

THE DIARY, A NARRATIVE INSTRUMENT OF RESEARCH AND INTROSPECTION AT THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

This paper we are introducing here deals with the diary of the university student as a device to do research and introspection. This diary is a narrative resource we have been using for quite a number of years in the study of the subjects we teach. Subjects of research, such as: "Methodological bases of Educational Research", "Qualitative Methods or Approaches of Research in education", which belong to the curriculum of Pedagogy, and other subjects such as "Methods of Research in Education" and "Methodological Approaches to do Action-Research", which belong to the curriculum of Psycho-Pedagogy. We also have worked with the Diary as a means for research in some workshops of Doctorate (PhD) and Master of education for Adult people.

Here we refer to the nature of the diary as a narrative instrument of research and introspection which collects lots and diverse pieces of information which come up as the development of the topics/subjects we are working with takes place. In this way, in the diary, we give expression to an important piece of information and to a historical evolution of the construction of the topic or subject we are studying. We also record facts, situations, actions, learning aspects, strategies, feelings, emotions, processes, relationships, etc which are being developed as we are studying a subject.

We place the diary within a constructivist concept of research in education and teaching, in which the student develops a main and relevant role. He/She is the individual around who the construction of the knowledge takes place and, at the same time, he/she is the subject and the object of research in this process of studying a topic.

The diary proves itself to be a precious object of research and introspection and it allows its main characters to see their historical and personal vision and development meanwhile they are studying the topics of a subject. It also collects the most important pieces of information which are to be analysed by the small group. It also allows the pupils to take in the different dimensions of the process of education/teaching/learning followed, as well as, the experiences, feelings and emotions which that process has generated within each person. The diary gives us the feedback to assess the subject of study, its methodology and the already acquired learning processes.

THE DIARY AS A NARRATIVE INSTRUMENT OF RESEARCH AND INTROSPECTION

The diary is an instrument which has been used all along the years (Lourau, 1988) with different purposes/aims. So that, this use has given a variety of sorts of diaries (notebook of binnacle, personal diary, diary of field of study, etc.). At the university classroom we, as well, use the diary with different perspectives (López Górriz, 1997). However, here we will centre around three dimensions which we think are essential for the personal, professional and scientific training of the university student. Let us write about every one of these three dimensions.

The diary as a narrative instrument

In a diary we, people, narrate facts, circumstances, emotions, feelings, reflections, considerations, actions, etc. All our life experiences are given expression and taken into consideration, and they make sense and get meaning when we put them into writing or when we narrate them. All this gives sense and meaning to our lives. Some authors state and quote as follows:

“All which happens to us could be considered a text, something which commits our capacity of listening, something which we must pay attention to. It is as if the books, and also the people, the objects, the art works, the nature or the events which happen around us, would be telling us something. And the education implies necessarily our capacity of listening (or reading) that, which the things previously mentioned have to tell us. A person who is not able to listen has cancelled his /her educational and transformational potential”. (Larrosa, 1996: 19).

Writing about the facts and circumstances which have happened during a particular day, demands certain conditions:

- Stop for a little while to be aware of our inside self, retiring and meditating in order to listen to ourselves.
- Stop the time for external action, in order to get time to listen to our inward life, to our own life experiences as we feel them at that exact moment.
- When we are listening to our life experiences we let those come out and they get written down on a blank sheet of paper with a certain narrative style, a certain type of discourse which comes up and emerges giving itself its own life and making itself real. It is a result which models our lives and our own beings.
- To give expression to our internal discourse, acquires its own form, makes up itself, remakes us up, remakes the definition of ourselves in a certain way, and moreover, it allows us to take out, and throw our anxieties and distress; so we unwind and relax, we come to a somet-

