

**A READER-RESPONSE APPROACH  
TO THE INITIAL TRAINING OF MALTESE LITERATURE TEACHERS**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis documents the development of nineteen student-teachers in becoming teachers of Maltese literature, initiated in a methodology study-unit over one academic year. Drawing on reader-response theories, and coupled with insights from reflective practice and assessment for learning, this study traces trajectories taken by student-teachers as they gradually move from a text- or subject-bound culture towards a more student- or response-centred approach. Methodologically, this thesis is an action-research project embracing a bricolage stance. The main analysis draws on the lecturer-researcher's and the student-teachers' experiences in a dialogical way. A number of reflective tasks were employed to make explicit the meandering thought processes that were taking place and shape during the duration of the study-unit. Different topics essential to any prospective teacher of literature were also critically examined. These issues were realised during a six-week block teaching practice, with some of the experiences collected in an *ad hoc* portfolio. Towards the end, six perspectives are analysed to illustrate broad themes and significant vignettes of what this transition entails. While mainly respecting traditional academic format, parts of the thesis are written in non-canonical genres, thus expressing an essentially exploratory, experimental approach.

## **DEDICATION**

To the loving memory of my mother, Josephine

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While a thesis has one author, in all truth it is a product of many unacknowledged years of education, to which many significant people, several of whom are teachers, have contributed in their valuable and unique way.

Although one of the most recent persons I have met, I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Dr Nick Peim, for his insights and foresight, constant support, and his willingness to share in a comprehensive and comprehensible way his academic acumen. I will remember for long and with joy our feedback meetings, mostly when I used to travel to Birmingham, but also on those two unforgettable occasions when he came to Malta.

This thesis would not have taken shape if the nineteen student-teachers enrolled to become teachers of Maltese language and literature in secondary school between 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 had not granted me their permission to participate in my research and to judiciously use all the necessary data that was generated during the many, all too many, study-unit's activities and tasks. By the end of writing my thesis, in a way I feel it has become *their* research too, since their voice was given ample space and treated with respect.

I would like to thank two of my colleagues within the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Deborah Chetcuti and Michael Buhagiar, a Science Education and a Mathematics Education pedagogues, respectively, with whom I discussed and expanded my ideas. Their assiduous listening and helpful critical suggestions have shaped my thoughts and tempered my writing skills.

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## NOTE

As much as possible, I use standard British English orthography throughout my thesis, with the exception of those quotations and book names that follow the American orthography as their system. I decline writing sic after each latter case to have a smooth text; I use (sic) when evidently there is a mistake in the original text only.

I use square brackets [...] to: indicate a lengthy omission from text; insert a personal comment or clarification not present in the original text; or when I give the literal translation in English of words, generally book titles or selections from original texts, written in a foreign language.

Unless otherwise stated, typographical emphasis (bold, italics and underlining) in the original texts are reported as found in the original text. Then, when I want to emphasise a word or part within a quote, it is clearly indicated by 'emphasis added' just after the page number within the parenthesis.

I prefer to use in-text parenthetical reference system. When I use two dates divided by a forward slash (example 1908/2004) the first date refers to the first year of publication when this has a significant historical meaning and the second year indicates the edition I am using and quoting from.

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*“He who is a teacher from the very heart  
takes all things seriously only with reference to his students –  
even himself.”*

**Freidrich Nietzsche**  
*Beyond Good and Evil*

*“He who is a teacher is usually incapable of any longer doing anything for his  
own benefit, he always thinks of the benefit of his pupils, and he takes  
pleasure in knowledge of any kind only insofar as he can teach it.  
He regards himself in the end as a thoroughfare of knowledge  
and as a means and instrument in general, so that he has  
ceased to be serious with regard to himself”*

**Freidrich Nietzsche**  
*Human, All Too Human*

## **PART I**

### **MY POSITIONING AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **OVERVIEW**

In Part I of my thesis I want to critically explore my provenance as a novice lecturer and researcher from the island of Malta (Chapter 1). Then, I provide an explanation and possibly a justification for my writing style, mainly traditional format blended with non-canonical genres in selected parts (Chapter 2). Furthermore, I will present the three main fields of knowledge – reader-response theory (Chapter 3), reflective practice (Chapter 4) and issues related to evaluation and assessment (Chapter 5) – that I specifically draw on throughout my research.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **The itinerary of my journey**

#### **1.1 My educational journey**

When I was young, I dreamt of becoming a doctor. Saving lives, I felt, was my vocation. At thirteen I began studying science subjects: Biology, Chemistry and Physics. All my classmates dreamt that one day we would become esteemed members of the medical profession, working at the same hospital.

Then, during my last year of secondary school, I became more aware of the near impossibility of obtaining the required results to be eligible for a degree in medicine. Instigated by poor performance in Chemistry and inspired by good results in languages, I started to be convinced that there were other fascinating professions, equally stimulating and rewarding.

At sixth form I chose Italian, Maltese, and Philosophy. By the end of the two-year course I obtained very good results in all three areas. I attribute this success to the fact that I developed a very good relationship with all my teachers. Furthermore, I felt empowered to be able to quote great thinkers and I would go through elaborately rewording my compositions just to squeeze in a sentence or two that struck my attention.

At that time, beyond any doubt, I wanted to become a teacher of Maltese. By enrolling in a four-year B.Ed.(Hons.) I had the opportunity reading Maltese to become a secondary school teacher. Once I finished the course I was employed as a secondary school teacher in a local secondary school.

#### **1.2 The writing of a personal history**

Complex events have taken place, some orchestrated, others not determined, and others still happened without even being noticed, “discretely, / very quietly...” like the growth of ‘Mushrooms’ in Sylvia Plath’s (1981: 121-122) poem. The research experience is a lace composed of different treads. But the way to describe that experience, the way to understand and make sense of the process, is as complex and at times problematic as the text itself.

In this thesis a predilection for the personal, subjective and intuitive will manifest throughout the whole research reconstruction and interpretation. Although there may be different equally relevant “points of entry texts” (Berry, 2004: 108), in most parts I prefer to draw on principles and practices developed from a life history approach. Life history research, as Ardra Cole and Gery Knowles (2001: 10) have explained:

...acknowledges not only that personal, social, temporal, and contextual influences facilitate understanding of lives and phenomena being explored, but also that, from conceptualization through to representation and eventual communication of new understandings to others, any research project is an expression of elements of a researcher’s life history.

Objectivity, a much desired value within certain positivistic approaches to research, is not directly aimed at. What is recounted is mainly in the first person, be it my position or my student-teachers vantage point of view. This is the ‘front’ – “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (Goffman, 1959: 22) – I want to present. The tension between being inside/outside at the same time, naturally led itself to difficulties if not couched within this theoretical framework that values such a stance. Since every research is a fabrication of sorts, and each text that represents that research experience is itself another fabrication, I consider them as an asset in the authentication of the portrayed experience. In scientific writing the author brushes his/her text to a state where it gives the impression of being neutral, value free, objective and therefore scientific, what Roland Barthes (1968) called “degree-zero” writing. However, I do not apologise for adhering to a different view. I concur with Maggie MacLure (2003: 81-82) that: “Texts cannot be reduced to singular meanings” and that “[t]he hardest thing to see in any text is that which poses itself as natural and unquestionable.” I do not plan to hide, camouflage, and polish my writing to a state of scientific resemblance. I am in agreement with David Berliner (2002: 20) that “no unpoetic description of the human condition can ever be complete.” I acknowledge my subjectivity and my student-teachers’ personal strong voices, and indeed I recognise that in doing so I capitalise on a new way of writing research.



I consider variety of research methods (Chapters 6 and 7) and writing (Chapter 2) as strong in qualitative educational research, especially when one is aiming at hinting, grasping, describing, and interpreting ‘local knowledge’ (Geertz, 1983) and ‘personal knowledge’ (Polanyi, 1958). Local knowledge develops over time by one generation to the next, is embedded within a community of practice, and is based on experience within an ever evolving culture. Personal knowledge is that kind of ‘tacit knowledge’ (another of Polanyi’s key terms) gained from a direct experience of an event; a kind of knowledge that is guided by one’s personal commitment and sense of an increasing contact with reality; the acknowledgement that to know something means to be personally involved in the act of understanding; this phenomenological awareness questions the distinction between the knower from the known, and challenges the bipolar subject/object (*vide* Moustakas, 1994; Titchen and Hobson, 2005; van Manen 1997; Grene, 1966).

Critical to this decision is the frankness about my positionality towards the whole research area. As Lorna Allies (1999: 2-3) contends: “In essence then we ought to know and acknowledge our personal, practical, ideological, cultural and theoretical positionality and, if we can, discover and discuss the impact it has on our research.” Positionality may be important in better understanding and explicating: the selection of research area, the choice of methodology, the way one reads fundamental texts in that area, and the impact all this has on the research process from conception to writing. Furthermore, “[t]he notion of place, and one’s positioning within it, remains highly topical in light of colonial deeds and post-colonial discourses” (Lovell, 1998: 2)... nothing nearer the mark when one considers Malta’s past. Understanding positionality is a never ending process of self-discovery. So better start off this journey or reconstruction with where I stand and how to a certain extent that determines who I am.

### **1.3 My context**

The Maltese Archipelago (better known as Malta) is a set of small islands at the heart of the Mediterranean Sea. Malta the main island, with Gozo known as the

sister island, Comino, and the uninhabited islets of Cominotto and Filfla, together constitute the Maltese Archipelago. Situated roughly 96 km from the Southern tip of Sicily and 290 km from Northern Africa, and midway between Gibraltar and Port Said, its strategic location has been detrimental for its history. The population is around 400,000 people (National Statistics Office, 2005: v). Enjoying a temperate climate nearly all year round, during the three months of winter, Malta attracts mainly mature people from colder climates around Europe; during the rest of the hot dry year, sandy beaches and exciting night life are main attractions for the young or young at heart. Apart from the tourist industry, the country's economy is heavily dependent on the construction industry and to a lesser extent on agriculture and fisheries, teaching English as a foreign language, and a host of other small enterprises.

