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► **To cite this version:**

Elsa Chachkine, Anne Jorro. Corporeity in PhD Thesis Writing. Rituals and 'Writing Gestures'. Michael Cross; Caroline Long; Sibonokuhle Ndlovu; Phefumula Nyoni. Transformative Curricula, Pedagogies and Epistemologies, 11, Brill, pp.149-167, 2021, 978-90-04-46843-6. 10.1163/9789004468443_009 . halshs-03320967

HAL Id: halshs-03320967

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03320967>

Submitted on 10 Mar 2023

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Corporeity in PhD thesis writing

Rituals and ‘writing gestures’

ELSA CHACHKINE AND ANNE JORRO

Introduction

For professionals who are writing a PhD thesis, the development of specific PhD writing skills presents a significant challenge. In this piece of adult learning research, we explore the intellectual, emotional and bodily engagement of adults who are studying for a PhD and writing their thesis. Our hypothesis is that writing a PhD thesis is not purely an intellectual engagement, but also an emotional as well as a bodily one. The student’s emotions and bodily actions help to address the challenge. Thus, in this research we refer to the idea of ‘writing gestures’ in PhD thesis writing, leaning on Mauss’s ethnographic works (Mauss, 1950, 1947), in which the body is described as “man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means”. This research is also rooted in anthropological studies around “the rites of passage” (Van Genep, 1987) that were re-explored by Delamotte, Gippet, Jorro and Penloup (2000) in terms of the writing activity of adult learners.

Ten professionals engaging in PhD research took part in the present qualitative research. They answered a written questionnaire and participated in comprehensive semi-controlled interviews (Kaufmann, 2001). Our participants, working in the fields of education, social work, health and information sciences, engaged in doctoral research for different personal and professional purposes such as supporting promotion of their professional profile. The first section of this study seeks to understand the role played by the body’s activity during the various stages of writing the PhD thesis. The second section describes five ‘writing gestures’. These gestures are shaped by each writer’s personal biography, or they could be influenced by their subject and by materials mobilised for their PhD study.

Literature review

Academic writing can present specific challenges for adult learners. These include not only physical engagement in the writing process, but also tension, feelings of insecurity and coping with the various steps which can be thought of as ‘rituals’.

The writing process for adult learners

The role of language in adult education has been highlighted for different written tasks, such as an internship report (Dejemeppe & Dezutter, 2001; Jorro, 2014), reflective learning journals (Bucheton & Chabane, 1999; Deleted for anonymity, 2002), or portfolios (Merhan, 2014). In all such writing, the author needs to reflect on his or her actions and experiences, and this can be a real challenge for adult learners who are used to producing short pieces of professional writing. In particular, it poses an internal struggle for the professional, as a certain objective distance must be maintained from the research participants when writing a PhD thesis (Pollet, 2001).

A PhD thesis is a long, structured piece of written work that must comply with certain norms. At stake is certification of the researcher as having succeeded in their doctoral endeavour (Reuter, 1998). The other vital aim of a doctoral study is the production of scientific knowledge in the form of a contribution to their field of study. This means that the PhD candidate writes not only for his or her supervisor, but must also keep in mind the future jury members who will certify (or not) the study, thus issuing judgement on whether the candidate merits entry into the postdoctoral research community. He or she also writes the thesis for the benefit of other researchers, experts and practitioners in the explored field.

The PhD candidate needs to adopt a research posture (or standpoint), while at the same time conducting the task of writing up the research study. This dual posture (of trying to be a researcher and writing up the thesis) is often described as generating tensions. Indeed, doctoral students are at the intersection of two different socio-cultural spheres, that is, at the point where training and research intersect (Reuter, 2004; Delcambre, 2009; Rinck, 2011). On the one hand, the PhD candidate has to demonstrate that he or she has developed the requisite knowledge and skills to be admitted by the community, in accordance with its own norms. On the other hand, he or she doesn't control it, and this can result in major tension.