- hing, a real object. Thanks to all that, a certain moment or a stage of our lives and a time in our beings has been given expression to.
- Writing allows us to get into the deep sense of our being, because as we write we come out with some new ideas, reflections, images, symbols, metaphors which give sense and meaning to our actions and to our existing beings. Writing helps us to rationalize things, to cast a retrospective look over our lives and to plan our future.
 - Through the diary we develop our life stories as pupils/learners, our experiences in this learning process, the difficulties we come across with, the way we sort out those difficulties, the different ways of learning, the resources and strategies we learn and acquire, the way we negotiate the group processes, the construction of the knowledge, the teacher's sympathetic accompaniment, etc.
 - Writing gives us a perspective in time when we read and analyse what we have written. Writing allows us to get distant and to see ourselves more at a distance. It looks as if the main character, who in fact is us, was not us but someone else, because this character has life on its own. When we reread our own written text we can get much more information, we can analyse it, we can assess it and we can get feedback. We can also see which stage of development we are in today with regard to the past time when we wrote those words, and we can feel that distressful and hard situations from the past are not as strenuous or as dreadful as they looked.
 - It is interesting to see that sometimes some diaries from some students show great skills for writing in a very nice poetic and narrative styles. These students are probably future writers.

We can say that for us the diary can be clearly placed within the narrative, understanding as narrative the following:

"The narrative is a structure of construction of meanings. Human beings think, feel and give meaning to their experience in accordance with narrative structures. The symbolic forms of the experience are processed and represented in our memory through chain of temporal sequences... this is an outline of the meaning. According to it the human beings make their existence meaningful. Narrative makes possible the social construction of meanings". (Bolívar, Domingo y Fernández, 2000: 23).

The diary as an instrument of research

We stand up for the diary as an instrument of research placed within qualitative and action research methodological approaches such as: narrative,

phenomenologic, autobiographical, ethnographic, symbolic, interactionism, participative action research in the classroom, cooperative and existential, (Barbier, 1997, 2002), among others. These approaches of the diary are also used in the Institutional Analysis (Hess, 1989) and in certain approaches related to the topic of assessment/evaluation.

As a means of research (López Górriz, 1994), the diary has a great potential and flexibility, because the researcher can use it the way which suits him/her and in accordance to the object of research, the matter he/she is dealing with and the focus he/she gives to the matter. With regard to the diary used to collect information about life experiences and the life in the classroom, we give a number of guide lines to do that recollection, but as a last resort, we would prefer a plan which is personal and according to the individual life experience of each student/author in class and according to the pupil's sensitivity and what calls more for his/her attention. Some of the outlines we suggest in order the students to narrate and observe are the following:

- The teaching methodology in the classroom.
- Teaching and learning strategies.
- Resources and materials used.
- The dynamics of the group in the classroom.
- The dynamics of the small working groups.
- The variety of roles the teacher plays.
- Power management, problems which take place in the group dynamics.
- Conflicts which emerge and the way to sort them out.
- The relational dynamics among the students and the relationship of these with the teacher.
- The variety of feelings, emotions and life experiences which appear in the learning process during the school year, together with the tasks, actions and particular circumstances which take place.
- The diverse learning processes and strategies which are being developed, such as cognitive, experiential, social, instrumental, procedural, technological, scientific, researchal, etc.
- The development of the process of building up knowledge.
- Other pieces of information that guests from outside the classroom can bring or information coming from comments and debates, etc.
- The atmosphere in the classroom, the classroom management, the lesson planning, the chronograms, etc.

To learn the strategies of external observation and self-observation is of fundamental importance, because the observation is not only a means but a methodological approach for research. On the other hand, to observe and

collect information, being the students the subject of observation requires lots of discipline and develops the capacity and the skill of being a good observer. This discipline is needed to write and reflect thoroughly, accurately, rigorously and objectively what has been observed and experienced. The students also develop their skills of written expression in the variety of styles (narrative, descriptive...)

As a means of research the diary not only means a collection of data, but it means, as well, that these data have to be analysed and objectified. So at the end of the school year the students in groups of 5/6 people read, analyse and discuss their diaries; then they choose a theme and they categorize it.