### **1.3.1 A very brief history**

For hundreds of years Malta's sheltered harbours were an attraction for different colonisers around the Mediterranean that sought military and economic power in the region (*vide* Bradford, 2000). From prehistoric times, Malta's history and Maltese identity have been the product of the different colonisers that landed on its shores. The first human stone buildings are to be found on the Southern part of the island, at Haġar Qim and Imnajdra; these are Malta's best known prehistoric remains that date back around 5000 years (*vide* Trump, 2002). The Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Romans had settlements and even temples around the island, mainly near the sea and around the natural ports. In 870 AD the Arabs occupied the island up to 1070AD, when the Normans from Sicily got hold of the island. Subsequently the Swabians, Angevins, Aragonese and Castilians governed the Island. Emperor Charles V in 1530 handed the islands to the Sovereign Military Order of St John of Jerusalem (better known as the Knights of Malta), who very much aware of possible incursions and military attacks from the Ottomans, fortified the Island, thus creating the appellation of an island fortress. The French came to Malta in 1798, with Napoleon himself entering the Grand Harbour and residing for some days in some of the magnificent palazzos around the Island. The French's dominion lasted only

two years, when the Maltese invited the British to govern the Island. British rule lasted up to 21<sup>st</sup> September 1964 when Malta gained its Independence, and the last battleship left the Island on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1979 when finally Malta gained its freedom. Definitely, the two distinctive characteristics that forged the Maltese identity are religion and the Maltese language.

### **1.3.2 Religion in Malta**

Most Maltese are Christians and loyal to the Roman Catholic Church. Religion permeates all spheres and all stages of Maltese life. Commenting on post-Independence's role of religion, Carmel Cassar (2000: 43) succinctly describes the state of affairs: "The established Church had served as a point of reference to the Maltese furnishing them with a *raison d'être*. It further helped them to create a homogeneity and a list of unwritten rules by which the community could abide." Just a small glimpse at the Maltese landscape will suffice to identify the church as the crux of the traditional Maltese village. In fact, many villages evolved as settlements around a chapel that later, with great efforts of the believers, was transformed into a dignified church. As Jeremy Boissevain (1992: 167) has noted: "A Maltese village was [and to a certain extent still is] thus inward-looking, focusing on the parish church and the intense social, political, economic, and ceremonial life that took place in and around the central square." Most artistic endeavours of the Maltese, be they of Maltese hands or commissioned to foreigners of great artistic reputation, can be found in churches around Malta and Gozo. As will be demonstrated later, religion directly or indirectly impinges on what happens in the literature classroom; or at least can serve as an interpretive key for understanding the classroom dynamics, the identity of the text, and the role of the reader in the reading act

### **1.3.3 Maltese: A linguistic background**

Although a very small island, Malta has its very own native language, spoken by more than 400,000 people (National Statistics Office, 2005: v). Maltese language's

history spreads over one thousand years (Brincat, 2000). Indeed, the Maltese language has been hailed as one of the most important (*Maltese Language Act*, 2004, p.3 point 31a-b), if not, together with religion, “the crux of Maltese identity...the main differentiating mark of ethnic identity” (Cassar, 2001: 257). Hand in hand, if not leading this ever greater awareness of the Maltese language, one can notice a parallel movement of a renewed consciousness among writers about their national identity as expressed through their writing (*vide* Cassola, 2000). Literature has contributed extensively in the creation of a national identity and in consolidating respect towards the Maltese language (for an overview of the development of Maltese Literature *vide* Friggieri, 1994).

Manwel Mifsud (1995: 26-27) describes the Maltese language as in strata that mirror succeeding phases of languages/cultures in contact: the Semitic stratum, the Romance super stratum (Sicilian and later on, Italian), and the English *ad stratum*. The major colonisers that brought along their language were: the Arabs (870AD – 1249AD), the Sicilians (1090 – 1530 AD) and Italians (1530AD – 1800AD), and finally the British (that can be further subdivided into two phases, an early one from their arrival 1800 AD up to the second World War, and the second phase related to the English dominant influence as an international language).

Maltese is the only national language in Europe that whilst indisputably belonging to the Semitic family of languages, from 1934 has a standardised orthography based exclusively on the Latin alphabet. The newly established standard orthography officially recognised by the Government consolidated its position after it was chosen as the official system in elementary schools (*vide* Brincat, 2001; Marshall, [1972], 63-70). During British rule, English’s influence on Maltese was limited mainly to the administrative and the military spheres. At that time, English was “generally regarded as the language of domination and of despotism” (Frendo, 1994: 14). English’s stronghold did not happen either overnight or without a fight for “linguistic supremacy” (Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander, 1997: ix) between those that hailed or abhorred Italian or English and *vice versa*. This virulent controversy resulted in what is known as “the Language Question” (*vide* Hull, 1993). The subtle

change in the importance attributed to different languages forms part of the Imperial government's stratagem "that strove to strengthen its rule by drawing on the local patriotism of the ordinary people – hence the elevation of Maltese, the language of the masses, rather than Italian the language of the middle classes" (Cassar, 2000: 214). Upon Independence, Maltese language's status and role was enshrined in the *Constitution of Malta* (1964). English is creating a lot of havoc in modern Maltese linguistic landscape mainly due to the incongruence between the two orthographical and grammatical systems.

#### 1.4 The Maltese Educational System and a first person narrative

Even if education in Malta dates back prior the arrival of the Knights of Malta (*vide* Sultana, 2001; Zammit Mangion, 1992), the Maltese educational system mirrors by and large the general framework in place in England, and to a certain extent may be considered as a historical remnant of the British Colonial past (Sultana, 1997b: 13-15).

Administratively governed by the Education Division, education up to sixteen years, is regulated by both the *Education Act* (2007) and the *National Minimum Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999). In Malta, one can find both State and Private Schools (Church Schools, Private Schools and Parent Foundation Schools). Generally speaking, pre-primary (also known as kindergarten)

I have two vivid memories of my first few days at kindergarten.

Early one morning my mother woke me up as usual and took me for a walk round the block. Instead of going back home, when we arrived at a big tall gate she took out a small lunch-box from her basket and handed it to me. It was heavy even if inside I could find only a tiny sandwich, orange juice, a banana and a Deserta (piece of locally made chocolate). I can still hear my mother nearly whispering in a calming voice into my ear: "Ter, now run to the main door and ask for Sister..." (I don't remember her name). I ran as fast as I could and didn't even look back to say goodbye.

The second early memory is going back home with a brand new copybook that was distributed for free at school. It was a new kind of copybook, with narrow blue, red and grey lines inside. But more interesting was that on the bluish-grey cover there were two profiles. I did not know who they were; I never saw them before. I had never

starts at the age of 3 up to 5 years.

Attendance at the pre-primary level is on a voluntary basis, and is free of charge in the State schools. At this level, supposedly no formal education takes place. Instead, activities aimed at developing social skills, language and communication competency in preparation for primary school, are preferred. At this level and in the subsequent one, in State schools one finds a co-educational system.

Compulsory education begins at the age of 5 up to 16 years. It is divided into two cycles: a six year primary course for children between the age of 5 and 10 years; and a five year secondary education for students between the age of 11 to 16 years. At state secondary schools, a single sex education is in place. Church, Private or Parent Foundation schools have different settings and arrangements regarding the type of students' gender, amongst other aspects.

“There is also increasing evidence that in Malta, it is the examination tail that wags the education dog” (Sultana, 1997a: 109). To date, the very first important milestone of every student attending primary school is the 11+ exam. This selection at a very young age has been criticised (*vide* Grima,

met them when with my mother we went to the playground or when we visited our relatives, or when we went to mass. Back home, I asked my father who they were. He took a long look and in a strong nearly irritated voice replied: “These are the king and queen.”

Maltese schools tend to celebrate all kinds of occasions. One of them is Mother's day. I still remember writing my first ever poem dedicated to my mother, handing it very secretly to my father to take a look at it to find that rhyming word I could not think of - because poems at that time and for a very long time, had to rhyme otherwise they were not poems! - going to school the next day and presenting my effort to the old teacher who used to live near the playground. The only thing I know was that the next day I was asked by the head of school to go on the podium to read my poem who had just won the best poem in school for Mother's Day. I do not have a copy of that first poem, but today I know that behind my work were the hands of a very caring and loving father who loved his wife very dearly.

Year six was a mess. Running from school to two teachers for private lessons, working past papers from day one, watching my mother pray each evening that all goes well and my father losing his temper when I did not know something that by then should have been obvious. I do not recall anything else, except for a cataclysm that fell on our house when I (or was it we?) received the results. Good results in nearly all subjects and one big F in one core subject that would haunt me to this day: English. My father was devastated. He reprimanded me

*et al.* 2008). However, to date nothing has changed much – parents are first to defend the examination selection system and even teachers in favour of this selective and discriminatory process.

After over ten years of compulsory education, towards the end of the secondary school, students may sit for yet another high stake examination, or better still a battery of examinations, the 16+ Secondary Education Certificate (SEC) organised by the local Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board (MATSEC) (a local version but internationally recognised examination body entrusted to set examinations similar to the G.C.S.E. in England). The results obtained at this stage are a prerequisite for entry to the next level, post-secondary education or a basic requirement to a range of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Once more, the examination regime at this level was criticised in a major evaluative report (*vide* Grima, Camilleri, Chircop and Ventura, 2005), but has little if no effect on the system.

Post-16 education in Malta consists mainly of two routes. Students not geared towards academic subjects, can now opt

since if I could not make it when there were more vacancies than usual (a new Junior Lyceum at Hamrun had just opened), how on earth could I ever think I could make it the following year?! I was sent to a local Area Secondary, and to add more sorrow to my family placed in Room 2 which was another way of saying I was a B student.

Mr Portelli was my English teacher and my first ever Form Teacher. He selected me to become the Class Prefect the most important responsibility any student in class would aspire too. I was assigned a badge with the word PREFECT that I would very proudly wear each day. I entered into a fight or two, but I always had the backing of my Form Teacher. Although some students used to say he was my relative, I did not know him and to this day I know nothing about him except that he taught me how not to be afraid of English, and that reading is a pleasurable experience. And by the way, by the end of that first year I managed to pass in all subjects (including English) for the Junior Lyceum schools and one very prestigious Private School. After one year I saw my father smiling again.

I was the first from my family to enter university. I still remember my father telling me with a slight embarrassment: “My son, from now onwards I cannot help you any more.” I felt that I was venturing into new grounds, becoming someone else different from my parents. The first important test came a few months into the course: my very first teaching practice.

Placed in a near to home primary school, I was assigned a year three class. I was so enthusiastic about the whole experience.

for a vocational education programme at the Malta College for the Arts and Science Technology (MCAST). A two year academic programme at a preparatory institution (known as Sixth Forms, with the state's Junior College being the most popular) leading to, upon successful completion of the programme – yet again measured by a series of examinations at A-Level and Intermediate Level – access to an academic or professional programme at the University of Malta. At University one can then choose from different degrees at undergraduate level and then progress one's studies at either post-graduate level or up to a doctorate level.