Research conducted by Delamotte et al. (2000) – rooted in anthropological studies around *The Rites of Passage* (Van Genep, 1987) – considers the concept of “passage to and by the writing” (Delamotte & al., 2000). This study presents three different functions of ‘passage’, namely ‘separation’, ‘liminality’ and ‘incorporation’. These correspond to three stages in writing a PhD thesis, which are discussed in turn below

During the first stage, the writer is in an uncomfortable situation. Rather than beginning to write immediately, he or she circles around the actual act, and can feel utterly befuddled in front of the blank page. He or she might seek self-reassurance by organising the physical work space, then leave, only to return a few minutes later, and then leave again. This hither-and-thither behaviour reflects the internal struggle faced by the writer as he or she attempts to begin the writing process. In the same vein, Dabène (1987) refers to “writing insecurity” (p.57). This means that the writer experiences much anxiety related to the internal contradiction between negative poles (for example, the judgment of others) and positive poles (such as things that are under their control), which may consume part of their energy as they seek to express their ideas.

The liminal stage is reached when the writer becomes immersed in their writing – when words start to flow; they add and delete, in trying to find the exact word or expression, and they reorder and rewrite text in more appropriate ways to express what they want to say. At this stage, the writer is fully mobilised – biographically, socially, cognitively and linguistically (Delamotte & al., 2000). At the liminal stage, the writer is going through an interpretative process, confronting ideas that emerge from their own history, and their manner of expression bears traces of their own emotional connotations.

The third phase (incorporation or re-aggregation) marks the end of the writing process. A piece of writing has been produced which is the tangible proof of having come to the end of this rite of passage. The writing now reflects the essence of the whole person. This passage through the writing process is symbolically intense: if it develops its own order, then the writer is able to transform feelings of pressure and insecurity in order to create a piece of writing that is fundamentally their own. The experience demonstrates

the dual process of reflection and creation. We now present more details of what the doctoral student candidate experiences during the different writing stages.

Corporeity in writing

Many pieces of research have investigated writing processes (Dabène, 1987; Reuter, 1998; Delamotte & al., 2000; Reuter, 2004; Delcambre, 2009), the development of specific discourses, and the position of the writer, but nothing appears to have been written about the notion of ‘corporeity’ in writing except in relation to the process of physical writing and its gestures. In fact, in this field, research has highlighted the process of drawing letters and symbols being closely linked with the meaning of the resulting words. Within this framework, the background is cultural, and aesthetic – nay, even philosophical (Guérin, 2011).

The fact remains that writing is not only a cognitive process; however, in Western cultures, the body has become invisible in writing practices (Joas, 1999). In these contexts, all the autobiographical dimensions relating to the act of writing are ignored, in spite of the fact that these dimensions could be the foundations of good writing practices. Flusser (1999) presents an anthropological view of a person’s daily gestures, and links thought and gestures in analysing the writing process: “Thinking before articulation is only a virtuality, which is to say, nothing. It is realised through the gesture. Strictly speaking, there is no thinking before making a gesture. [...] To have unwritten ideas really means to have nothing.” (Flusser, 1999: 24). Hence in the framework of this research, we investigate the writing practice of doctoral candidates in trying to understand the place of the body during the particular process of writing a PhD thesis.

The physical place where the body is located is embedded in various rituals, as described in the work of van Genep (1987), and reutilised in the work of Delamotte et al. (2000). In this view, the writing work space forms a space for the writer will begin the activity of writing. Browsing or walking around a room, or even changing the place where one sits to write, reflect physical engagement in the writing process. Even such small gestures as getting up and sitting down again demonstrate the writer’s engagement with the physical space. Van Genep’s work is complemented by a second theoretical underpinning in the form of Mauss’s ethnographic works (Mauss, 1950, 1947). For him, the body is “man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means” (1950:372).