All along the process when doing this work the student gets greatly surprised, when he/she finds that the time perspective has made him/her read and feels things differently from the beginning. Stressful situations from the beginning have been successfully sorted out. The students find out that they are not the only ones feeling a certain way, other colleagues felt the same. So that, what looked singular and intimate has features of objectivity and universality. What is more, their learning life story through their diary has been given expression and meaning. Students have been able to use their diary as a device for communication of their intimacy and social life, as well as, a training resource (Jurado Jiménez, 2006).

The diary as an instrument for introspection

The diary is also an important means for introspection. It is important for us to develop in our lessons, apart from a cognitive training and a capacity of research, an existential education. In this way the diary is a precious tool which allows the students to work and develop their skills of self observation and introspection.

We assume that we, people, get educated and mould as we interact with other people. For us the classroom is a place where teachers and pupils meet and have different sorts of experiences. These experiences come out parallel to the learning process of the subject. On the other hand, students, while studying a subject develop certain feelings, emotions and experiences. They learn things, they get more open-minded, they learn from facts which evoke ideas, they get inspired to do something, they face up to certain attitudes and behaviour, they consider changing some of those attitudes, etc. It is essential to be a good listener. It is also important to use the diary as a resource to develop the skills of self observation, so that students can take in the essential aspects of their lives which have emerged from them. We understand that:

“When listening one is ready to hear what he/she does not know, what he/she does not want, what he/she does not need. One is ready to lose foot and let himself lie down or be drawn by what he/she comes across with. He/She is ready to turn into an unknown direction. The other thing is something I can not reduce to my size. But the other thing is something from what I can learn and get experience, something which changes me with regard to himself”. (Larrosa, 1996: 21).

When the students first arrive in the classroom to study the subject, they have to be ready to run an adventure because they do not know where the constructivist research and sharing process of study of the subject is going to take them. They have to learn how to monitor a number of resources which they, most times, are unfamiliar with. Now they have to acquire and develop those resources. The students have to be ready to experience or suffer rupture and conflict, as well as, to have times when they become confused and disorientated. But they also experience hope and success when they find out that they can sort out problems successfully. To run this transformational adventure means to be ready to risk and experiment. So that,

“To experience something means that something has happened to us, something reaches/touches us; something takes us over and transforms us. When we say “do” an experience that does not mean that we are making it happen. “To do” here means: to suffer, to accept, to let us be questioned and asked for clarification. We can be changed by those experiences from one day to the next or through a longer period of time”. (Heidegger en Larrosa, 1996: 20).

We think that along this training process the students go through learning situations which create rupture in them and make them face up to unknown circumstances which they never faced up to before. To do a diary which allows them to empty themselves, to express their ideas, to narrate their experiences, to tell their conflicts, their emotions, hopes, new ideas and future plans is necessary and essential for their training. The diary is necessary to record their breakage, as well as their comprehension, understanding and restructuring.

Self-observation, recollection of life experiences and feelings and expulsion of certain aspects, allow students to feel much better. To leave a record of certain situations, to make them clear, to analyse them with a perspective of time helps students to give meaning to those situations. Students can relate the experiences they went through to a learning methodological approach which made them suffer at times. But other times they found out the big potential of transformation which the diverse ways of learning brought to them. They can also realize that they have undergone a real character transformation or metamorphosis.

The diary as an instrument for introspection and analysis allows students to record/recall and find out these life experiences and changes.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE USE OF THE DIARY AT THE UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM

We use the diary as a means to study certain subjects from the curriculum of Pedagogy and Psycho-pedagogy. As we have already mentioned at the beginning of this paper these subjects are: Methodological Bases of Educational Research, Qualitative Methods or Approaches of Research in Education which belong to the curriculum of Pedagogy, and Methods of Research in Education and Methodological Approaches to Action-Research which belong to the curriculum of Psycho-Pedagogy.

We plan our university teaching from a complex and constructivist perspective (Porlán, 1993), as well as, from a researching point of view (López Górriz, Jurado Jiménez y Aparcero Martínez, 2006). This teaching takes place in the university classroom which is like a lab where people generate their experiences and their transformation.

