



**University of Dundee**

## **Engaging with student-teachers on reflective writing**

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*Published in:*  
Social Theory and Education Research

*DOI:*  
[10.4324/9780203557686](https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203557686)

*Publication date:*  
2013

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Mercieca, D. (2013). Engaging with student-teachers on reflective writing: reclaiming writing. In M. Murphy (Ed.), *Social Theory and Education Research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida* (1 ed., pp. 200-211). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203557686>

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## **Engaging with student teachers on reflective writing: Reclaiming writing**

Duncan P. Mercieca

### **Introduction**

Reflective teaching and writing is now a fundamental aspect and practice of being a teacher. It is seen as ‘an effective tool in democratizing teaching and learning processes’ (Galea 2012, 245) that counter balances the ‘positivistic technicist approach to teaching and learning that has overwhelmed the educational sector’ (ibid.). The move towards greater accountability has led to an emphasis on measurement, and this gives rise to a search for that which can be measured. ‘The most insidious danger’, as Jennings and Kennedy (1996) argue, ‘is that only that which can be measured will be considered worthwhile, thereby leading to a revision to the worst excess of behaviourism and a blinkered focus on behavioural objectives’ (p. xi). Managerial discourses and market forces, particularly at a time of world financial crises, are more than ever pressing on educational aims. Political expediency has become the norm. Under such circumstances, there is the need for teachers to stand back and reflect upon their professional lives and interactions with children and others. It is in this light that the majority of teacher training schools are putting a lot of effort into training, nurturing and guiding student-teachers in becoming reflective practitioners. There seems to be a need for the ‘search for meaning’ at the heart of the process of becoming-teachers.

When I first wrote this chapter, I was working in Malta and asked volunteer student-teachers who had just finished their teacher training for what they considered to be reflective writing. My desk was piled high with numerous files and bits of writings that the student-teachers provided as reflective writings during the course of four years. I was amazed and flabbergasted at the volumes that each student-teacher sent to my office: parts of assignments and tasks assigned; activities aimed specifically at encouraging reflection; and of course, all those activities that involved working directly with children and their parents, in schools, and in carrying out lessons.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in *Social Theory and Education Research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida* on 21 March 2013, available online: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203557686>.

I gradually became more aware of the process of writing involved in reflective writings that the student teachers carry out in the course of their training. For, apart from ‘reflective conversations’ that occur at different moments in the training of teachers, most reflective processes involve the act of writing. Having engaged with Derrida’s ideas, I started to question the process of writing involved in reflective writing. Derrida’s preoccupation with writing has been a life time concern, with his concepts on writing scattered all across his work, while certain of his texts problematise the issue further.

Derrida cannot be reduced to a model of analysis often known as deconstruction. Jacques Derrida (1991) warns us that ‘[it] is not a method and cannot be transformed into one’ (p.273). Gert Biesta (2009) reminds us that ‘we should not aim to deconstruct anything, but rather engage in witnessing the *event* of deconstruction’ (emphasis in original, Biesta 2009, 400). We need to give witness to ‘those moments where conditions of possibility and impossibility ‘cross’ each other and in their crossing provide a deconstructive opening... an entrance for the incoming of something new, something unforeseen’ (ibid.). We do not make deconstruction happen – deconstruction occurs whether we like it or not, but we can acknowledge it and give witness to it.

This has been my driving question in reading my students’ writings: do their writings allow for witnessing the event of deconstruction? Do their writings allow, give space or even create space for the impossible to cross the possible? What other models of writing could allow for more acknowledgment and witness of the possible and impossible crossing each other?

The difficulty and limitation with this book chapter is that it is caught in its own economy of exchange (Derrida, 1992, 1995; Standish, 2001). The Chapter questions the process of writing through writing itself. Therefore, in its own very nature there is a limitation to what can be questioned with regards to writing, yet it is this impossibility that this Chapter tries to capture and acknowledge (Derrida, 1993). This takes me to heart of social science research where most of the research is written and assumes that it is read. The act of writing seems to constitute the foundations of research - writing is often assumed all across the research

process. Spoken words in interviews are transcribed into written words, as are also tones of voice, inflections and other nonverbal behaviours in an attempt to capture what would otherwise be lost. As a supervisor, I encourage my research students to start writing from early on their research process - in the belief that eventually writing will become easier.