Research questions

In this research study, we sought to answer three main questions:

- What is the the writer’s engagement with the physical space in the process of writing a PhD thesis?
- What are the rituals in the writing practice? Are rituals associated with a particular type of writing practice?

Considering the fact that writing a PhD thesis is not only an intellectual engagement, but also an emotional as well as a bodily one, in this research we refer to ‘writing gestures’ displayed by adult learners when undertaking the writing of a PhD thesis. Our third research question is:

- What specific gestures are exhibited by PhD students during the writing process?

We sought to answer this question in order to understand the various writing steps they go through, with particular focus on the importance of the personal engagement in the physical space

Research methodology

Research participants

Ten participants volunteered from among professionals enrolled in a PhD programme in the Abbé Grégoire doctoral school at the Cnam. The Cnam is a French institution dedicated to life-long higher education. The Cnam intends to fulfil the educational needs of adults at any stage of their career, in the economic, technical and social field. The doctoral school is made up of research units in the field of human sciences (Management Sciences, Workplace Sociology, Education Sciences, Architecture, etc.). For the most part, the participants were members of the *Centre de Recherche sur la Formation (CRF)*, which is an Education Sciences research unit. The other two participants are doctoral students in information science and economics. There were eight women and two men, ranging in age from 28 to 66 years, with an average age of 50.

Most participants began their doctoral studies after having gained significant professional experience in the workplace. However, this long period of professional experience does not necessarily mean that they are acquainted with writing or have the ability to produce scientific writing. The decision to choose candidates from the CRF was based on the fact that they had attended a doctoral workshop which had raised their awareness of the importance and process of scientific writing. Consequently, they could acknowledge the difficulties involved in scientific writing, and learned how to express and discuss their rituals when they start writing, which personal strategies they use to begin the writing process, and their writing engagement. From our point of view, their oral evidence constitutes a substantial and valuable corpus. Since this study was conducted, eight of the participants have already been awarded their doctorate and the other two have almost completed writing up their theses.

Table 9.1. Information about the participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Profession	PhD completion time	PhD defended	Discipline
FB	41	F	Social educator	3 years	2016	Education Sciences
LPQ	54	M	Hospital executive	5 years	2015	Education Sciences
FPM	55	F	Education advisor	5 years	2015	Education Sciences
P	64	M	Retired engineer	5 years	2015	Education Sciences
LL	47	F	Educator and manager in the health field	--	In progress: 4 th year	Education Sciences
PR	58	F	Educator	8 years	2015	Education Sciences
LP	54	F	Educator	5 years	2016	Education Sciences
MG	66	F	Retired social work educator	9 years	2014	Education Sciences
LC	32	F	Teacher in information science	--	In progress: 5 th year	Information Science
RA	28	F	Journalist and feminist blogger	3 years	2016	Economics

Data collection

Two data collection tools were used in conducting this qualitative study of writing engagement among PhD students and to understand the place of the body in this process. Firstly, the participants completed an online questionnaire with open-ended questions, in order to collect information about their environment (habits, representation – or conception – of the writing process, etc.). Secondly, a comprehensive semi-controlled interview (Kaufmann, 2001) was conducted with each participant in order to gain more profound insights into their particular writing activities. A rich bank of data was collected, as a result of the positive two-way interaction between the participants and the researchers (the authors of this chapter). The comprehensive semi-controlled interview protocol evolved between the beginning of the interview process (May 2017) and the last interview (June 2017), in order to integrate our insights into the advancing research process. As the interviews progressed, the place of the body in the writing activity was more explicitly broached, so that the participants might verbalise things which might previously have been sub-conscious.

Interviews lasted from 35 to 70 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed in a trustworthy manner: {.} indicates a one second pause, {...} a two seconds pause, capital letters indicate a speaker emphasis, / and \ indicate a rising and a falling intonation and {laugh} indicates a non-verbal activity. Interviews were conducted in French and quotations from the responses have been translated into English for this publication. Content analysis was conducted in order to identify and gather information about relevant themes. The data was summarised using the following coding frames:

1. The materiality of writing (laptop, notebook, pencils, board, etc.).

Writer	Writing rituals	Corporeity in writing activity	Analysis
S1			
S2			
...			