Briefly we will state the conceptual bases which will help people understand better the meaning of the diary. We give the students the role of individuals being able to build up their learning processes through research. In order the individuals to build up meaningful processes of learning, we think, that they have to start from what they already know about the subject or the topic they are dealing with. (i.e. what they understand when we use expressions such as "concept of science, scientific knowledge, research approach, etc."). From that previous knowledge we can get to work the thematic nucleus of the subject with the help of some specific papers.

That focus requires a dynamic teacher's role. Apart from explaining the basic and necessary concepts, the teacher gets together with the students to help them build up the definition of those concepts. They also have the help of specific papers/articles. So the students must master reading strategies such as: extract the main ideas and concepts, do summaries, compare, contrast, relate similar concepts, organize the discourse, etc. All this will help the students to make a list of the main topics they are going to study. Normally when the students arrive in our class, mainly the ones from the first year, they are not used to this way of working. So they have to be introduced and trained. The first half of the syllabus of a subject is more conceptual and the students must learn how to build their thematic nucleus. Teachers help them with explanations, guidance and accompaniment. This part is basic and necessary to do the second part. When the students start they feel lost and disorientated. Later on they acquire and learn the logics of a constructive cognitive way of building up their knowledge.

During the second half of the school year the students follow processes of construction of knowledge with research approaches. The students in small groups of 5/6 people plan, design, develop, and present a topic to be researched. That is to say that the students decide the topic they are going to deal with. And this topic should be studied with a methodological research approach. During that second part of the school year we alternate theoretical lecturing with lessons where teachers guide the students with their practical work. At the same time the analysis of the diaries is taking place. Along this process the students have to learn how to develop the theoretical basics of the theme to be researched. They have to plan the main point of research with its aims, hypothesis, variables, sample, instruments, resources, analysis and report of research.

The plan is carried out in group, so the members have to learn about aspects such as: group management, sharing of tasks, responsibilities, learns how to sort out the conflicts, dialogues, listening, make plans, etc. In general students have to learn how to build up knowledge with a research, cooperative and group focus.

The students have to make a qualitative analysis of their diaries in small groups. From that analysis they come out with the points they are going to categorize.

Finally they are sharing and presenting in the classroom their plans and essays together with the analysis of their diaries.

During this second part of their work the students go through complicated times. They not only have to know well the means to build up knowledge, but they also have to plan and develop a proper outline for research, they have to learn about group management, they have to go out of the classroom and into the social world to find the sample, they have to leave aside their shyness when speaking to their colleagues in class, they have to put together and share the information from their diaries, they have to analyse that information, etc. Even though we, teachers, accompany our students in this process, they go through moments of suffering and conflict. However, they feel and see more dynamic and much more real the materialization of their plan and time goes quicker now than in the first part.

Within this framework the students will have to develop their diary from the beginning of the school year to the end. Then they will do its analysis together in a small group. Later on they will share their work with the class. Finally they will do an assessment of the methodology and the process followed in all the tasks related to the subject.

To draw up the diary the students must follow the steps previously mentioned and on it there will be different aspects which are happening

or have happened in the classroom. It will collect from the most external facts to the most internal life experiences. The diary has lots of dimensions: research, narrative, introspective, evaluative, educational, existential, guidance etc. Here we put special emphasis on the first three dimensions; however, we believe and think that this instrument, the diary, is much more complex and complete.

The students work out their diary according to their skills of observation their sensitivity, their capacity to capture and reflect their observations, their idiosyncrasy, their experiences, their present moment, the circumstances around them, etc. When the diaries are read, not everybody gives the same importance to the facts or events narrated on them. Sometimes the facts which at first sight look unimportant, later on, they are the most questionable facts. On the other hand, the diary turns to be a confidant where authors /students throw all their worries and upsets, even though these can go further from the life of the classroom. Incidents, accidents, personal and familiar worries are put in their writings. From this we draw out that the diary goes further than the classroom studies and it is a friend which gets together with the students at that very moment of their lives:

All this leads us to the following ethic matter: where is the limit between what is private and what is public/social or half public? At this point we leave the students to decide what information they are going to share and what information they want to keep as private. Some pupils who are not so happy with the diary at the beginning advice other colleagues to get involved in it because their experience after having gone through the process has been very positive.