This chapter is divided into four parts. Each part explores the process that I engaged in, in my research. If I want to categorise this research project it falls under the terms 'action-research'. Carr and Kemmis (1986) 'regard it as a form of 'self-reflective inquiry' by participants, undertaken in order to improve understanding of their practices in context with a view to maximizing social justice' (Cohen *et al.* 2000, 227).

In the next section I put forth some ideas from Derrida that have challenged my ideas on writing. I give an idea about how these Derridian concepts helped me make strange the familiarity I am accustomed to in reading the students-teachers' reflective writings. In the last section, I show how my reading of Derrida calls for a political action on my part, calling me to take up my responsibility (my ability to respond) and act by trying out a different model of writing with the student-teachers.

### **Derrida on writing**

Before engaging in some of the ideas developed in this chapter, it is important to remind ourselves that Derrida's writing style is itself his philosophy (see Rorty 1978). The way how numerous Derridian texts are presented to us readers, texts which often are difficult to read and 'understand' within the Western philosophical tradition, are playing this double articulation between the text and the concepts. Texts and concepts are in infinite play with each other, both being inseparable and mutually contaminating for each other. Since my initial reading of Derrida's text, this has always fascinated me: How does writing create ones' philosophy? And how does ones' philosophy create ones' writing?

In *Force and significance* (1978) Derrida is engaging with French structuralism. In particular he uses the text of Jean Rousset *Forme et signification* (1989) to create his argument. One can immediately see Derrida's play with the words *form* and *force*, where he is using the latter to

correct Rousset's idea of form. Rousset developed geometrical schemas for studying literary texts and Derrida argues that this process is one of reductionism. This reductionism 'appears to give exhaustive descriptions of the 'structures' or 'formal constants' underlying the texts' (Johnson 1993, 13). Derrida argues that these structures become ends in themselves, and rather than the text being under study, the structure is. Also the structures from their nature are spatial entities and are applied to the text. As Christopher Johnson (1993) argues 'the nature of Rousset's method is indeed appropriately expressed in his choice of title, *Forme et signification*: his own forms (spatial, geometrical) are imposed upon different textual significations' (p.13-14). Derrida furthers his analysis of Rousset and argues that his approach is 'performist', the idea that organisms develop from miniature complete versions of themselves. Each small part reflects and resumes the whole, and the temporal dimension is therefore always of the present. This implies 'the idea that the totality of the literary work is contained in germinal form at its beginning, the end of the work being implicit in its origin' (ibid., 15). These are Derrida's two main concerns: structures and time, what Derrida calls the 'flatness' of structuralism (two-dimensions):

the panoramagram, the very image of the structuralist instrument, was invented in 1824, as Littré states, in order to 'obtain immediately, on a flat surface, the development of depth vision of objects on the horizon'. Thanks to a more or less openly acknowledged schematization or spatialization, one can glance over the field divested of its force more freely or diagrammatically (Derrida 1978, 5).

It is this removing of, or hiding of, the 'force' in order for things to seem simpler, ordered, systematic and clean, that Derrida wants to recuperate in structuralism. Derrida does this by wanting to think in terms of three-dimensions, rather than two. He wants duration (instead of the present time) and becoming (rather than geometrical structures) to play a part in flat structures, in order to give volume (that is the third dimension) to structures: 'in its demand for the flat and horizontal, what is intolerable for structuralism is indeed the richness implied by the volume, every element that cannot be spread into the simultaneity of a form' (ibid. 25).