2. Issues about self-knowledge, writing, reading and writing gestures: the activity of the writer displays multiple gestures, which accompany the writing process from the beginning, and may continue throughout the writing activity. Some activities help and some amplify the writing, and our role was to identify and analyse these gestures:

Writer	Specific knowledge about writing and reading; Personal knowledge	Writing gestures	Analysis
S1			
S2			
...			

Results

The body at work

The first analysis seeks to find the place of the body during in the writing activity. The collected data contains many references to the materiality of writing (computer, pencils, notebook, board, etc.). Although

this subject has been explored in other studies (Delamotte et al., 2000), our findings presented here focus on corporeity in writing processes.

Writing anywhere and at any time

The data shows that many places are used during the writing process: places connected to sleep (bed, night table), meals (dining room, kitchen, table, cafeteria at work), transport (train, tube/underground, walking between work and home) or washing (shower):

PM: But I have written sitting on the bed/ because I suddenly remember something or because I have just 30 minutes to rewrite something: uh: on a uh rough draft/ or I might write in the kitchen and that's because I don't want to lose my train of thought at that moment. (interview)

LPQ: ... that time I was in the cafeteria of the hospital/ it was really noisy/ it was complicated because it was a paediatric hospital so parents were in the cafeteria/ close family members/ siblings/ I could hear very difficult conversations/ uh about ill children/ it was difficult/ I really experienced difficulties but I didn't put my pen down ... this was the first step when I collected materials and theoretical elements. (interview)

LP: When I didn't have enough time to dive into the writing, I wrote summaries, I wrote in books or on my articles (I could see the development of my ideas and insights, as each was dated). It might take place in a library or at home, in a hotel room, or on the train. Indeed, I made the most of such moments when I could be interrupted at any time without it creating too many problems. (questionnaire)

The range of places mentioned is linked to the breaks that may occur naturally around a full-time job and family life. These breaks are seized upon by students, because they allow for the liberation of thought and the construction of the PhD research:

LPQ: Afterwards, there was the theoretical investigation and research issue phase/ and that/ that was an extraordinary experience because brainwaves happened everywhere/ when walking/ in the underground/ when taking a shower uh/ and at that moment you must write quickly because it quickly slips away/ {...} then I started the first data analysis/ and then ideas could come up anywhere {.} at work/ in my office/ I am doing something completely different/ I answer a phone call/ I look at my screen/ I answer at the same time to what's-his-name/ I prepare my presentation for the afternoon/ that's my working routine/ and suddenly/ the revelation {laugh} I fall to my knees/ inside, I can feel myself fall to my knees/ it is the revelation/ and then I write. (interview)

In this way, places and moments which occur in the students' tight schedules contribute to the writing process: this finding is common for all the PhD candidates in this study. This reflects the deep engagement of

the PhD candidates in writing up their research studies. Such small breaks are not only used in a practical way, but they are linked to special spaces that contribute to the construction of research activities – they are the place and the moment when brainwaves became tangible on sheets of paper, on post-it notes and in notebooks. These breaks or spaces are facilitated by physical features – the objects around the student – as well as by mental, sensory and motivational aspects which allow the student to take advantage of their affordances.

Construction of a favourable environment for PhD writing

Even if novice researchers seem to know how to take advantage of some affordances in terms of time and space, they are also preoccupied with building a favourable place in which to write the PhD thesis. The choice of a specific environment is linked to a particular writing activity (e.g. transcribing oral data, reading and writing notes, or writing parts of the thesis). Some writing activities are more ritualised than others, and express the different stages in the aforementioned ‘passage’ through the writing process: separation (uncomfortable situations, writing insecurity), liminality (verbal flow) and incorporation (writing now incorporates a process of reflection by the writer). These rituals must be understood as specific behaviours with specific rules, usually characterised by a cycle of repetition, and they point to values which involve the use of the body.