SAMPLES OF CERTAIN ASPECTS COLLECTED/TAKEN FROM SOME DIARIES

Here we exemplify with some paragraphs from the students' diaries. To make it short and simple we will use the diary of a student from her first university year which corresponds to this actual school year. It has been taken at random.

My experience from the first day in class. Introduction of the topics of the subject.

"It was my second day at the University of Pedagogy. I was less nervous than the first day, but I was as enthusiastic and eager to get to know the teachers and the colleagues as the first day.

At about 11 a Mrs. with dark said to be the teacher of Methodological Bases for our group 1P. I wondered what Mrs. was like until the time came and Isabel broke the ice with her introduction.

Some minutes later the group of students started to get relax and smiled and laughed with Isabel who asked for a one by one introduction (...) There was a brief introduction of the subject" (Diary of a student, 3rd October).

The starting point is: previous ideas, wishes and needs.

"Isabel has asked us to do a task in which we define or describe the words "education" "pedagogy" and "research" apart from stating three wishes, three needs and three questions" (Diary of a student 4th October)

The atmosphere in the classroom and the expression of our wishes.

"This lesson has been very relaxing, because we have shared our wishes; the most remarkable ones have been undoubtedly "get a successful pass in the subject" "find a job" and "get to know people", among many other wishes. Time flew and we left the needs and the questions for the next day" (Diary of a student, 10th October).

Debate in small and large groups about previous concepts of education and pedagogy.

"Isabel has made an outline of the topics of the subject for our colleagues. There she was introducing the utility of the diary. A bit later we got in small groups and we discussed together our concept of education, pedagogy and professional outcomes/future" (Diary of a student, 17th October).

After discussing and describing some concepts we work with texts.

"We were asked if we had read the text about educational research. As not many of us had read it, the teacher gave us fifteen minutes to read it, and then we have discuss it" (Diary of a student, 24th October).

Students find out the banking and dialogic education, they give their points of view and they see an example of a diary where they see themselves reflected.

"We got to know Freire's philosophy of life after a presentation of his autobiography. He seems to be an interesting man and I share with him his idea of education of the poor.

During the second half of the lesson we have listened to some parts of the personal written diary from an ex-student from previous years. It is interesting to listen and see how many students share the same feelings in their very first days when attending their lessons" (Diary of a student, 17th October).

Students discuss in small groups about certain concepts and they relate that with their experiences.

"We start talking about the banking and the liberating education. In my case I have spent fifteen years with this banking situation and I remember having this banking education in my previous school, but there was lots of dialogue between the teacher and the pupils" (Diary of a student 31st October).

Plan and organization of the essays and tasks. There is lots of anxiety and nerves.

"...fifteen minutes later Isabel explained quickly the whole plan for the whole six months, but she did not finish, so she will go on tomorrow... The school year looks very hectic. I am starting to feel quite nervous. I hope that will pass" (Diary of a student, 14th December).

The handing in and the revision of the essays; portfolio.

"The lesson started with the handing back of the essays about topics one and two from the teacher's part (...) She is telling us that we have to go deeper into Freire's ideas. She has brought two portfolios from another group (...), and when we have seen them we felt still more anxious, because they were too dense" (Diary of a student, 27th November).

The teacher gives us an outline/plan to give us clues and guide lines for our essays.

"The lesson has started with Isabel refreshing the explanation of the plan/outline from the day before. It seems that the essays we handed in were a bit unfinished. I have devoted the time left from the lesson to write down what Isabel has taught us about this new topic" (Diary of a student, 28th November).