The education system is the backbone of Maltese society since it's the investment in the sole resource that is readily available on the island: the Maltese citizens. Various governments have highlighted education as top priority of their legislature.

#### **1.4.1 Teacher training in Malta**

In Malta, “no person may exercise the teaching profession against remuneration or hold himself to be professionally qualified to do so unless such person is the

My very first lesson was on the Holy Spirit. I prepared a cardboard in a number eight form that when closed formed a circle with a happy and sad face on each side. Then, in the middle I drew a pigeon, the symbol of the Holy Ghost in the Roman Catholic church's tradition. I used this resource as an induction, with the simple question: “Do we want to be happy or sad?” As predicted all answer in unison: “Happyyyyyy!” “And how can we be happy? What can make us happy all the time?” Knowing that this was the 8.35am lesson, a religious answer was needed; and together they replied: “Godddd”. I had to ask another question, for which I got no answer. For them God was God. As a hint I asked them to make the sign of the cross. They obeyed. Finally one of them shouted: “The Holy Spirit”. And in a magic like fashion, I opened the happy face and they all saw this dove. A success.

Subsequently during my third and fourth year I started teaching Maltese at secondary level. I really felt that was my true vocation and mission: teaching Maltese. Indeed when I finished university, even if I knew I had a greater chance of finding a job in the primary sector, I applied exclusively for a secondary sector job, which not without some trepidation I obtained some weeks later. That is how I became a teacher!

The four-year course was nothing when compared to the difficulties I encountered when teaching Form 3 in an area secondary school in the south of Malta. I reckon that experience was my baptism of fire. Day in day out I tried to control my classes with what I learned about youth psychology and



holder of a warrant issued under this Act” (*Education Act*, 2007: 24(1)).

Apart from academic training, being a Maltese citizen and of good conduct are two necessary prerequisites to qualify for a permanent teaching warrant in Malta. At the time of my research, teacher education in Malta consists of three routes. The Faculty of Education at the University of Malta is entrusted with the organisation and provision of two teacher training professional courses: a four-year full-time B.Ed. (Hons.) degree and one-year full-time Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (P.G.C.E.) course. The B.Ed. (Hons.) course provides training both for primary teachers and secondary (single- or double-subject specialisation) teachers. The one year P.G.C.E. is offered as a single subject specialisation to student-teachers who want to teach at secondary level. The third route – often contested, but never to date revoked – into the teaching profession is offered to those that possess a Masters Degree or Doctorate in any subject or area of research, that can apply for a permanent warrant (*Education Act*, 2007), who however must undergo a Pedagogy Course.

classroom management manuals, and in respect of philosophical precepts and sociological insights. Nothing seemed to work. What kept me going at that time were: my never-ending passion and love for my subject specialisation; my constant creativity and search for innovative teaching methods; and those few hours a week at University reading for an M.A. in reader-response theory. Like many others, I truly embarked on the road to become a teacher at school; I consider my teacher training as just the waiting time at the station.

Although employment at university is very rare, I was fortunate enough to be one of four to be chosen to lecture part-time on teaching Maltese at primary school. This opportunity was an appetiser of what had to come later.

Two years later, I applied for and was assigned a full-time post in Maltese pedagogy, the first ever post at my institution. My last day at school as a teacher was the Christmas party; I started working at University on 5<sup>th</sup> January, 1998. Within a few days I was expected to deliver a whole study-unit (14 hours) without any guidance or mentorship. It was yet again a sink or swim situation. In the beginning I found it difficult to fit in especially since I was the youngest member in the Faculty of Education, and nearly all the members at that time were my own lecturers. With time I became just another recognisable lecturer of the Faculty.

## 1.5 Maltese and I: A reflection

It is through my language, Maltese, that I experience my existence. It is through Maltese that: I store, interpret and relive my past; intensely experience and savour my present; dream, and hopefully forge my future. My identity is moulded with Maltese language. In the highly evocative word, laden with mystery, so dear to Cesare Pavese (1952: 12-13), Maltese in my life is “all-pervading.” I perceive the world through Maltese as it unfolds in front of me and within me. I cherish its possibilities and enjoy stretching its limits to the edge of creativity and without losing sight of comprehensibility. Moving the boundaries of my language is like a game that I like to play, aware and knowledgeable of the limits provided from over a thousand years of use and developments, and at the same time keen to reach for and maybe reinvent the horizons of possibilities that it provides me with. I cannot fathom my being from my language; I am my language and my language *is* what I am. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1921/2001: 68) has stated: “The limit of my *language* mean the limits of my world.” All my lecturing is conducted in Maltese; I take great pains in searching a Maltese equivalent for the basic pedagogical terminology. I feel a responsibility towards the advancement of my language, a duty most noticeable in the three year collaboration with a colleague of mine, in writing the first ever language methodology textbook exclusively in Maltese: *Stedina għat-Tagħlim fis-Sekondarja* [An Invitation to Teach in Secondary School] (Portelli and Camilleri Grima, 2003). At the same time I cannot but feel pity to read what Peter Mayo’s (2005, Language, Cultural capital, and Citizenship, para. 2) has rightly described as the local linguistic scenario at my University:

The University of Malta is an important state-funded institution that encourages use of English through its educational language policies. Lectures are, for the most part, delivered in English, and the same language is used in the writing of assignments, test papers and dissertations. Maltese, the language spoken in working-class homes, on the other hand, is assigned a subordinate status in this institution as elsewhere in the country, and those who speak only this language are thus constrained in making full use of their citizenship rights.

Linguistically speaking, things would be better defined as diglossia that is, two languages, in this case Maltese and English: “co-occur throughout a speech community, each performing an individual range of functions, and each having acquired some degree of status as a standard” (Crystal, 1999: 89). Thus, Maltese and English at least at University have distinct roles and serve different functions. Finally, these roles - Maltese on the spoken level and English on the written level - carry different prestige, demarcated as “high” and “low” (Crystal, 1999: 89). Over the years the written word has gained more and more prominence, since it is through writing that human consciousness achieves its fuller potentials (Ong, 1982: 14-15). In Malta, social mobility is directly linked to linguistic competence in English. In other words, Maltese speaking individuals cannot aspire to socially improve their lives without a good command of English.

## **1.6 Mapping my context**

In this chapter I tried to explore, describe and critically examine the generalities and specifics of the Maltese context that, similar to other contexts, “is emergent, variable, and highly elastic” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 309). I tried to identify those aspects I consider relevant to the foreign reader and more selectively, what I believe is pertinent to my research. Time and again it has been asserted that: “Words, utterances, actions, perceptions, and cognitions all depend on context for their intelligibility, substance, and understandings” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 297). I specifically selected four main routes to cover my context, “working it up, down and across” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004): geography and history, religion, education and language. No one aspect can be described singularly without any reference to the rest, hence the strong relationship and dependence of one on the other. My complex and interconnected evolving context has been considered as “interpretative resource” (Holstein and Gubrium 2004: 299) which acts as a backdrop as much as a foreground to my research project.

## **1.7 Inquiring my own practice: Two sets of research questions**

In my thesis I set out to explore the following main research question: *How can the initial training of Maltese literature teachers benefit from a reader-response approach?* Recently, the study of the reading act has found renewed and reinvigorating interest in the reader mainly emerging from reader-response theories. Prompted by this assumption, I would like to consider the possibility of translating and contextualising this empowering experience to Maltese literature secondary school initial teacher training. Various insights from reader-response guide the researcher through different stages, mainly planning, enacting and reflecting on the literature teacher training process during one particular study-unit. Moreover, the thesis documents the transition from reader to teacher of nineteen Maltese student-teachers trying to appropriate a reader-response approach to teaching literature in different local secondary schools.

When I had to choose my research area, I followed some of Daniel Schwarz (2008: 151-152) recommendations, mainly: identifying a subject that I feel “passionately committed” to, and keeping as a personal source of inspiration “the relationship of your topic to your teaching.” The latter, time and time again, proved to be a never ending source of inspiration. I concur with Jean McNiff’s (2002: 18) insight: “Life is a process of asking questions to reveal new potentialities.” Indeed, my research questions emerged as a result of the dialectical process of ‘literature informing practice’ and ‘practice being understood and interpreted in the light of literature’. Hence, I did not experience a hiatus between theory and practice; actually I felt that they were all the time mutually influencing and clarifying each other. Reader-response theories (Chapter 3), as well as literature on reflection (Chapter 4) and assessment for learning (Chapter 5), offered the necessary theoretical framework to couch my research. On the other hand, my life at University of Malta as a novice lecturer within the Faculty of Education responsible amongst other duties for pedagogy and the teaching-practice component for Maltese specialisation student-teachers, was the always refreshing spring from which I drew my inspiration. To these, one might add my love to write and experiment with different genres (*vide* Chapter 2).

Actually, it was through the vital and cyclical process of reflection that I managed to elaborate, edit, refine and clarify my research questions. In a sense, I lived through the process of ‘framing’ and ‘reframing’ my research problem (Schön, 1983, 1987), with time raising more questions than answers. This reflective process gained more momentum between the first and second cycle, when I began to place my initial questions within the broader context of reader-response theories, reflection and assessment for learning. Thus, a “nexus of issues” (Andrews, 2003: 15) was established, as exemplified in my main research question. Later, the main research question developed in two different strands, namely: (i) my identity as a novice lecturer and researcher (Table 1.1); and (ii) the induction into a reader-response approach to teaching Maltese literature of two groups of student-teachers (Table 1.2).