The search for well-being

To get into the act of writing, all participants stated that they sought or needed to “feel good” (PP, interview). For example, they expressed the need for a comfortable chair, light or silence:

FB: My armchair means a lot to me! [...] if it was a chair/ {.} it would be difficult/ it is not ultra-comfortable/ one of the armrests is broken/ you see/ it is not the best/ I’m not sure the other armrest will last until the end. (interview)

FPM: in other words to start writing/ that’s it – things must be in order/ let’s say/ it’s always on a table/ I only work on a laptop/ [...] in a place where I feel good/ basically it’s always in my kitchen or the veranda it’s never in my office {small laugh}/ I only worked once in the office to do the transcript/ because I had oral interview data/ I really needed silence/ (interview)

LPQ : In concrete terms/ when it falls silent/ well, I sit down in front of my computer/ I sit myself down in a comfortable armchair with cushions/ a suitable lamp and then either I read/ or I write/ so uh/ and there are moments when I have to lie down/ on the sofa which is empty at night. (interview)

This search for well-being is often accompanied by hot drinks (coffee or tea) which boost self-confidence and strongly increase sensations. These drinks help to set off and start writing, as well as to accompany ongoing writing:

PP: I lock myself in my bedroom [.] uh and I take a cup of tea [...] for me that's how I start writing/ the physical conditions which I place around me/ [...] AH my cup of tea/ in fact it comforts me/ it comforts me and I have the feeling/ that uh above all it comforts me and it's like having some company/ then it's hot so I absorb something hot/ uh/ and uh in fact it accompanies me whilst I write my few sentences. (interview)

The search for isolation

All participants in this study stated that a vital condition for progressing through the writing passage is isolation – the need to create a bubble, and find quiet. This assists their passage towards the ‘expression’ and the gesture of recovery-reformulation described later). The participants have a predilection for writing later on in the evening, when children are in bed (LL interview), or during the night “when it falls silent” (LPQ, interview):

LL: uh I told myself I finish my PhD [...] in my bedroom where I have silence and then in the library where all the books are which I frequently use/ well/ in the end they ended up in my bedroom {laugh} I feel good in this set-up/ since a couple of MONTHS/ and as I told you there's also the data which I've collected and organised/ and suits me/ so I think that this stage is the end of the writing/ when I was in my first office I couldn't look to the future/ I really have an environment which I have built as I have gone along/ and now it is just right for me. (interview)

While note taking, data collection, and the transcription of momentary ideas can happen anywhere and in any circumstances, the final writing activity takes place in isolation, and its own rhythm is sought, separate from work, the family, and the list of daily activities:

LP: For the writing, I wanted, nay even needed to be alone, to find myself, in my temporality, my imaginary world, not to have to account to others for what I was doing and where ... For example, if I woke up during the night, I could work if I wanted, I could go to bed late, I could eat at odd hours, be in communion with myself, talk loudly with myself or my subjects, or with my authors, to make them talk, and finally be immersed in my notes, my notebooks, my data, my memories of all the sensations I had during the interviews (questionnaire).

Body at rest – body in motion

With the aim to find its own temporality and to resonate with oneself, some participants need to sit down, “the body is sat down”, “the members [of the body] are in harmony with the brain to start writing more easily” (PP), and ensure that the body is calm:

LP: the writing itself is on the computer/ but for example C. lent me her country house/ which is wonderful/ I understood that there was one bodily sense which had been a bit dormant – that is, the ability to listen/ because in her house no noise can be heard/ so uh I had all my time/ I listened to my own breathing and my voice because I speak [when I write]. (interview)

On the contrary, the writing process can be constrictive and painful, even if the result provides satisfaction:

LC: last February/ I literally KILLED myself working but that's the last article I wrote for my PhD / I mean before finishing it/ and I really had good reviews/ I don't regret it/ but in concrete terms I didn't do any exercise from December to March/ in February it was horrible/ I didn't go out at all/ because I absolutely had to finish/ [...] anyway I was FORCED to finish this article and then I had to go out but it was bad for my health/ I went to the doctor because I had problems with my legs/ with my circulation/ I urgently had to do sport again because I really didn't feel well. (interview)

LP: During the final stage of writing up/ naturally my body began to ask me for more attention/ to be more aware of it/ It no longer sufficed to feed it properly/ to clean it/ and to find the chance to relax during the day. (interview)

During the final stage of writing up the thesis, all the participants faced the constraint of remaining in a sitting position for hours “without eating sweets” (LC, interview). Some of them spoke about the “domestication of one's body” (LP), allowing oneself to move and listening to one's body:

LP: I need to have different spaces and that's why I like being alone/ ideally big enough to have the possibility to go from one room to another uh/ [...] yes, there you can go in every direction/ you sit down/ in the staircase/ {.} you change the place where you write because you are going to give birth to something/ now your brain is doing its job. (interview)

The need to go from one room to another suggests that the writer is trying to find himself or perhaps that he tests himself to break through his own limits. Sometimes, the body in motion is integrated in the process of reflection and within the writing process. It makes possible “a new perspective”, “a break for a reflection”, and “to digest somehow” (FPM, interview):

FPM: At times I get up especially and [.] I walk or I am stuck to the kitchen stove and I spend a lot of time/ I don't know/ I take a little distance from this writing lying on the table [...] I get up and I have a break/ if I can say that like this and then I come back to it/ I do that because I need to think and it takes time/ all this WORK/ I had a great deal of breaks because I needed all these chances to reflect. (interview)

The variety of places and snatched breaks, the organisation of their own space and writing time, bodily limitations and demands, as well as the different strategies mobilised to control these factors – all these

elements demonstrate how young researchers apply themselves to the work and manage the constraints. They aim to go beyond their limits and master the tension and difficulties that are a fundamental part of the writing process, without straining themselves. They make rules for themselves, attempt to change themselves, to modify their essential self, and to make a work of art out of their lives (Foucault, 2001). This existential transformation is all-encompassing for each individual.

Writing gestures

The second part of the analysis focuses on the writing gestures employed by the writers. These gestures were explained by our participants, often in terms of strategies and activities. They described their specific acts, intentionally oriented and directed at the self. The writing gestures observed during writing workshops and discussed by Jorro (2016) are not only corroborated by this research, but are also more accurately characterised. We also outline a new gesture, the gesture of ‘diversion from the act of writing’. All these writing gestures reflect the students’ investment in their activities.

The collector’s gesture

By reflecting on their writing experience, students identified phases in their writing activity. They described actions similar to those of a collector, for example, they collected written records or video recordings, constituted resources, and established lists (Goody, 1979). These actions belong to the first phase of writing that makes it possible to establish a referential and semantic base, and an inventory of citations, which will then be used for more linear writing. Collector gestures symbolize a rite of entry into the writing activity.

FB: Oh my god/ there's always a notebook in my bag/ So, it was always like that long before the thesis but as my thesis progressed/ I needed a notebook on my nightstand/ I did need IT/ I used a great number of incredible post-it notes that I always put in the same drawer in the kitchen/ In fact/ in the strategic rooms in which I have ideas/ I write everything that comes into my head\ {.} Sometimes, it's a complementary idea/ Sometimes/ I think I have a lot of paintings in my thesis/ I think that a word is misused/ {.} so I go through that. (interview)

The expressive gesture

The expressive gesture is used in the second phase. At this point, the doctoral student enters into a longer writing. They have to verbalise and express an idea that they are trying to formulate, and then they come back to it later. One doctoral student (FB) stated: “I would say that I need to write at the same time as I think about it”. (interview)

FPM: Then there was a later time when I knew what I meant/ I worked on some notes on all this/ from this first draft/ I had something that was a bit more organised/ so here was the first phase of general organisation/ then there was a finer phase where I was really writing/ part by part, etc./ and when I had a whole part, I went to the computer and I wrote a clean version. (interview)

The expressive gesture consists of an oral or written externalization of one's thought. Verbalization and reformulation, note taking and rewriting are implemented by the author. This is the case of LPQ, which seeks in a favorable environment to deepen an idea.