The question that follows from this is: how do we do this? How to produce volume in flat structures? As often happens, we introduce opposites to help us overcome the linearity of things, to find some sort of (Hegelian) synthesis between the opposites. Derrida will take a different stance to this – he will suggest ‘that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an economy escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions’ (ibid. 19). This *economy* takes us at the heart of the Derridian project which is nutshellled in the term ‘logocentrism’. This term is relevant to this chapter as, in *Of grammatology* (1976), Derrida examines the relationship between speech and writing. He argues that the latter is subordinate to the former: we think, speak and then maybe write what has been spoken. Logocentrism is the idea that the *logos* (speech) and not writing is central to language. The assumption is that speech is clear and transparent. We can understand the speaker and know what she is talking about – ‘the subject is the ‘master’ of language’ (Usher and Edwards 1994, 121). But writing is seen as a suspect and untrustworthy because it can be interpreted in various ways and have different interpretations from what author meant and implied. However, writing for Derrida is able to escape the control of the speaker/writer/reader and we are in a position where language controls us.

This, obviously, ‘plunges us into a realm of strangeness’ (ibid.), as we have lost control of language. ‘Grammatology’, a term Derrida uses to refer to writing, can free our ideas of writing from being subordinated to our ideas of speech/writer/reader. In this way, the *logos* is a presence, what Derrida refers to as the ‘metaphysics of presence’ – a centre or original guarantee of all meaning, which for Derrida has characterised Western philosophy since Plato. The ‘metaphysics of presence’ is motivated by a desire for a ‘transcendental signified’, a signified that transcends all signifiers, as meaning that transcends all signs. What happens is that we measure everything in relation to the logocentric, so writing is measured in relation to speech, or to give another example, woman is measured in relation to man, and so on.

The ‘economy’ that Derrida writes about that escapes this system of metaphysical oppositions, that is the logocentrism,

can be announced only through a certain organization, a certain strategic arrangement which, within the field of metaphysical opposition, uses the

strength of the field to turn its own stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself through the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly delimiting it (ibid.).

In order to answer the question posed above: how do we do this? How to produce volume in flat structures? Derrida's answer in *Force and Signification* is to bring form and force in an economy, allowing for fissure to appear when doing so. Although Derrida wants duration and becoming to give volume to flat structures, pure duration and pure becoming still need a 'certain organisation' - a form. Without a form these would never actualise. 'The point of articulation between force and form' (Johnson 1993, 23) is the 'inscription'.

Inscription is the line, the moment, between force and form. The 'scribble' (see Derrida 1979) that the writer engages in automatically brings death! It brings death because the moment I scribble something down, I have not opted for the other thousand possible words and ideas that potentially could have been scribbled down. I did not choose these other words and ideas. For Derrida (following Kierkegaard), this is a moment of madness – the aporia of infinite possible words has been summed in some scribbling. Scribbling is violent – it leaves a mark, a scratch. This is painful. Derrida uses the term 'anguish' (Derrida 1978, 9) which from its Latin roots means 'narrowness' and 'difficulty'. Derrida uses Artaud's 'description of the painful experience in writing' (ibid, 22). [The following rather long quote has the aim to show the difficulties of writing and the painful experiences that Derrida experienced himself in writing:](#)

[Each time I write something, and it feels like I am advancing into new territory, somewhere I haven't been before, and this type of advance often demands certain gestures that can be taken as aggressive with regard to other thinkers or colleagues... or even hurt others. So, every time I make this type of gesture, there are moments of fear. This doesn't happen at the moments when I'm writing. Actually, when I write there is a feeling of necessity, of something that is stronger than myself that demands that I must write as I write. I have never renounced anything I have written because I have been afraid of certain consequences. Nothing intimidates me when I write. I say what I think must be said. That is to say, when I don't write, there is a very strange moment when I go to sleep. At that moment when I am in a sort of half sleep, all of a sudden, I'm terrified by](#)

what I'm doing. And I tell myself 'You're crazy to write this!'... 'Stop everything! Take it back! Burn your papers! What you're doing is inadmissible!'. (Kirby and Ziering, 2002)

Yet, Derrida argues that anguish is the condition from which all expression proceeds. It is as if infinite words and expressions are pressing on the writer - all wanting to be scribbled. It is in this light that Derrida (ibid.) argues:

To write is only to know that through writing, through the extremities of style, the best will not necessarily transpire.... It is also to be incapable of making meaning absolutely precede writing: it is thus to lower meaning while simultaneously elevating inscription (p.10).

Therefore, the inaugural moment<sup>1</sup> is writing and not speaking/thinking about something. It is writing, re-writing and re-re-writing that 'is, in a certain way, the condition of meaning and of the concept' (Johnson 1993, 28). The process of writing is that which constitutes the condition of sense, and not sense which is then written down.