**Table 1.1: My personal research questions**

Questions related to myself as a lecturer, researcher and writer	Chapter/s
A. How can I improve my practice as a lecturer and pedagogue of Maltese literature at secondary schools?	Chapter 8 Chapter 11
B. What skills did I need to develop as a researcher in order to be able to inquire my own practice?	Chapter 7 Chapter 8
C. What role can reader-response theories have in elaborating a philosophy about reading, the reader and literary meaning, but which at the same time act as interpretative lens through which I conceptualise and understand both the local situation and scenario of teaching literature at secondary school, as well as the transactional relationship between lecturer and student-teachers?	Chapter 3 Chapter 8 Chapter 9
D. To what extent and in what ways can insights from reflective practice effect, change and improve my practice?	Chapter 4 Chapter 10
E. How can I impact my student-teachers' learning experiences by shifting attention from learning assessed in a summative way, to assessment for learning? What does it entail to put into place a system of assessment for learning at a higher education institution which has no such tradition?	Chapter 5 Chapter 10
F. How could I present knowledge in a thesis in such a way as being experimental, engaging, creative to write and stimulating to read? Can expository writing marry creative exposition?	Chapter 1 Chapter 3 Intermezzo I + II Chapter 8

\* Main question shaded in grey; the rest are the supporting or subsidiary questions

**Table 1.2: Set of questions related to student-teachers**

Questions related to student-teachers as learners becoming professionals	Chapter/s
A. How does one become an effective teacher of Maltese literature at secondary school?	Chapter 9 Chapter 10
B. To what extent does a reader-response ideology (theories, view-points, insights, etc) create an awareness of how to read the past and create possible future trajectories for teaching Maltese literature at secondary school?	Chapter 3 Chapter 10
C. What role does critically reflecting on the personal reading history or biography have on student-teachers' current beliefs and aspirations, as they embark on the journey to become teachers of Maltese literature?	Chapter 9
D. How do student-teachers conceptualise the identity of their own subject?	Chapter 9
E. What images of literature teachers do student-teachers bring to their classrooms? How do these experiences influence and impact their own practice?	Chapter 9
F. How and to what effect do student-teachers appropriate and try to contextualise a reader-response approach to teaching Maltese literature during their six week field experience? How do student-teachers experience and live through the congruence or disjuncture between literature pedagogy at university and classroom practice? What factors in their school and classroom context do they encounter which facilitate or impede the smooth and lasting appropriation of a reader-response stance to the teaching of Maltese literature at secondary school? How do student-teachers gauge and describe their own success or disappointments as teachers of Maltese literature?	Chapter 10
G. How do student-teachers receive the challenge of participating in a new assessment system that requires them to become responsible autonomous learners as well as actively engage in new forms of assessment such as peer-assessment and designing a portfolio to document their professional journey?	Chapter 10

\* Main question shaded in grey; the rest are the supporting or subsidiary questions

This dual approach is more intertwined than it *prima facie* seems, for they mutually influenced each other throughout the academic year. Furthermore, within this perspective, reader-response is viewed more than just an enabling literary theory. In my view, reader-response theories have an important role to play in teaching Maltese literature. While I was personally convinced of the relevance of reader-response theories, I wanted to explore whether such theories could illustrate a protocol for initial teacher training and whether reader-response theories could be considered as a new paradigm for teaching Maltese literature.

While it may be highly debatable to claim that the current state of teaching literature at secondary school in Malta is in a state of crisis, it would be more realistic and prudent to define the present state of affairs as warranting a sustained and research-based process of change. I feel reader-response theories, with their renewed emphasis on the reader, are an ideal partner in the promotion of children or reader-centred pedagogy in the local scene. From the scrutiny of individuals' reading habits to the categorical importance of the transactional act, from rigorous principles of text selection to more humanistic and experienced-based approaches to aesthetic reading, from the redefinition of the teachers' role to more advanced considerations such as standards-based teaching, accountability, assessment and progression in the Maltese literature classroom, all these and similar critical issues find meaning in insights by reader-response theorists or in innumerable documented experiences of pedagogues and teachers inspired by these sensibilities. Furthermore, I contend that teacher training, to be truly effective, needs to reflect and embody the same guiding principles and pedagogy adopted in literature secondary school classrooms. Thus, initial teacher training inspired by reader-response theories acts as a mirror or serves as a living model of what is to be transplanted in secondary schools by prospective teachers of literature.

## **1.8 An overview of the thesis**

In the following chapter I will make the case for a different kind of writing than just expository writing (Chapter 2). Then, I proceed with the discussion of reader-

response theories (Chapter 3) in the form of an interview, the role of reflection in educational courses (Chapter 4), and the innovative idea, at least in my institution, of assessment for learning (Chapter 5). These chapters will be followed by Part II that explains and elucidates my own particular way of thinking about methodology and methods in the field. Finally, in Part III I narrate my own experiences as a pedagogue (Chapter 8), and then present the analysis and discussion of the data around six broad themes that relate to conception of reader-response: reading history; the role of beliefs in teaching literature; subject's identity; images of a teacher of literature; teaching practice and assessment for learning (Chapters 9 and 10). These concluding three chapters and themes specifically and intricately document the trajectories taken by nineteen student-teachers in their journey in becoming teachers of Maltese literature by appropriating a reader-response stance to teaching of Maltese literature at secondary school, which is in sharp contrast to the text-bound culture prevalent in most secondary schools.

## CHAPTER 2

### The PhD thesis as a multi-genre writing

#### 2.1 The PhD as a genre

Writing pedagogy has recently tended to focus on either the ‘process of writing’ or the ‘product of writing,’ known also as genre (Maybin, 1994: 186-194). In turn, process writing, “a highly intricate dynamic and constantly fluctuating interplay of activities” (White and Arndt, 1991, 3), has drawn attention to the mechanics of writing, subdividing the writing act in stages or interrelated phases – generating ideas, drafting, focusing, structuring, re-viewing, evaluating – and focusing the awareness of the writer on different complementary components such as of the importance of the audience and voice. On the other hand, pedagogues such as John Moss (1998: 135) emphasise “the importance of giving pupils experience of writing in a range of genres.” Janet Maybin (1994: 186) concurs in “making the genres explicit and showing how to write them” since this will “enable pupils to understand more fully how knowledge is constructed in different academic disciplines.” Like when faced with all ‘false dichotomous thinking’ (LaBoskey, 1998), similar to Louise Rosenblatt’s insight on and stance towards literary theory (*vide* Booth, 1995: viii-ix; Chapter 3), my approach will take a balanced view; an approach that is more than a synthesis of divergent view/s, rather than a question of either/or.

##### 2.1.1 The essay

In Malta, the essay features in many exam contexts at secondary school and especially in national examination settings such as the 16+ exam, and the local MATSEC ones. While the essay’s infiltration can never be understated, few ever think about the gross limitations and wash-back effect of the essay upon the whole system of teaching and learning where literature is concerned. I unequivocally share Robert Protherough’s (1986: 50) preoccupation, that the strongest limitation of the



essay, is that it “seems to posit a fixed and retrospective view of a text, not a tentative, developing one.”

### **2.1.2 The essay mutating into a thesis**

Towards the end of formal education, the essay form takes precedence over all other forms. Indeed, the essay can be considered as the icon of schooled literacy, not only of the long revered history and standing, but also for the way it mutates in post-formal education to suit a range of supposedly ever increasing requirements, at Sixth Form and at University, without ever losing its shine. Some of the formal features of this kind of academic writing are: the strong relationship with the question as well as an exploration of personal opinion about the topic; a piece of writing with logical structure and a preference for argumentation; flexibility of content; and finally, proper use of grammar and stylistic devices to persuade the reader about the writer's competence. The ‘essay,’ develops in length and with time becomes an assignment, then a long essay, after that a dissertation, a paper, and later on a thesis and maybe also a book. (About the relationship between a dissertation and a book in its conception, reception and utility *vide* Olson and Drew, 1998) This follows elegantly the idea that “a new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one” (Todorov, 1990: 15), in this case a linguistic augmentation of sorts. The essay and its mutations, like other genres, “sediment into forms so expected that readers are surprised or even uncooperative if a standard perception of the situation is not met by an utterance of the expected form” (Bazerman, 1994: 82). No wonder that one can find books specifically dedicated to the writing of the essay in general (*vide* McClain and Roth, 1998) and in language studies in particular (*vide* Myers, 2002).

Anis Bawarshi (2000: 335) summed up the new interest in the analysis and understanding of genre as bringing about “a dramatic reconceptualisation of genre and its role in the production and interpretation of texts and culture.” However, the thesis as rather untouched or hardly scrutinised. Indeed, it is very “ironic” that the thesis as a genre is “under-theorised, under-studied, and under-taught text” (Paré, Starke-Meyerring and McAlpine, 2008: 1) as well as being “strange” and

“problematic” (Duke and Beck, 1999: 32). To put it differently: “research writing is disrespected and omnipresent, trite and vital, central to modern academic discourse, yet a part of our duties as teachers of writing that we seldom discuss” (Davis and Shadle, 2000: 417). The thesis not only can be conceived as both the “ultimate student paper” and “the first contribution to a discipline”, but also as “a multi-genre, responding to multiple exigencies, functioning in multiple rhetorical situations, addressing multiple readers” (Paré, Starke-Meyerring and McAlpine, 2008: 1-2). However, the latter two functions especially “in its traditional format does not adequately serve either purpose” (Duke and Beck, 1999: 31). The doctoral thesis, as a genre communicates within the society where it is operative through its “institutionalization” (Todorov, 1990: 19), for indeed, “it is because genres exist in an institution that they function as ‘horizons of expectations’ for readers and as ‘models of writing’ for writers” (Todorov, 1990: 18).

Among the coded characteristics of a dissertation one finds: a well-argued subject; a strong awareness of audience usually the tutor/professor, rather than peers; a rarefied use of language with over use of passive voice, pervasive use of technical terminology and lengthy footnotes; a particular sequence ranging from a literature review, methodological concerns, to presentation of the data, some form of analysis and conclusion. These have become a blue-print for theses around the world. All these characteristics pertain to a particular, maybe archaic, view of the thesis as an institutionalised genre that is very much promulgated in a symbiotic genre: books on how to produce such a thesis (*vide* Evans and Gruba, 2003; Tietelbaum, 2003; Oliver, 2008).

## **2.2 Reborn from the ashes: The new or alternative thesis**

Robert Davis and Mark Shadle (2000: 418) view a move away from modernist ideals such as “expertise, detachment, and certainty, and towards a new valuation of uncertainty, passionate exploration, and mystery.” Part of the new rhetoric requires that prospective writers master and “compose within a large range of strategies, genres and media,” to work so to say against the grain, by deconstructing and

reworking long standing binary opposites, such as “academic and expressive writing; competing canons; fiction and nonfiction; high, pop, and folk culture; and the methods and jargons of different fields” (Davis and Shadle, 2000: 418). Within this paradigm: “Research becomes seeking as a mode of being” (Davis and Shadle, 2000: 422). This paradigm tallies very much with the sense of personal quest as a method of self-discovery and self-improvement, as well as being an existential condition as a human and as a researcher (*vide* Part 2).