The gesture of recovery-reformulation

This gesture is fundamental to the writing activity. Feeding back into the text is driven by the idea that improvements are always possible. It is important for the writer to improve the wording, to modify a part of the text, or to return to an unclear explanation. The use of the computer predisposes writers to such a process of reformulation. The students emphasised the importance of this gesture, which promotes a coherent relationship with what they are trying to say, what they have not yet managed to write, and consequently what such modifications are trying to bring about.

LPQ: it's the same/ most often computer for writing/ and after there are all the readjustments/ there I hadn't noted the reference/ there/ it is necessary to get back to the books/ the last minute adjustments {incomprehensible} then it was the same/ 15 pages on it/ I did not take it/ it's not work anymore actually/ {..} What happened/ is most often on the computer at home/ most of it/ most of it was at night while sleeping and then/ during the week that I devoted/ the whole week/ almost day and night/ and in two days/ annexes/ presentation of annexes.
(interview)

The gesture of restructuring the thesis

Writing a thesis should be considered not only in the organisation of the different parts, but also in its entirety. PhD students expressed how they constructed their writing and their need to review the arrangements within each part and between the parts. Sometimes, it became necessary to delete a significant part of the text. The symbolic cost of such an action is important – sometimes it implies giving up a development which took time and which later proves to be irrelevant or inappropriate.

The gesture of diversion from the act of writing

The act of diversion can be described as branching off from the initial activity of writing in order to initiate another activity that suspends the tension being experienced by the writer. The underlying purpose of the diversion gesture can be thought of as being somewhere between procrastination and allowing space for the maturation of time and thoughts. At first sight, if the diversion activity is, for example, searching the web for peripheral information, or even a completely different task from writing, the gesture seems to establish a 'change of channel'. However, one may also consider this diversion gesture as a necessary parenthesis, since the writer is still fully engaged mentally, and the 'click' moment mentioned by students is not far away. In other words, leaving their writing with the full intention of going back to the text later seems to be the rationale for such a gesture.

RA: I know that if I want to write I have to spend all my day on it/ so this is a day where I will not take a look at my emails/ I will not answer the phone/ where I really will not be bothered I do not know if I have problems of inattention BUT it's quite hard enough to describe/ and

especially to write this thesis and if I have a moment of inattention I know that I stop/ and I go on social networks/ I always lose twenty-five minutes doing this type of thing. (interview)

Discussion

The present research study highlights the fact that writing for research purposes is highly challenging. A PhD study, and in particular writing up the thesis, is a reflection of a student's desire to commit themselves to conducting research and recording their findings. It is an exacting task, especially when daily life for adult learners is packed with professional and family commitments. Students who are engaged in professional activities in their workplaces often need to deal with tight schedules before being able to focus on their writing. Research studies in the field of academic writing (Bucheton & Chabanne, 2002 ; Reuter 1998, 2004) commonly describe cognitive or even epistemological impediments involved. This study highlights practical obstacles and difficulties that have to do with daily life and learning how to make arrangements to ensure for oneself a suitable and productive writing environment.

We found that the question of writing to be used does not seem to be the most pressing issue for a PhD student who incessantly needs to organise the place or space in which they can carry out the task of writing their thesis. When the question of scholarly writing was mentioned in our interviews, it was viewed by the participants as an exacting task. However, we also found that when doctoral students experience difficulty in writing, they do not explicitly mention the need to gain writing or discursive competences. The most surprising finding was to discover how the authoring function is often overshadowed by physical preoccupations (i.e. the rituals needed to get into the writing process). This demonstrates the need of some students to set up a 'place for themselves' so as to alleviate "writing insecurity" (Dabène, 1987: 57).