As a final note on this section, I would like to emphasise the process of writing the above section. Authors such as Derrida are daunting, not only because ideas presented are complex and dense to access, but the volume of writing is just breathtaking. My experience of engaging with Derrida is that his texts requires multiple readings. When at moments I feel that I think I am making sense of particular ideas, this feeling very quickly slips away and I am again lost in a reading that is breathtaking and painful. Even when I feel I am engaging with a concept, transforming it into a written text, in spite of pages of notes, this is still daunting, and often the feeling of incompleteness haunts me, as is the case with this Section. This begs the question, why do I continue engaging in this process? The moment that my reading starts engaging with some of Derrida's ideas, the experience of that is unique - his ideas challenges me, question my very way of thinking about and being in research. The ideas challenge the social constructed world, particularly that focusing on education, that I live and inhabit. There has now developed a hate-love relationship, maybe in the way that Melanie Klein (1997) talks about the depressive position in her writing about

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida is always asks why there is something and not nothing.



splitting. I am often called by Derrida's text, there is a desire to be in the text, and I do return often to them to read, although I know that most ideas will escape me. Indeed, it is a very humbling position to be in. To those starting to engage with Derrida's work, my recommendation is be patient with themselves and let themselves 'be' with Derrida - slow reading, slow note taking, slow writing, slow re-reading, slow re-note taking, slow re-writing. There will be an 'aha' moment soon.

### **The research project**

This Chapter reflects on an action-research project that I engaged in a few years ago when I was working in a School of Education. I was engaged with supporting student teachers on their practice placement in Maltese primary schools. The aim of this research was not to capture a holistic picture of the teaching practice experience, but it focused on my reflections about my role in this process, and subsequently develop a module of reflective practices. In any professional course such as that focusing on training and forming teachers, the practical component is paramount. As will be discussed in the next section, the focus is not only on 'the doing' but also on reflecting on such a process. This action-research project focused on my reflections on student-teachers' reflections on processes of reflections. I felt challenged when reading the module description and assessment criteria of the teaching practice. In particular I questioned the use and implication of the term 'reflective writing'. The issue was that the lived experience of being in a classroom and engaging with students was being transformed into a practice of writing that had to be 'reflective'.

As Bridget Somekh (2006) argues, the aim of doing an action-research project goes beyond describing and analysing but to 'reconstruct and transform those practices' (p.1). While aware of the need to bring about 'transformative practices' I wanted to resist performative transformations. The focus for me was not to find a better method of engaging in 'reflective writing' for student teachers, but to 'make-sense' of this process. The term 'making-sense' is influenced by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1990), where he makes a distinction between understanding and making-sense. The former implies for him elements of certainty, while the latter focuses on the rhizomatic connections (multiple and every constantly changing

connections) that are formed between ideas, people, spaces and time. Understanding is understood as 'sedentary', while making-sense is seen as flowing (see Wang, 2015). This flow tends to resist 'shorthand' that often is part of the performative discourses that have embodied education. In the fast-paced society in which we live, we find ourselves using convenient 'shorthand' to help our work become conveniently more practical. We often resort to shorthand for the sake of efficiency, and sometimes in the belief that it makes us more professional. In so doing, we risk forgetting the contradictions in the language and practices that we use as this is suppressed in the shorthand (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2012). The danger is that of ironing out the complexity of the processes, and therefore, 'otherness' is left out. The risk (see Biesta, 2013 on the use of the term risk) is that in using shorthand, we are in turn being produced by it. It is not only a tool, but it is a way that constructs us, therefore becoming a methodology. John Law's (2004) writing on methodology can be applied in this context as he reminds us that the statements we use are not just 'about reality' but also produce the realities themselves.