Within a post-modern condition, boundaries between disciplines are continuously being blurred, merged and reinvented. Postmodernist awareness has evolved towards an ethnographic writing genre that “has been blurred, enlarged, and altered with researchers writing in different formats for a variety of audiences” (Richardson and Adams St. Pierre, 2005: 962). The thesis as a genre cannot remain immune from such an extensive and pervasive climate. “Alternative research writing inscribes an inclusive cross-disciplinary academy, which mixes the personal and the public and values the imagination as much as the intellect” (Davis and Shadle, 2000: 422). Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles (2001: 10) claim that: “Arts-informed research brings together the systematic and rigorous qualities of scientific inquiry with the artistic and imaginative qualities of the arts.” The critical collection of papers in refereed journals targeting different audiences is one of the new thesis formats that have already been accepted in different institutions (*vide* Duke and Beck, 1999: 34).

### **2.2.1 Alternative forms of data**

Alternative forms of data representation, refers to “forms whose limits differ from those imposed by propositional discourse and number” (Eisner, 1997: 5). Elliott Eisner (1997) lists: stories, pictures, diagrams, demonstrations, still photography, parody, collage, pastiche, theatre, caricatures, journals, narratives, and multimedia resources. To these one might add: letters, soliloquy, collage, pastiche, allegory, parody, satire, autobiography, farce, aphorism, caricature, drama, fable, stream of consciousness... more often than not, genres or writing techniques derived from

modern literature or philosophy. On a more experimental note, one might add: film and video, dance, music and multimedia installations (Cole and Knowles, 2001: 10).

To name just three strong modern examples: Ludwig Wittgenstein's (2001) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is written in ever descending points according to a method adored by linguists much like fragments from a papyrus or classical literature; Friedrich Nietzsche's (1978) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All* is actually a series of reflections held together by a thin line of a parable or novel-like account; and Jacques Derrida's (1986) *Glas*, that looks more like a scrapbook or notebook, written in two columns with different fonts, than the conventional book Westerners are so accustomed to.

### **2.2.2 Poetry and the novel in research**

Poetry too can be an effective mode of expression. I share James Clifford's (1986: 25-26) defence of poetry as a mode of presenting data: "to recognise the poetic dimensions of ethnography does not require that one give up facts and accurate accounting for the supposed free play of poetry... it can be historical, precise, objective." Poetry resides in everyday language and its creative potentials are at the disposal of everyone. Denotative language is challenged by the personal and connotative use of a word. Linguistic play is at the heart of everyday language use.

The novel is already an acceptable format in some faculties or departments (Duke and Beck, 1999: 33). The novel can be an example of the evolving relationship and 'contamination' between social scientific writing and literary writing (Richardson and Adams St. Pierre, 2005: 959).

"Genre translation" can be another technique when presenting and analysing data; for example using snippets from an interview to create a poem synthesising the highlights of the topic. Indeed this technique is one of the "generative procedures for developing language activities" that is suggested in reader-response activities, what Alan Duff and Alan Maley (1990: 161) dubbed as "media transfer."

### **2.2.3 The layered text**

The “layered text” is “a postmodern reporting technique” (Ronai, 1995: 396) that “reflects the structure of consciousness” (Ronai, 2002: 107); presenting different accounts of the ‘same’ story. In printing, the end result is the product of four or even at times more passages of different colours.

Reading a layered text, readers are expected to “fill in the spaces and construct an interpretation of the writer’s narrative” and in doing so, “the readers reconstruct the subject, thus projecting more of themselves into it” (Ronai, 1995: 396). This opens a creative space for the researcher as writer, as well as for the reader who is invited to bring new insights to knowledge production and dissemination. As perception evolves, so does the apprehension of a picture emerge. The possibly ever greater clarity or refinement is very much in line with Roman Ingarden’s idea of “concretization” that can be defined as “the activity by which the text is put together in reading which leads to the reader’s cognition of it as a meaningful experience” (Valdés, 1993: 527). Ingarden’s concept was later developed by Wolfgang Iser (1980: 118-134) to include the idea of “consistency-building”, that is the unity that develops as the interaction between the text (or better still, selections or discrete groupings from the texts) and the reader, as s/he makes sense as progressing with the text, in order to grasp or construct an understanding or a meaning of that text.

## **2.3 The virtues of alternative forms of data representation**

Alternative forms of data representation have a number of advantages. Hypothetically, alternative forms of data facilitate the comprehension process in a creative way. Alternative forms of data representation can supply the author and reader with a healthy dose of “productive ambiguity” that is “the material presented is more evocative than denotative, and in its evocation, it generates insight and invites attention to complexity” (Eisner, 1997: 8). The latter tenet for the use of alternative data representation is very much similar to Umberto Eco’s (1989) ‘open texts’ that offer an unlimited number of textual possibilities of fruition.

### **2.3.1 Two further justifications for alternative forms of data representation: Writing pedagogy and Multi-genre approach**

Furthermore, alternative forms of data representation can find another justification in writing pedagogy. The use of multi-genre writing has been around in methodology circles for years, and “has become a powerful complement to traditional research papers” (Grierson, 1999: 51). The multi-genre concept has been hailed as having “the potential to become a major force in developing writing ability and writing enthusiasm” by offering “a seemingly boundless array of options” (LeNoir, 2002: 99). Indeed, just juxtaposing widely disparate kinds of texts or genres together, does not equate the final product with multi-genre writing; an essential ingredient needs to be present, that of ‘unity of message and scope’ that reflects the richness of experience (Romano, 2000). Thus, the reader of a multi-genre text, as well as multi-genre thesis based on alternative forms of data, requires a sense of unity that will guide the reading from beginning to end.

This writing pedagogy innovation finds resonance in what James Clifford (1986: 3) has termed as “literary” approaches in the human sciences, where the researcher shows a more than keen interest in literary theory and its relation to practice, thus blurring the boundaries between art and science. Indeed, “ethnographers have often been called novelists manqué [missed], ...the notion literary procedures pervade any work of cultural representation is a recent idea in the discipline” (Clifford, 1986: 4). No ethnographer can escape literary processes; keeping the factual from the rhetorical apart is difficult to attain (Clifford, 1986: 4). The multi-genre writer presents a vision that “determines the organisational structure of the paper” (Grierson, 1999: 51) in contemporary times.

### **2.4 Some limitation of the new thesis or alternative forms of data representation**

Alternative forms of research writing can be taken to another level by including web sites and other complimentary electronic avenues such as digital video sharing. These in turn “enact a process of intertextual linking that erases the boundaries

between texts, and between author and audience... gather material from many sources and often inspire readers to contribute more, or to do related work” (Davies and Shadle, 2000: 432). Indeed, one personal limitation was my lack of domestication with these electronic possibilities. Related to my personal limitation was a problem highlighted by Eisner (1997) that is: the pressing practical need to publish and share in a conventional way what we have experienced, intuited, grasped and maybe start to believe in. To date, alternative forms of representations especially digital ones, are at the borders of what is the acceptable.

However aware of such merits of alternative forms of data representation, and conscious of the personal and institutional limitations, I cannot but agree with Nell Duke and Sarah Beck’s (1999: 35) appeal, that is, it is high time for the field of education to consider alternative formats “in a comprehensive and serious way.” I consider my thesis is a minor contribution for the paradigmatic change that I envision for the field of educational studies in Higher Education.

## **2.5 My exploration or adventure**

At this stage of my personal development, I am already overwhelmed by the possibilities that alternative forms of data representation and multi-genre writing have to offer to the researcher/ethnographer and writer in me. On one hand, in this thesis I do present material in a conventional expository way; whole chapters are written in this way. I am very much aware of what is conventionally acceptable as a PhD thesis. But then, like Maldon salt on a traditional roast leg of pork, I sprinkle along my writing parts or sections and intermezzo pieces that draw heavily on the latest insights as explained above, and celebrate a new more audacious form of research writing. I find the pure creative aspect of this latter possibility as the place where I can be more authentic, more free and thus liberating, hopefully, the readers from the shackles of continuous critical reading and lead him/her to a “secondary world” (Tolkien, 1938/1964) that is enjoyable and instructive.

I find that throughout my thesis I have ventured mostly in two modes of creative writing: manipulating an established form and juxtaposition or layered text writing. I tended to experiment with layered-text to better evidence the tension between the official and the personal, such as in the beginning of the thesis when I was positioning myself within Maltese culture (*vide* Chapter 1) or when I wrote on top of each other two different points of view such as mine and that of my student-teachers in vignette format (Chapter 9). I found that by writing a layered-text on the same reality, the reader will be challenged to either merge together the different points of view, take sides or possibly alienate oneself completely from the whole narrative.

Another example is haiku and senryu genres which I consider as a spiritual writing very much revered in Japan. I experiment with these genres (*vide* Intermezzo I), since poetry is very important to me. To date I have written poetry mainly in Maltese and this was a first for me, to write (rather than translate) poetry in English (Portelli, 2008).

I find the idea of a template (or genre type) rather ingenious to use (or abuse?). I use the famous Wallace Stevens' (1923/1984: 92-95) poem 'Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird' in an extended researched reflection of thirteen ways of looking at becoming (*vide* Intermezzo II). I specifically chose to name both pieces as 'Intermezzo,' drawing from music while being central they act as a gel between the remaining chapters.

Hence, I might conclude that rather than write a complete avant-garde piece of research by embracing *in toto* and rather uncritically the possibilities of alternative forms or research writing, I choose to critically and creatively engage sparingly but wholeheartedly with some of the new modes and potentialities at the modern researchers' disposition.



## CHAPTER 3

### Reader-response criticism: An interview for the perplexed

#### 3.1 Preamble to an interview and a table

In Chapter 2 I made a case for a multi-genre approach to thesis writing. To demonstrate the potential of such an approach, in this chapter I intend to critically present an overview of reader-response theory in the form of an interview, and a synthesis of a number of specific studies on becoming teachers of literature as a table.

This hypothetical interview takes place between two lecturers. The interviewer is the product of a literary education very ingrained with text-bound forms of literary reading. The interviewer, while knowledgeable about reader-response theories and approaches to teaching literature, is very sceptical about the whole enterprise. On the other hand, the interviewee is a young lecturer, like myself, with a passion for reader-response. Having conducted research at postgraduate level using a wide spectrum of reader-response theories, he considers himself as a passionate connoisseur of the field. The interview format was specifically selected for its broad range of advantages, some of which are: it can provide a wealth of information about a subject or topic; is a flexible and adaptable method to explore the particular contexts, spectrum of emotions and personal meanings underpinning individual stories; answers can be clarified and delved in depth; and finally, there is a space for creative interaction between the interviewee and interviewer, rather informal in style without, hopefully, being less informative or researched (for a further discussion of interview's advantages *vide* Arksey and Knight, 1999: 32-42).

Towards the end of this chapter, some of the data regarding specific studies on becoming teachers of literature is presented in a long table, another example of a non-canonical genre. I chose this model for the potential of a table to present and

organise a summary of complex and scattered information from a number of studies, in a simple, logical and comparative way.