Teacher's lecturing and the atmosphere in class

"The teacher lectured us in detail about the critical paradigm, and she made a brief revision of the three paradigms (...). She left a little pause/break because the students were a bit noisy and tired (...). After that she finished lecturing us about the steps of the method and then the lesson was over" (Diary of a student, 13th December).

The starting of the second half of the school year.

"Today Isabel has told us the work-plan for this second half of the school year, and it seems more interesting than the first part, because we are putting into practice what we have learnt before" (Diary of a student, 6th February).

Guests in the classroom and the research projects/essays.

"One week already, how quickly time goes! (...). Some old people have come to the classroom. They came from a school for adults. Their life stories are touching, moving, amazing. To tell the truth today, in my group, we have decided that we are choosing for our research essay the theme about old people. I am sure it will be interesting, fun, enjoyable and instructive" (Diary of a student, 13th February).

Teacher's accompaniment to do the research projects/essays.

"We already have the plan for the essay, but we have to say that the interview/talk with Isabel has been of great help, because we hardly had an idea about how to start" (Diary of a student, 20th February).

In the adults school/centre and the difficulties to do research.

"When we arrived at the adults school we were lost, because we did not know how to start. We needed to tell the teacher who gave us a welcome what we were there for" (Diary of a student, 27th February).

The teacher makes a plan and a chronogram of the tasks left and she also teaches us about the analysis of the diaries.

"More meetings, more theory about the instruments /means/resources/devices,... Moreover, we have to have this diary already finished and I have to bring it to the class in order to analyse it.

I have never done it before. It sounds very complicated. I hope it is simpler than what it looks" (Diary of a student, 6th March).

Development of the researching project/essay. Joyfully doing research.

"The teacher of the adults school told his pupils that we were doing an essay about life stories. He asked for volunteers. We got greatly surprised because all pupils wanted to be volunteers (...). We chose three women and a married couple.

It was a very enjoyable afternoon. We and them enjoyed a lot. At the end of the questionnaires /interviews we took some photos (They and us) which we will add to our project/essay" (Diary of a student, 18th March).

Presenting the essay. Anxiety, a challenge to overcome.

"Our essay was ready (...). It was the time to present it to the class. My hands were cold and sweating; my heart was beating more and more. The classroom was full (...). One of my colleagues started, and then it was my turn. I started fine but as I was going on I was getting more nervous (...). Never before was I in that state" (Diary of a student, 18th April).

Projects/essays presentation and analysis of the diaries.

"This month is very hectic. I am longing for the end. In this subject we are relaxed, because we are just listening to the presentation of the essays from our colleagues.

(...) Now our group is involved with the analysis of the diaries, as we have already finished our research essay. The school year is getting to an end" (Diary of a student, 10th May).

Assessment and final analysis.

"I am very pleased for having chosen this career (pedagogy), and I am going to continue.

I have got to know nice people.

The studies of this year have made me realize that I am able to do what I wish and aim to do. I have learnt that I am worth a lot as a person and I have become a more open minded person.

I have never written a diary like this before (...). Now I like being able to see how things were before, for instance how tense and insecure I was the first times the group went to the adults school.

The research project/essay has been a very hard task, not only for the density of the work, but also because of the difficulties we had as a group. It was not easy to agree to meet, to manage while in the adults school... However, we sorted everything out successfully. I would like to work with adults" (Diary of a student, 22th May).

These previous quotations allow us to see the teaching-learning process which takes place in the classroom. We can see how feelings, experiences and points for analysis are emerging. It is obvious that the diaries have much more information than what we have quoted here. These are only examples because our aim was only to sample the essence of a diary at the university classroom. And this one here shows some of the aspects dealt with.

To draw a conclusion we would say that the diary as a narrative, research and introspection device shows a great potential flexibility and adaptability to the aims of the educational research. Moreover, it allows us to collect and record in depth lots of interesting information. When using the diary in the classroom the researcher, who is the subject involved in the research, can give us lots of important and meaningful information. The diary can be used to collect, assess and analyse that information.

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