It is not just a philosophy of method, a methodology. It is not even simply about the kinds of realities that we want to recognise or the kinds of worlds we might hope to make. It is also, and most fundamentally about a way of being. It is about what kinds of social sciences we want to practice. And then, and as a part of this, it is about the kinds of people that we want to be, and about how we should live. (Addleson, 1994; Law, 2004, p.10)

This action-research project involved reading and engaging with the student-teachers' reflective writings, reading on reflective writing and reading Derrida on the act of writing. The process ended with writing reflective comments to students on their reflective writing, and then writing the module specifications. Derrida was important for me as his idea provided an 'in-between' for me that disrupted my urge for performativity, shorthand and clean method. Derrida's idea kept opening closures in the research. Derrida was not a method per se, but a force that did not allow method to calcify itself - there was a constant challenge that came from within as I had opted to include him in this research. Often, he provided me with an alternative language, or better still, to question the language that I assumed I knew already. Derrida for me was almost a natural choice. I was

already acquainted with some of his ideas, and I was aware of the importance of the act of writing for Derrida, not only in questioning the act of writing (for example in relation to speech), but particularly in the way he wrote. It is a writing that tries to disrupt writing as discussed in the previous section. The next two sections elaborate on this process, and in so doing I hope to show how Derrida's idea impacted on the methodology.

### **Routinized writing**

Such 'reflective writing' is a very effective and worthwhile exercise. There are many ways of doing this, but the most effective one is to find *your own* system of how to write about your feelings and thoughts regarding your own professional and personal development as teachers. In the portfolio you are being given several reflective tasks which will help you to focus your thoughts and ideas and reflectively question your choices and learning experiences (Professional Development Portfolio, undated, 7).

The Professional Development Portfolio starts off by stating that student-teachers need to find their own voice in how to write about feelings and thoughts, regarding their professional and personal development as teachers. Yet, when one goes through the portfolio, one cannot not observe that it is made up of numerous tasks, which the student-teachers have to complete under various subheadings every week, spread over their second academic year. Now, the School of Education had shifted from hardcopies to online portfolios where student-teachers are also given word limits for certain online tasks, and an automated system will not allow the student-teachers to move forward if they have not inputted every part as expected.

The Professional Development Portfolio is just one example of the many reflective activities that student-teachers are asked to do. Similarly, when on teaching practice<sup>2</sup> student-teachers are asked to reflect-on-practice (see Schön 1983, 1987, 1991), our primary students are given a *Reflective Questions* booklet (Cardona 2005) which 'is designed to assist you with your reflections as you as you write up your weekly self-evaluations during Teaching-Practice' (p.1). Even if it is specifically being told in the introduction that the questions provided for each week should not be seen as

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<sup>2</sup> In Malta, Teaching Practice for student-teachers is a six week teaching block.

a 'comprehension exercise' (ibid. 2), yet a closer look at the document does suggest so and also the student-teachers' answers suggest this. The following is an example of one of the questions suggested for the second week:

The effectiveness of any classroom management depends on a teacher's attitudes and practical intelligence. Reflect on these basic principles:

- a. Have you established a friendly relationship with your students?
- b. What did you establish the relationship on?
- c. Do you consider yourself to have established a supportive and trusting relationship?
- d. What is your regard towards disruptive students?
- e. Can you honestly say that you have a positive regard towards disruptive students?
- f. Do you consider your approach to be optimistic and no-nonsense approach?
- g. If you do, how did you set about establishing it? (Cardona 2005, 5).

From reading through the students' work, what I found out is that when student-teachers are not give models of reflective-practices, still most of them develop a very systematic approach to write their reflections. The following excerpt is taken from a reflection diary that student-teachers are asked to keep during their teaching practices.

How to improve:

1. I should repeat over and over again and remind students continuously about the present perfect, as it was difficult for the students to understand. The worksheet given for group work was not ideal one. I should have provided a worksheet with various examples where children would decide if the examples were simple past and present perfect. Another thing which I could do is to have an exercise with examples copied on their copybooks. The examples will then be worked out as a whole class to make sure that everyone is following and understanding.
2. The worksheet which I have given today for group work should have been given another time, when children would have understood the concept better.
3. I could have put the slideshow on the classroom computers and shown the PowerPoint presentation from there. In fact I gave every

child a copy of the PowerPoint on the USBs, so that they could see it again at home. (Student-teacher, personal communication, June, 2011).