### **3.1.1 Solid foundations... Malta's oldest poem**

Malta's oldest known poem, 'Cantilena' by Peter Caxaro (Wettinger and Fsadni, 1968), was written circa 1470. In Caxaro's poem, the poet acknowledges that his intention was to build a relationship on solid rock and only later on found that he was actually building on sand. This strong image led me to understand better the role of 'foundations' and to introduce my research's underpinnings, especially in this and the subsequent two chapters. No wonder one suggestion often given to novice-researchers reads: "It is good practice to draw attention to relevant work reported in the literature which provides the perceived audience with a contextual context for the new work" (British Educational Research Association, 2000: 5).

### **3.1.2 Literature review as a sympathetic critique**

It is common parlance in Malta that criticism can be one of two kinds: destructive or constructive. I try to avoid as much as possible a bipolar way of thinking, and embrace instead a position that I feel particularly attuned with. While I acknowledge the variety of criticisms as a wealth in itself, lately I have come to feel more affinity with 'sympathetic criticism' for its method and scope, as well as my personal disposition towards the reading/critical act. Draper (2000: 24) suggests a kind of "awareness" that generates "both judgement and understanding, laughter and compassion," a kind of criticism that is "balanced by sympathy, and sympathy modified by a cooler quality of intellectual detachment." In a certain sense, it is a kind of playful "transaction" (Rosenblatt, 1965/1995) with these texts, a relationship that is both involved and detached at the same time.

### **3.2 Reader-response theories: An interview for the perplexed**

#### **3.2.1 A personal beginning**

**How did you arrive at reader-response theories? Were there any particular incidents that led you towards a reader-response approach to literature reading/teaching?**

While being arcane to many, literary theory has always fascinated me. It provides possible interpretive keys to a myriad of activities and perspectives during and after the reading event, many of which are probably hidden to the reader her/himself. Indeed, the only thing I was certain of when deciding to further my studies was that I had a strong ‘desire’ to familiarise myself with ‘Theory’.

While it is very hard to delimit the borders and contours of theory, following Jonathan Culler’s (1997: 1-17) discerning analysis, one might parenthetically claim that it involves: speculative practice; putting forward an explanation that should involve a certain level of complexity rather than being obvious, common-sense or natural; be relevant to other areas

beyond the original field (such as philosophical works being pertinent to literary studies); makes people think differently about a subject; and finally, be broad in nature, rather difficult to learn and practice since it seems somewhat endless in scope in such a way as one can never claim one knows it all.

Jacques Lacan’s (2006) interpretation of desire is illuminating. Desire, so claims Lacan, is always a reflection of something lacking and insatiable, essentially not present, a longing for something missing, that eventually can never totally be quenched or attained. In my case, what was missing, the object of my desire, was contemporary literary theory.

To partially satisfy my thirst for literary theory, I bought two guides (Culler, 1997; Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 1997) that helped me set the first steps in the complex terrain of contemporary literary theory. The sheer variety of recent literary theories with each distinctive body of interests, specialised discourses, particular

principles and methods, and key theorists makes one wonder... Which tentatively explains one's tensions? Which provides the necessary specialised language to describe one's anxieties? Which supplies a variety of possible solutions to the immediate existential problems? Which contains a viable hypothesis that clarifies or enriches one's World view?

### **How did you choose one?**

Maybe it was because at that time I was a secondary school teacher trying to teach literature and reading to disengaged classes, but from the array of movements and approaches I particularly and immediately felt 'attracted' to reader-response criticism. Had I to describe it, it would be very much like the title of one of Goethe's novels, *Elective Affinities* (1809/1999). As Charlotte, one of the characters explains, "Affinities are only really interesting when they bring about separations" (Goethe, 1809/1999: 32). This 'separation' was not out of lack of interest or competence, or a predetermined choice, but rather as Captain, another character in the

novel elucidates: "it really does seem as though one relationship was preferred to another and a choice made for one over the other (Goethe, 1809/1999: 33).

Ideas and insights start to grasp one's imagination and construe a whole new existence or World view. At first it is fluid and murky and only later it starts to build consistency, until it reaches a critical mass... and one day one wakes up finding oneself expounding and defending one (or multitude) of voice/s.

### **3.2.2 What's in a name?**

#### **So what was special with reader-response when compared to other theoretical schools and movements?**

It provided me with the theoretical framework and discourse to begin to understand the different critical events that were taking place in my classroom. In other words, it matched my own deductions about my own experience and supplemented further insights that, in turn, gave deeper meaning to my actions and reflections.

**‘Reader-response theories’ and  
‘reader-oriented theories’... Are  
they one and the same thing?**

The theories revolving around the reader and reading act owe their name to: Jane Tompkins (1980) ‘Reader-Response Criticism,’ Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (1980) ‘Reader or Audience-oriented Criticism.’ The emphasis on the reader is indicative of the re-orientation of emphasis when compared to previous theories. The inclusion of ‘audience’ (*vide* Blau, 1990; Bennett, 1997) implicates a ‘spectator’s role’ (*vide* Benton, 2000), a performance, be it a play, a poetry recital, or a literary evening. However, both reader and audience redirect to central position the reading event (as against the ‘text’ or the ‘author’), the time when a text is given life. Moreover, my interpretation of the hyphen between reader and response is that they are united, one cannot have one without the other.

**Within this context, what would be  
a plausible definition of ‘response’?  
Is it something akin to the  
behaviourists’ ‘stimulus-response’?  
Or is it something different?**

Reader-response critics and teachers of literature alike, are very much aware of the importance ‘response’ has in their daily enterprises. To take one instance as an example, suffice to say that how one thinks about the organisation of literature within a syllabus reflects one’s underlining understanding of response. At the same time, ‘response’ “is an elusive concept, hard to define and difficult to assess” (Probst, 2003: 815). However, I am not disheartened...

I refer to Alan Purves and Victoria Rippere’s (1968: xiii) definition, in my opinion never surpassed, in the sense that it is all comprising and answers exactly your query...

Aware that it is not quite the same as what psychologists call response to a stimulus, teachers realize that response to literature is mental, emotional, intellectual, sensory, physical. It encompasses the cognitive, affective, perceptual, and psychomotor activities that the reader of a poem, a story, or a novel performs as he reads or after he has read.

This definition has stood the test of time, more than forty years!

In a way, I compare response to the modes of expression and possibilities that have been offered by an updated version of intelligence, that by Howard Gardner (1983). Nearly instinctively many would consider response to literature as involving oral or written response, corresponding to Gardner's 'Linguistic Intelligence'. However, Purves and Rippere's (1968) definition, entertains other possibilities that match Gardner's other Multiple Intelligences. For example: Spatial Intelligence and Bodily-Kinaesthetic Intelligence (such as when students dramatise a text); Logical-Mathematical Intelligence (such as when students are asked to count characters, words, sequence events etc); Musical Intelligence (such as when students have to match a piece of music to the rhythm or tone of a text); and Personal Intelligence (such as when students discover things about themselves during and after reading a text especially when the empathise with a character or experience).

In one of his later works, Howard Gardner (2006) considers without actually claiming that it is a fully

fledged one, the possibility of another form of intelligence, 'Existential Intelligence'. Manifestations of this 'intelligence' are when one ponders about the bigger questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where is 'here'? What does it mean to live or die? What is time?... and aren't these questions the very stuff of literature? When students read literature they meet the bigger questions, they read how authors have tried to solve the puzzle, and hopefully they become uplifted by a particular text giving him/her another dimension. Therefore, response involves more than just written or spoken words to a text... it engages the whole person.

### **3.2.3 Orienting oneself round reader-response**

#### **Can you explain a bit how one can begin to understand reader-response theories?**

A good place to better appreciate the principles, applications and relevance of reader-response theories is by:

(i) first, tentatively trying to comprehend the established theoretical paradigm prevalent in most

British and American Universities, namely, New Criticism;

(ii) then, trace the historical development of reader-response from its ‘unacknowledged’ roots in Louise Rosenblatt’s work in the late 1930s, to the major anthologies that document its potential published in 1980, prevalent and immediate applications and comprehend their limitations;

(iii) and finally, map down the different currents and orientations within reader-response according to the relative importance particular theorists attribute to the reader in the reading act.

### **3.2.4 New Criticism**

**So to check if I understand well...  
reader-response criticism was  
(and/or is) a reaction to New  
Criticism?**

Once upon a time there was New Criticism... Or at least so the story goes in many reconstructions of reader-response (*vide* Rabinowitz, 1995: 375). For some, reader-response has been claimed to be a reaction to the minute detail that can go into reading particular texts; a sort

of close reading or as the French prefer to call it *explication de text*. New Critics emphasised one way of reading a text, devoid of the emotions and passions readers feel as they are reading; reading became like performing an autopsy on a corpse. Indeed, while embracing disparate views and orientations, reader-response theorists seem to agree on one thing: their opposition, “hostility” (Rabinowitz, 1995: 375) or even antipathy for text-oriented close reading as promulgated by Formalist theorists and their American counterparts, New Critics.

As I like to put it: If reader-response theorists don’t have a common mission, at least they have a common enemy that unites them in purpose. Or as Elizabeth Freund (1987: 10): “[c]rudely summarised, the point of departure in each story is always a dissatisfaction with formalist principles...”

**What was this New Criticism  
‘monster’? Many children and  
pupils learnt literature in that way.  
So many teachers, to this day, teach**

**according to its principles! What is so ‘wrong’ with it?**

New Criticism was a movement in literary theory that developed in the 1920s-30s and peaked in the 1940s-50s. As a goal, New Critics wanted to steer criticism away from impressionism and subjectivity, toward the more reassuring and at their time modern harbours of science... contributing to a deeper and more objective textual analysis. No wonder that René Wellek and Austin Warren (1949/1986) in their study on *Theory of Literature* dichotomised the study of literature in the following methods and approaches:

- *Extrinsic* (biography, psychology, society, ideas and the other arts); and
- *Intrinsic* (euphony, rhythm, metre, style, stylistics, image, metaphor, symbol, myth, narrative fiction, literary genres, evaluation and literary history).

New Critics have an innate and strong predilection to the latter approach.

**What were the tenets of New Criticism?**

For New Critics, literature is a special kind of language, deviating from normal speech while having its own particular kind of grammar, creating its own architecture or structure, and having its own organic unity that cannot be reduced to its individual components, but rather understood as a whole.