An interesting finding of this study is that the student's writing engagement is dependent on physical relationship with the writing task. The role of the body is revealed by the attempts made to find an environment to stimulate the writing activity. The conditions of the selected environment facilitate the efforts required for writing the thesis. These conditions, which are essentially related to personal circumstances, influence the student's progress in writing the thesis. Being at one with oneself and organising one's work environment reflect the importance of the 'concern for self' within the objective of self-development that is generated by the act of writing. An autobiographical dimension imbues thesis writing. The writer seems to target the establishment of the right relationship with himself or herself, in other words, to experience the self-governance described by Foucault (2008) in an attempt to achieve self-consistency; in this context, such attempts occur in the writing circumstances of the student.

Writing engagement is infused with precise actions that signal a departure from the unsystematic activities movements that regularly mark the doctoral student's daily life. Writing gestures emerge as work on the thesis progresses. The preparation stage in starting the writing process involves 'collector' gestures, the writing amplification stage appears with the 'expressive' gesture, and the process culminates with the gesture of 'recovery-reformulation'. PhD students clearly described the gestures of a 'collector' in setting up their working environment. This 'expressive' gesture is deliberate, and clearly differs from an initial writing gesture that lacks depth and ideas. Writing emerges as the performance of an act – a concrete act that

requires specific actions or movements directed to oneself personally; actions that convey a purpose and reflect the author's experiential knowledge.

A particularly noteworthy finding is the gesture of 'diversion from the act of writing' – a gesture that sets the writing activity aside. This can be interpreted in one of two ways: either as an act of truancy, or as an act of detachment of the writer from their piece of writing. This gesture of diversion is underpinned by the need to stay more or less in control, since the student must soon get back to the piece of writing and resume the writing activity. Should this not be the case, the diversion gesture could result in the writing activity being suspended.

Identifying these writing gestures does not lead to establishing a particular scale. The gestures have their significance.

Learning how to write a thesis requires the development of self-knowledge in an environment set up by the writer. The findings of this study show how important the materiality of writing is; this involves the layout of a working space with stacks of books carefully arranged, the selection of pencils and pens, the use of post-it notes, and a suitable place assigned to the computer. The layout can also include other dimensions, for example, when the writer reconfigures a familiar space – such as a staircase, a corridor, a bedroom – to make it a place favourable for reflection and articulating his or her thoughts. These spaces become 'counter-spaces' or 'utopias' that stimulate the subject's imagination and generation of ideas. Foucault (2009) uses the term 'heterotopia' to refer to the influence of the personal space set up by the writer and into which they project themselves, that is, a space to which they are committed.

Conclusion

Taking corporeity into account in thesis writing is a way of humanising the act of writing, and adding a sense of 'concreteness' to the writing activity. The variety of writing gestures presented in this chapter reflects the meandering paths taken by doctoral students, with each of them entering and conducting the writing process in their own way. Our findings show that it is important to extend the field of vision to be able to understand what entering the writing process implies: writing does not solely impact the PhD student as an individual, but also his or her personal and professional environment.

The particular gestures which were identified during the second stage of this research study include elements related to the paths taken by the writers during their rites of passage. Without being a clinical study on conceptual gestures or formal instructions (Streeck, 2009), the gestures we have identified provide information for future doctoral students and directors of research who support and advise them on the thesis writing process. Awareness of these gestures makes it possible to clarify objectives, establish reference points, and relieve fears and anxieties often mentioned by young researchers in their thesis journals (Gérard, 2014).

Whilst preserving an anthropological perspective, avenues for further research include investigation of the acquisition of language competences and, more broadly, the assimilation of writing knowledge at stake, not only in our own institution but more widely for PhD students in writing their theses.

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