This particular student-teacher, when reflecting-on-practice about the lessons she delivers, divides her reflections into three sections: Things I did wrong; How to improve; and What went well. A number of bullet points are written under each section. Similarly, when she is writing about particular children, she has another list of subsections: 'General overview of the child'; 'The child's abilities'; 'Support areas needed to be addressed'; and 'How to intervene with child'. Every bit is compartmentalised, split into sections and seems to fit nicely into place within a large picture. It is like when one finds a missing piece in a big jigsaw puzzle. The pieces fit nicely together. The moment one fills in a piece of writing it is as if a piece of the puzzle has been fitted in the large picture. What also becomes evident in this example is how the present is made manifest to us. With the student-teacher's writing we can come to know exactly how things are, what she did, what her intentions and actions are. We seem to be present during her lesson delivery. There is a clear end in the writing of the student-teacher. Every point mirrors her whole lesson, thus allowing the totality of the lesson to be permanently present in any of one of the points written down. The beginning and end of the lesson can be seen through each point written down.

Structures, whether imposed by lecturers or by student-teachers themselves on themselves, seem to have taken over most of reflective writing. And it is here that I question, in light of Derrida's arguments, whether structures of reflective writing have become ends in themselves? And if these structures are just promoting the present? Content seems to have second place. Form has taken over the force, or to explain it in another way, force has been channelled into paragraphs, subtitles and bullet points that seems to dilute, stifle or even kill this force.

It is not only the reflective writing which seems to be too structured, but also the way we teach and theorise reflective practice. One of the texts used with our student-teachers is that by Anthony Ghaye and Kay Ghaye (1998). In this text we are presented with a model of reflection which has

four characteristics: 'it is cyclical, flexible, focused and holistic' (p. 6). Then we are presented with four foci which are in the heart of this model:

- Reflection on Values: self → others → action (which influences the self)
- Reflection on Practice: political → professional → personal (which influences the personal)
- Reflection on Improvement: construction → interpretation → validation (which influences the construction)
- Reflection on Context: Partnership → culture → empowerment (which influences the partnership) (p.8).

Not that there is anything wrong with such structures of how to think and engage in reflective practices, but the concern is that we tend to follow to the letter these structures. This could be seen as the flatness of structure, where a certain kind of geometry and a certain conception of time are at play. From the above, it was evident for me, viewing through a Derridian framework, that how we teach reflective-practice to student-teachers and how they write their reflective practices may not giving space to force and duration to manifest itself. Rather, what this writing seems to be reinforcing is a logic of identity – through writing the student-teacher can arrives to the origin of herself and what it means to be a teacher. Writing is seen as that means through which we are able to master and control ourselves. What this writing leaves out or what it eliminates is the other of ourselves. We see ourselves as one having a particular identity which excludes alterity. 'The otherness which is excluded and suppressed in order to maintain the myth of a pure and uncontaminated original presence is actually constitutive of that which present itself as pure, self-sufficient, self-present, and therefore as totally different from this otherness' (Biesta 2001, 44).

In the next section I will 'reflect' about second phase of my research.

### **Student-teachers writing the self**

According to Richard Rorty (1978), 'for Derrida, writing always leads to more writing, and more, and still more' (p.145). Probably this quote puts 'in a nutshell' (Caputo 1997) the ideas of this section. As part of my research, after I have read extensively the reflective-writings written by my students, I wanted to take up Derrida's invitation of trying to come up with an

economy that escapes closure as much as possible. As already pointed out, force still needs form. So I thought of shifting from reflective-writing to narrative writing. From this year, while student-teachers still engage in reflective teaching and writing, I was able to create a study-unit for the student-teachers with the title of this section. What this module does is gives spaces for writings to take place, hoping that Rorty's suggestion holds true. No formula of how to write is presented and any kind of writing is accepted. I give a brief description of the study-unit to situate the reader of this chapter: the study-unit is carried out after the student-teachers have a long period of being in schools, where they are mainly involved in teaching and working with students. During the course of the lectures they are presented with different policy documents, ideas from philosophers, pieces of poetry and novels (in particular Kafka and Woolf), photos of past and contemporary educational setting, they hear elderly people talking about their experience of schooling, read narratives written by teachers and watch movies of teachers. The student-teachers are encouraged to write about their narratives of their just finished teaching experience in relation to these. The aim is to stimulate the student-teachers to write about themselves, their ideas of teaching, about the process of working with children, their families and the experience of teaching classes. They are asked to write events that they experienced in the light of these stimulations.