Indeed, the preferred metaphor for a New Critic would be that of ‘literature is a machine.’ The object of study of literature is literature in itself, that is as an autonomous and self-sufficient organisation of words. Therefore, the predilection of literary terminology such as irony, tension, symbol and image.

Key texts important for New Critics to disseminate their thoughts are: *Practical Criticism* by I. A. Richards (1929/2004), William Empson’s (1930/1949) *Seven Types of Ambiguities*, and the two influential American textbooks and anthologies *Understanding Poetry* (1938/1950) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943/1979) by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.



To a certain extent, New Criticism was the right method at the right time (Graff, 2007). Universities were becoming frequented by an ever greater number of students from diverse social backgrounds. Large classes registering for literature studies required a teaching method that was demonstrable, efficient, that could be reproduced, easy to be learnt, support the canon, with basic terminology, and a strong belief in literature as the art and science of the word in the hands of distinguished authors (mainly white middle-aged men). Decades later, New Criticism's strong points became its very own weaknesses, as evidenced in works of reader-response theorists.

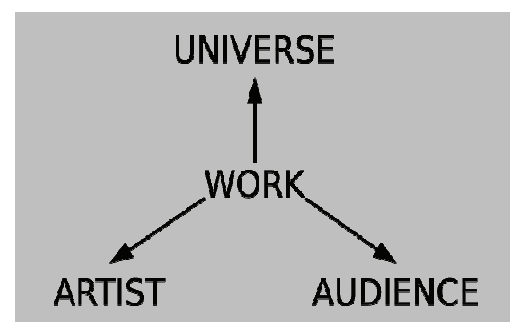
**That sounds like a rather long digression...**

I believe that one needs to understand the past to better grasp the present, or as Jürgen Habermas (1994: 55-72) paradoxically explained in an interview, 'The past as future.'

When M. H. Abrams as early as 1955 had to identify the fundamental ingredients that blend and give

meaning to different orientations of literary theory and criticism, he rightly pinpointed the author, the reader or audience, the universe and the text as the four cardinal points of the 'literary' compass. While Abrams (1989b: 3) is referring to poetry, the same might stand for literature in general: "A *poem* is produced by a *poet*, is related in its subject matter to the *universe* of human beings, things and events, and is addressed to, or made available to an *audience* or hearers or readers." The four elements do not carry equal importance at the same time during the reading event. These four cardinal points of the literary compass, were represented as in Table 3.1 by Abrams (1958: 3) himself. In Table 3.1 the text is strategically placed at the centre and the other three revolve around it, drawing and gaining meaning from it.

**Table 3.1: The literary compass points**



I reckon this is not so much as an oversight, but rather a depiction of Abrams' predisposition or "implicit presupposition" (Freund, 1987: 2) – or may I bluntly assume, 'prejudice'? – and the prevalent belief of his times. This is especially so in the rather melancholic style Abrams (1989a: 269) depicts the transition or in Kuhn's (1962/1996) terminology "paradigm shift", that was taking place in front of his eyes: "The Age of Criticism, which reached its zenith in the mid-decades of this century, has given way to the Age of Reading..." and the author is "the first casualty in the literary transaction" (Abrams, 1989a: 270). Indeed, "has given way" not without a battle, not without injuries and casualties, not without personal sacrifices of individuals who had to think and move against the grain.

### **But that was fifty years ago...**

An updated and in a way modified version of the four key terms was carried out by Rob Pope (2002: 76–77), who elucidates and modernises the understanding of these categories:

- *texts* refer to both products and processes;
- *authors* can also be producers, artists, directors and the like;
- *audience* includes receivers, readers, viewers; and finally
- worlds rather than *world*.

This update demonstrates how relevant and still pertinent these categories are in thinking about literature... one might start to doubt if one can think outside these points of references.

### **But did New Criticism fade away?**

However, that's not the end of New Criticism. Its principles, methods and lure, still influence the current way of conceptualising the teaching of literature, years after the supposed demise of New Criticism. Notwithstanding the effort of many teachers and lecturers to challenge the *status quo*, one can still find unfortunate situations where close reading is still practiced, with variable emphasis and effects, especially in exam papers.

While there are a number of factors contributing to this state of affairs,

one strong reason may be attributed to how literature is taught at university. This influence lingers on because of the perceived strengths that made it popular in the first place: giving the English professoriate a particular identity and project by virtue of its distinct analytical method (Graff, 2007). And this story ends with New Criticism becoming ‘old’...

### **3.2.5 Precursors and basic tenets of reader-response**

**Therefore, reader-response theory did not develop just as a reaction to New Criticism or out of nothing...**

**Where there any precursors?**

Judith Freud (1987: 23-39) identified I. A. Richards as the precursor of reader-response theorists, for having paid attention to literary judgments of real people. However, I am not that convinced of this single handed revolution. And I find my justification in Freund’s (1980) and Tompkins’s (1980) own words... albeit their small print, that is in their footnotes.

Freund (1987: 158) rather apologetically identified Louise Rosenblatt and Walter Slatoff “whose valuable and interesting contributions have been excluded from the categories of this survey.” She herself acknowledges that “the list of omissions is embarrassingly long” (Freund, 1987: 158). Another apology comes from Jane Tompkins (1980), who identified Louise Rosenblatt, again with Walter Slatoff, as one of the omissions that seem the most significant. Interesting is her justification: “Louise Rosenblatt deserves to be recognized as **the first** among present generation of critics in this country [United States] to describe empirically the way the reader’s reactions to a poem are responsible for any subsequent interpretation of it. Her works, and later the work of Walter Slatoff (1970), raise issues central to the debates that have arisen since” (Tompkins, 1980: xxvi, my emphasis). Alas, the devil is in the small print, not once but twice! And she was left out from a nearly all male selection.

**Are there different ways of going around reader-response? What is your favorite?**

Reader-response was aptly described as “neither united by a common methodology nor directed towards a common goal” and assigned the curious title of a “motley band” (Rabinowitz, 1995: 375-376). Therefore, it stands to reason that there are different entry points to reader-response.

The most common is the historical overview of reader-response theories. Such for example are the invaluable introductions to the three major reader-response anthologies (Tompkins, 1980b: ix-xxvi; Suleiman, 1980: 3-45; Bennett, 1995b: 1-19).

Related to the historical perspective is the description and critical assessment of individual reader-response theorists. This kind of methodology is embraced by Freund (1987) in her monograph focused on the seminal contribution of Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser, respectively.

Then there are at least two other ways of ‘reading’ reader-response theories. Richard Beach (1993) in his survey of reader-response theories with special reference to teachers’ concerns, tried to explain the text/reader transaction, which is at the very heart of all reader-response theories, by proposing five theoretical perspectives on response: textual theories, experiential theories, psychological theories, social theories and cultural theories. These perspectives “ultimately intersect and overlap” (Beach, 1993: 9). Suleiman (1980) in her review of audience-oriented criticism outlines six varieties or approaches: rhetorical; semiotic and structuralist; phenomenological; subjective and psychological; historical and sociological; and hermeneutic.

Due to reader-response’s conflicting views and lack of a coherent and unified set of assumptions and practices, Peter Rabinowitz (1995: 376) proposed to describe how different authors tried to answer three fundamental questions:

- What is reading?
- Who is reading?

- And where is the source of authority for interpretation?

Indeed, and this may bring to a partial closure of this argument: “the categories of reader-response criticism frequently overlap, but distinctions between them may blur, focus or collapse depending on the angle of vision, point of departure or context of inquiry” (Freund, 1987: 8).

### **3.2.6 A short history of reader-response and reception theory**

#### **What were the major milestones in the history of reader-response?**

The documentation of the inception, development, and ever increasing influence of reader-response theory can be traced to three major anthologies and two main review studies. The very beginning of reader-response while going back to Louise Rosenblatt’s work published in 1923, never got hold of academia, until Tompkins in 1980 edited for The Johns Hopkins University Press *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism*.

Among the key theorists that had an article or chapter published in this anthology one finds: Walker Gibson, Michael Riffaterre, Goerge Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Jonathan Culler, Norman Holland, and David Bleich. Theorists from mainly the United States are collected, with three chapters from theorists from Europe (France and Germany) who however were visiting lecturers or had strong ties to American universities. Wolfgang Iser came from University of Konstanz, where novel ideas were being initiated among its members, and where Reception Theory found its strongest exponents.

That same year, Princeton University Press had their own book on reader-response edited by Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Four authors in Tompkins’s anthology feature once more in this collection – Jonathan Culler, Gerald Price, Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser – with a host of other new theorists, such as Karlheinz Stierle, Tzvetan Todorov, Naomi Schor, Michel Beaujour, Louis Marin. One might find it interesting,

however, that the often quoted articles are those of the four theorists that appear in both anthologies.

Indeed, 1980 has been hailed as “the high point of reader-response criticism” (Bennett, 1995b: 3). Actually, during that same year, the controversial and polemicist Stanley Fish issued *Is There a Text in the Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, a collection of articles published earlier that created a lot of commotion within the field of English Studies and Literary Theorists.

Seven years later, Freund issued a monograph on *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*, as part of the highly influential New Accents series published by Methuen. After a cursory look at two precursors, I. A. Richards and New Criticism, Freund dedicates a chapter on the contribution of four key reader-response figures: Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser.

The third anthology that documents the breath of scope and enduring attention to the reader is *Reader and*

*Reading*, edited by Andrew Bennett (1995a) and published by Longman. By then, the reader had gained more attention and feminists found it important to amplify their voice and be heard. Moreover, better attention is paid to the politics and histories of reading, and psychology has finally made it to influence the reader.

### **And what about reception theory?**

Three years earlier, in 1984, the German version of reader-response, Reception Theory was equally given importance in another monograph in the same series written by Robert Holub (1984). While going back to works by Russian Formalists (who can be considered very similar to New Critics with their attention to the text and close reading) Holub identified Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser as the major theorists. While there are some commonalities between the German school of thought and American reader-response, a closer look at the two shows that, according to Robert Holub (1984: xii-xiv), they are different for at least the following reasons: reader-response theorists never meet at the same meetings, on

no account do they publish in the same journal, and by no means attend the same seminars or conferences, while on the other hand, reception theorists do. Another divergent aspect is that reader-response theorists work within different institutions, while reception theorists are associated with the University of Constance. Holub (1984: xiii) contends that “reception theory may be separated from reader-response criticism on the basis of lack of mutual influence”. Much has been written, but the emphasis has always been on two books, and offshoot papers that never actually made it to catch the attention of a wider audience. I stand to be corrected, but had Iser not been associated with reader-response, his influence would have dwindled if it would have ever existed at all. In sum, reception theorists may have had critical attention, but as lime light of a major force or movement, Reader-Response.

