principles. I often came up against statements like “counter-transference doesn't exist; here we use an exclusively behavioral method, we try to set aside the emotional dimension”. I somehow feel that my knowledge and capacities are not shared and are not recognised and can't be used in this context. (...)”.

Third phase: “with (the benefit of) hindsight”.

In the writings produced by the students, there is no differentiation in terms between protocol, observation protocol, relationship and report: these terms are used vaguely, as if at this stage the report was not recognised as a working tool with its own particular nature. A step which enables the elaboration of experience to evolve is the proposal to take up some of the reports from the early stages of practical work and try to reread them in the group after all this time. Starting from the here and now of the relationship with the group and the practical work, the re-narrated texts become pretexts for the reconstruction, in a there and then which was current at that time, of new possibilities of rethinking one's relationship with the Service. Various students in fact manage to reconstruct the process of their being in the practical work-places, recognising certain modalities that may have influenced and limited their chances of learning from experience. This enables them to start to see in a clearer, less persecutory and/or omnipotent way, some limits, both in themselves and in the Service and training contexts. These limits are considered as elements to come to terms with in a process of learning and growth, and therefore as resources. Some examples:

“(...) After this new reading I immediately realize that I don't know myself; my attitude was too judgmental. I think that if I managed to judge the operators, the Service etc, so much and so badly before, it was because I was outside the relationship (...)”.

“(...) I think these practical work experiences have been useful in some way, to get us closer to the world of work with “the great hopes” of the beginner. Then to set ourselves up as judges, maybe because of envy for the position occupied by our tutors, or simply because it's easier to judge others than to examine our own selves (...)”.

It becomes possible in reports to name, recognise and differentiate the emotions (boredom, anger, resignation, disappointment, impotence). Through the report it is possible to connect these emotions to the demand that somebody else should state the meaning of the practical work for each person, and attribute to oneself the organisation of the experience. These emotions are not only acted out in practical work contexts, in the reflection group and in the reports. They in fact become material on which to develop thinking about one's positioning

within the experience, recognising the paralysing aspect that a non-thought emotionality can assume and gradually progressing towards more and more mature forms of assumption of responsibility as regards one's own training process.

"(...) During the others' interventions I started to feel impatient. The fact that the great majority of the group were dissatisfied with their practical work and were resigned to not finding anything good in it, made me angry. I realize that I was angry in my intervention, when I said I had found the space for a learning experience in my Health Service. Basically what I felt was displeasure for the dissatisfaction and disappointment of the others, but I translated this emotion into a kind of reminder of personal responsibility, recalling that each person was in charge of his/her own training and therefore had the power to manage it as she/he liked (...)"

"(...) at the end of this report, I realize, and forgive the play on words, how few people answered Dr. R's question seriously: "What skills do you feel are lacking in your professional competence, what would you like to learn?". We simply answered with what we do in our practical work, with the tasks we have been given. I think my problem in answering seriously depended on my inability to project my professionalism as a psychologist. On my inability to set goals as a psychologist. I still feel too much a student and too little a professional".

The report, lastly, also helps to re-read experiences using categories that are actually understood and thought out and are not repeated stereotypes.

"(...) I chose to describe the administration of the cognitive test as a traditional clinical situation. With (the benefit of) hindsight, I wonder why the same clinical importance is not given to the Easter party held the day before, where all the people involved had gathered together (psychologists, clients and family members)? The psychologist's role can actually be different depending on the clients being dealt with and on the context in which this is carried out (...)"

"(...) All in all, therefore, the resources are never taken for granted, and at the same time they are always present. This makes one think what it means to want to understand, to decide to be responsible for oneself and not to delegate to others and then complain".

" (...) Very quickly so many things appear which seem to be so important and that until now were kept in the dark. We can no longer deny that we've started our practical work, that we have to take a stance and clarify our ideas. A definition is needed. I would tend to think that defining oneself means finding a way, perhaps a method that can give meaning once and for all. A fantasy that I think is bound to fail, driven by the constant push of time (...)"

"(...) thinking back to past experience and comparing it with the present enables me to understand what I was going through emotively; perhaps without having re-read my protocol and without reflecting, some important changes concerning the relationship with the young people and the psychologists at the Centre would come about in silence. I don't think I would have given it enough space (...)"

Recognising oneself in the relationship with the practical work context shifts the attention onto the issue of regulating the distance between oneself and that context. This is a highly problematic aspect for students, and it becomes the focus of the discussion. The group swings between fusion and detachment, and does not seem to be able to grasp the opportunity to use the report as a tool that enables distances to be regulated through thinking of one's emotions.