The aim of these stimulations together with the experience of their just finished teaching-practice is to help escape the idea that the self is transparent and can be seen or spoken of through writing by the student-teachers. Rather than seeing the self as transparent and clear which is accessible to oneself, the idea is to see the self as multilayered and strange to oneself. The self, is made up of various ideas and connections and the other of the self is given space to disrupt the identity that we built or assume that we have. Not only that, but this process questions the idea of 'the self' of the student-teacher, as something fixed which can be understood and known. This obviously questions the idea of agency that reflective-practice seems to be putting forth. The student-teachers' experience and the stimulations give the possibility of the 'play of difference', which comes across through writing and re-writing. I am seeing this as a way how difference is not reduced to sameness. Here writing is not seen as a representation of a thought-out process by the student-teacher, but rather the process of writing creates the student-teacher and her 'sense' making of the

teaching-experience. This would provide depth and volume to the flatness mentioned earlier.

In no way does this mean that this process has worked for all. Probably, the contrary. From reading the writings of the student-teachers it is evident that some student-teachers were struggling to engage in this experience of writing and re-writings. One student-teacher emailed me telling me that she is 'lost' as she does not know what she has to do. She writes 'I know that I have to write about my experience in relation to the various stimulations that we had, but HOW do I start writing.... can you please consider giving us clear guidelines in how to do this writing' (personal communication - email by student, March, 2011). The fear of getting 'lost' seems to be at the heart of what this student-teacher is afraid to engage in, which is contradictory to the heart of the whole project, that is, of getting lost. I do not offer structures to my student-teachers, only exemplars (Woolf, Kafka, and many narratives of teachers) and a few suggestions. My first suggestion to the above student-teacher is: 'start writing'. 'When you don't know what to write just start writing'; 'Start writing about your feeling of 'getting lost' and see where that takes you'; 'Not all writing takes you somewhere – but you are on the road'; 'Writing is a painful process'. A student-teacher reacted very vociferously to the latter phrase, saying to me 'why does writing need to be painful? The kind of writing that is being suggested opens up things that I don't want to deal with. It is not like the other reflective-practice writing - that closes up things'. This comment was very revealing to me. First, it is interesting that for her reflective-practice writing (as she calls it) closes down her experience. Yet she does not want, or is finding it difficult, to engage into another writing that opens things up. This could be painful for her. But, it seems that this pain or anguish, as Derrida (1978) refers to it, is a fundamental part of writing and re-writing.

Although at this stage of my research I also feel lost on how to present this to the student-teacher, yet I feel that this 'feeling lost', 'strangeness', is a driving force. Derrida's idea of *aporia* – to be caught in moments of uncertainty, to be have all possibilities available – is fundamental here. Daniela Mercieca (2009, 2011) draws upon Klein to explain how the psyche is engaged in a constant move towards integrity, that the discomfort experienced in the unknown is anxiety-provoking.



It is very difficult to produce an account which acknowledges contradictions, and describes the detail and diversity of events and analyses experience in terms which go beyond the unitary, rational subject. Defences are maintained to achieve integrity with an energy which is equivalent to the energy of the original repressed desire. (ibid. 2011, 30).

She quotes a number of papers written by professionals, whose aim is to explore ways of reducing the uncertainty using systematic procedures. However, Mercieca (2009, 2011) suggests to us to attempt to befriend the contradictory state of being and to view it as part and parcel of who we are.

I maintain that it is incumbent upon us to make sure that they do have a place. It is only through maintaining a healthy level of doubt that the complexities and contingencies of the situations which children present us can be received and listened to. It is only by allowing ourselves to be uncertain that we are open to shock and surprise. It is through being more tolerant of the feelings that accompany not knowing, rather than resisting that which we do not expect, that we can be more open to children. And it is this that will enable our continuous development of professionalism, as opposed to a 'restriction of the role of the professional practitioner to that of the technical operative' (Nixon 2004, 33) (ibid. 2009, 10).

### **Bridging theory and method**

In this research, reading with Derrida's texts and engaging with his ideas was woven throughout. Derrida's ideas, or his idea of deconstruction, is not a method, but acts as a catalyst to challenge the research process. Law's powerful statement that method constructs 'the truth' (Law, 2004) is helpful here to understand how theorists such as Derrida may support research in relation to constructing truth. As has been emphasised in this Chapter, Derrida's work aims at opening up closed spaces and allows for alternative discourses to emerge. From my experience based on this research, and other research, my recommendation is that the work of Derrida needs to be situated at the beginning of the research process as well as throughout the process. Authors such as Derrida cannot be an appendix. They are so powerful that they need to be participant actors in the research process. Quoting the introductory line of a research project I developed (Mercieca, 2013, 1), this is how I introduced the study:

A number of characters are the main protagonists of this book: five students, three French philosophers and myself. All of these will be introduced shortly. Let me start by giving names to these characters: the students are Ruth, Nina, Charles, Luke and Matthew. The three philosophers are Jacques, Gilles and Félix (to keep it on a first name basis). I am the author of this book and the person who has conducted this particular research, and has brought the nine people together, forming “folds of friendship” (Stivale, 2003). The nine people “seize upon the extremely distant relationships to nourish their thought and thereby to maintain a vital, if dispersed, community of friends of thought” (Stivale, 2003, p. 25).

The distant relationship that Stivale (2003) argues in the above quote seems apt here to understanding research as made up of friends that nourish each other. When I am intrigued by an educational concern or problem, and a tentative research question is forming, from its very early emerging stages I start reading and engaging with theory. I let theory challenge me, ‘play’ (Allan, 2008) with my ideas and questions, thus influencing the construction of my research question. Similarly, I actively strive to create spaces for a conversation to occur between methodology and theory. My starting assumption is that theory challenges methodology, and methodology challenges theory. Research methodology is not neutral to theory. The process of analysing data is also very interesting. I often start looking at the data from particular theoretical ideas and concepts. The process of writing the research is also very interesting. How can one develop the idea of volume in one’s writing, rather than let it present as a flat structure?

## **Conclusion**

Teacher training puts reflective-practice at the core of the student-teacher becoming, with particular focus given to written reflective-practice. Using a Derridian framework, my action-research process, of which I have given highlights above, helped me question the taken for granted familiarity that I was engaging with when teaching reflected-practice and reading reflective-writings. Through reading Derrida and engaging with his various writing styles, I started to become more aware of the process of writing and its complexity. This helped me think about the possibility of offering such ideas to my students and also to open myself to various writings which do

not follow structures to the letter and allow for some force to be demonstrated through the writing.

During the course of this action-research I have been caught in moments of aporia and ‘madness of deciding’, particularly when I was trying out with student-teachers the new study-unit that asks of them to write their narrative. My many moments of doubt, of not knowing exactly where I was going, of correcting myself as I developed this course was a very strange feeling of uncertainty. Considering that performativity is fast becoming a characteristic even within universities (see Nixon 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2004), where assessment and measurement of each study-unit is now in place, to carry out a study-unit that is fluid can have its consequences. Yet Derrida comes to me as a comfort and also as a provocation: a decision only takes place when one is caught in a moment of aporia. If one follows structures and procedures then there is no decision. What I and my student-teachers were doing, as described in Section Four, was mostly on my part to create structures of reflective-practice and for the student-teachers to follow. Now I try to provide spaces for student-teachers to escape these formulated structures and allow their otherness to come across and disrupt the identity. This process has also disrupted my identity as a lecturer and researcher. Maybe the word ‘disrupted’ is not the best word to use here. Rather, this process gave me the opportunity to let the other (the impossible) be made possible in my identity as a lecturer – challenging (at times violently) who I am as a lecturer. Not that the impossible is actualised, but that which cannot be foreseen, is made present in what I do and influences my decisions. This openness to the other is a possible way forward that allows for the ‘incalculable’ for me and my students. This is nothing, if not justice for Derrida. Therefore, writing that is just!

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