"(...) I hope to find the right proportion, to be able to position myself midway between the two poles and I think my experience will help me".

Indeed, in the second-last session, there was the refusal by the students to take responsibility for their own training process. In her report, the leader of the session writes:

"My suggestion of using the report to try to link events together, using shared, recognisable interpretative criteria, provokes an unexpected reaction. The request is interpreted as a way of keeping emotions out and of theorising. I am attacked again for not controlling their emotions and for

wanting to split emotions from theory. The reflection group meets again at the university and is seen as an academic duty. Somebody comments that it would be better to have the reflection groups not at the university, but in the practical work context. I try to reinterpret this proposal as a request for a supervision or therapeutic group revealing the desire for someone to take responsibility for telling them how to be a psychologist or to “look after” them; but I conclude that, through the reflection groups, the university can promote their competences in thinking, and cannot replace them with its own”

There is one critical moment in particular that marks a fundamental step forward: at the end of this turbulent session, everybody, including the leader, forgets to establish who will write the report and it does not enter anyone’s mind to do it regardless of the “official” designation: the report misses (in the true sense of the word) an opportunity! This crisis seems to bring out the difficulty of integrating the praxis, in which there is the desire to contact, in a rather improvised way, one’s own emotions and those of others to show that something “psychological” is being done, and the theory, which is seen as the body of notions and theoretical principles that are hard to integrate or use in assuming a professional role. Just when the report was starting to prefigure the first possible connections between these two separate aspects, there would seem to have been a rejection of it and a failure to recognise its power to transform experience and its training potential for the development of reflective competences. It should be remembered that such emotions were felt in the concluding stage of the group work when the participants were about to separate from each other and from the leader.

Conclusions

Several phases have been identified in the evolution of the reports produced by the students, which run through the entire experience and are redundant in the texts themselves. The attempt was made to understand how the two training experiences (practical work and reflection groups) are usefully connected to each other in constructing the professional role. In this sense, we can say that we have explored the use of the report as a tool for increasing the ability to make sense of both the experiences, in the student’s broader training process. The clear, involving personal exposition entailed in the report, different from the usual ways of learning typical of the university context, certainly determines a moment of crisis and loss of the criteria of orientation. This leads the student to consider the report a “dangerous, disturbing thing” to be brought back and “domesticated” into university tasks, or to be split from learning and used as a “personal diary” as a way of letting off steam and of getting rid of emotions. Or again, as an opportunity to devalue, not being consistent with or useful for one’s training process. However, gradually it has emerged that through the activity of reporting, the students manage to make connections that are clearer and clearer, less confused, less self-centred, and less generalised. There is the construction of a space for thinking about the emotions felt in the relationship experienced in the various training contexts. Starting from these connections, one can trace the development of a professional competence. The reflection group, which can potentially offer more control and reassurance for the students than the Services can, seems to be prefigured as the first setting where, in relation to reporting, it is possible to be part of a triangular standpoint and simultaneously see one’s relationship to the Services and to the university. By reporting in the group one gains insight into the cross modes of one’s positioning, related to the broad training process in which students are involved, enabling past roots and future perspectives to be discovered. Reporting what happens in the reflection group is a test of the usefulness of the report, in other words, it brings home the importance of connecting one’s own experiences with what happens during both the session and during practical work. This occurs through clinical psychology models that help understanding and that one starts to adopt thinking of them and not applying them a-critically. This learning accustoms students also to broaden their perspective when they are thinking back, in the final report, to their experience of practical work. Admittedly, their ability to make connections is still immature, as is understandable at this stage of their training, but it is also evidence of a process that has begun, and which the

students themselves recognise as such. Moreover, we think it is useful to remember, as the critical final stage of our experience tells us, that students will benefit from other chances of reflection on their experiences, also those in the university context, apart from the re-elaboration of their practical work, so as to prevent the reflection group experience from becoming bracketed as problematic. We believe in fact that the “dramatic” dimension taken on by the second-last session was due to a feeling of uncertainty, both on the part of the leader and of the participants, about whether the reflection group work on the relation between theory and practice would be taken up again later in new training situations. In conclusion it can be said that through training to rethink one’s emotions and to identify with the contexts, which “becoming aware” permits, it is possible to mature and refine oneself in the process of acquiring a professional role. Reflecting on the experience right from university days therefore invites us to think of and to try out spaces and places of learning, in which the reporting activity figures as a tool and goal of the training in psychological competences.

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