### **3.2.7 The reader, reading and meaning**

**How do reader-response theorists define the reader?**

The ‘turn’ to the reader or in Freund’s (1987: 13) word “return” of the reader, are actually two powerful words denoting, “circling and revolution; change of position, direction or quality; a trope or a translation; a replacement; a recurrence.” The rebirth of the reader was the emblem of the renewed interest in the reading act as a human activity.

I reckon there are different readers as there are reader-response theorists. Each and every theorist ascribes the reader with predispositions, functions, history, education, gender, political orientation, and power. Furthermore, each theorised or described reader, asks a set of questions different from any other reader, tackles the reading act in an idiosyncratic approach, and identifies solutions to problems in specific ways.

I have also come to believe that nearly all, if not all, reader-response theorists mould their reader according to his/her own identity, and at times whims as well. This hunch was best expressed way back in the 1960s by Stephen Booth (1983: 138), who

hypothesised that the reader created by the author is “his[her] second self”.

Basically, all readers can be subdivided into two broad categories:

- hypothetical, idealised or fictitious (based on assumptions and beliefs that are interweaved to form a sort of character in a novel); and
- empirical or actual (based on real reader/s experiences taking a bottom-up approach mainly from detailed ethnographic observations of real readers and then finding common habits or patterns of action).

Indeed, Wolfgang Iser’s (1974; 1978) ‘implied reader’ might be an outstanding albeit “conventional” example of the latter type of reader, that is “in all their variety, most liberal humanist readers in the second half of the twentieth century probably actually *do* when they read” (Belsey, 1980: 36). For example most of Rosenblatt’s (1936/1995; 1978/1994), Holland’s (1975) and Bleich’s (1978) insights about the reader are drawn from real readers in schools or universities. Fundamentally, the reader is the one that lives the reading act or event.

These are just a few of the different readers that were given birth during the reign of reader-response criticism: ‘the mock reader’ Walter Gibson (1980), the model reader (Eco, 1979), the super-reader (Riffaterre, 1978), the literent (Holland), the informed reader (Fish, 1980), and the resistant reader (Fetterley, 1978).

Some might object that the reader was always present in the reading act, and therefore reader-response theorists propose nothing new. This might even be defensible by an interesting article by Tompkins (1980c) ‘The reader in History: The challenging shape of literary response’ where she traces the role readers played in literary criticism throughout the ages. However, I contend that what is original and peculiar to reader-response theorists is *the new emphasis* on what was always there but never paid enough attention to: the reader. And “[b]y refocusing attention on the reader instead of the text as the source of literary meaning, a new field of inquiry is opened up” (Freund, 1987: 10).



**In what sense is reading within a reader-response paradigm different from, let's say, New Criticism's close reading?**

Under the hands of reader-response theorists, reading regained respect, as an action performed by a human being, an active agent who does not simply translate dead symbols on a page into meaning, but rather is an active participant in the reading act.

With the advent of reader-response critics, reading is no longer an innocent, transparent activity. In line with structuralist and postmodern trends, language, the very stuff literature and reading are made of, "is always in some degree unstable, indeterminate, double, duplicitous, other to itself, different – and therefore subject to misinterpretation" (Freund, 1987: 18). Or as Catherine Belsey (1980: 4) succinctly expressed: "The transparency of language is an illusion." What among literary theorists and possibly readers alike seemed natural, common-sense and obvious, following a radical rethinking of the premises that kept in place the propositions, was not anymore tenable. Language becomes

a product of a particular society or groups of individuals with power, with a great component residing in the individual's subjectivity. People construct the World through their language, which in part pre-exists the individual who, in turn, is not viewed anymore as a unified subject, but rather as a process, a nexus of conscious and unconscious forces which can never be fully explained.

**To put it simply, New Critics and reader-response critics are fundamentally in disagreement on the locus of meaning in the reading act. Is that right?**

To a certain extent, the problem of meaning in literature is akin to the children's game of sticking a donkey's tail onto an image of a tail-less donkey. There are three major possibilities...

There are those that ascribe meaning to the author, namely E. D. Hirsch (1967: 1-23) would be a strong and virulent proponent of this theory, especially in 'In defense of the author.' The author's intention, so well theorised from ancient times has

gone under scrutiny by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, both New Critics, in their famous essay 'The intentional fallacy' (1946/1954: 3) where they contend: "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art." In their crafty hands, the intention of the author was dubbed as a fallacy (i.e. an erroneous belief) and then shredded it down to pieces.

Then there are those who ascribe meaning to the text itself, namely New Critics or people who consider textual criticism as their prime source of inspiration. Formal features of the text, like metaphors, symbols, and grammar, when rightly identified and dissected churn out the meaning of the text.

Third, there are those who attribute meaning in the reader – like Bleich (1978), Fish (1980), and Holland (1989) – without the reader who decodes, understands, interprets and creates a response to the text within a particular social-historical-cultural context, the text can never come alive. Thus, a competent reader is required

to initiate the reading act, s/he is a *sine qua non* like the text and the author, however more important since it is through him/her that literature becomes alive.

### **And where do you stand?**

Maybe, then, the whole issue is not a question of identifying meaning in one place, but rather striking "the critical balance" (Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz, 1980) between the contenders. However, objective theories as well as subjective theories fall short of providing a satisfactory and definite answer. While recognising that the ideal balance between objective and subjective criticism cannot be attained, however desirable this might be, "unless we try, the whole enterprise of criticism is passionless, pointless, or both" (Rabinowitz and Rabinowitz, 1980: 932).

I have argued about a position that takes flight away from bipolar positions. The reading act is complex, intricate and dynamic, more than can be explained by one absolutist position. The ever changing context,

historical, economical linguistic etc, and personal variables in the reader will blend in such a unique way that no one theory can explain all reading events. Therefore, I prefer not to choose to align with one position, and rather consider as much as possible contextual and subjective variables that impinge on the reading act by becoming a reading event.

### **3.2.8 Key contributions of reader-response theorists**

#### **Can you highlight some of the most fascinating contribution/s of some reader-response key figures?**

Various insights come to mind that merit mention and that require a detailed study in their own right.

- ‘The efferent / aesthetic continuum’, the ‘stance’ the reader takes during reading, and ‘the transactional theory of the reader/text interaction’ by Louise Rosenblatt (1978/1994). All these concepts provide a deeper reading of literary and non-literary reading.
- ‘The subjective reader’ and ‘subjective criticism’ by David

Bleich (1975; 1978). The birth of the reader needed a radical stance, a theorist that explored with great courage the reader’s role in an era and landscape of textual analysis.

- ‘Affective stylistics’ and ‘interpretive communities’ by Stanley Fish (1980). Especially the latter concept explains marvelously the dynamics of a classroom in search of meaning.
- ‘Literary competence’ by Jonathan Culler (1975). A concept that explicates the incremental contribution of individual reading acts, in something that draws parallels with linguistic competence.
- ‘Gaps’ in texts by Wolfgang Iser (1974). Fascinating idea about the space the reader has to supplement information and through which so much can be discerned about the writing style and reader’s contribution.
- ‘Open and closed texts’ by Umberto Eco (1962). A basic typology of texts that aids any attempt at schematisation.
- ‘Envision building’ by Judith Langer (1995). Based on the idea of stance, the reader passes

These are just a few of the key concepts that are attributed to reader-response theorists that have survived the ten year test!

### 3.2.9 Louise Rosenblatt

**From the above list, which author do you prefer? Is there a particular theory that, in your opinion, is more explanatory than others?**

I find Louise Rosenblatt to be the most readable and inspiring. *Literature as Exploration*, published in 1938 and running in the fifth edition in 1995 by The Modern Language Association of America, with a foreword by Wayne Booth, is the key text for any teacher of literature. In ‘The literary experience’

she expounded her ideas of the ‘transactional’ (rather than interaction – where the text and reader are two separate entities) metaphor for the reciprocal nature of the reading act, between the text and the reader, that leads to the event or evocation of the poem/literature. “The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed. [...] Meaning emerges as the reader carries on a give-and-take with the signs on the page” (Rosenblatt, 1995: 26). The role of the reader may be grasped “inductively” (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994: 6) by letting readers of different ages write what comes to their minds when they read unfamiliar texts. This technique was later appropriated by literature pedagogues like Michael and Peter Benton (1990: 24-35) in *Examining Poetry*, especially in ‘Making your own notes around a poem’ where they stress the reader’s thoughts, emotions and memories in making sense of new texts. These rudimentary jottings will serve as a basis for a more fully fledged response to the text. Indeed, “the

reader's creation of a poem [or any literature] out of a text must be an active, self-ordering and self-corrective process" (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994: 11). This process transforms the reading act in an event.

The reader performs different things when reading aesthetic texts and non-aesthetic texts, depending on the stance s/he takes before, during and upon completion of the reading act. In an aesthetic reading the reader is conscious of his/her particular relationship with the text "*during* the actual reading event" (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994: 24). Rosenblatt is very much aware that her theory be interpreted as dualisms rather than what she intended, as a continuum. Actually, in her 'Epilogue' to the 1994 edition of *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* she stresses this feature, for not once was such a distinction misinterpreted (*vide* Rosenblatt (1993) 'The transactional theory: Against dualism'). Her contribution is not so much a distinction based on textual features, as the stance the reader takes, the lived through experience of the text, and the activities s/he does with the text.

### 3.2.10 The possibility of an integrative model

#### **Can there ever be an 'integrative' model, a model that blends together textual features and readers' characteristics?**

As already explained, the distinction between objectivity/subjectivity at a first glance can offer a very rudimentary explanation for the contraposition New Criticism and reader-response theories and theorists.

A middle ground between these two opposite conceptions of the reading act, is that of a method that is a more dialogical or, in Rosenblatt's ideas, 'a transactional theory of the reading act'. Within her framework both reader and text are needed to the fruition of literature. A text becomes a poem or literature only with the hands of the attentive reader. While it is difficult to determine exactly the contribution of the text and reader, the reading act in Rosenblatt's hands reaches a theoretical explanation and critical balance that never before was hinted at or achieved. However, various differences within both the text's structure and, when known, the

author's intentions, and the reader's motives and identity or stance, produce a different reading. I find her position on the reader's contribution as very sensible, however, I tend to move to other theorists to explain how textual features might impinge on the reading act.

**Well, where do you look for a 'better' explanation of the contribution of textual features?**

Umberto Eco (1989) produced an ingenious distinction between 'open texts' and 'closed texts'. In Eco's (1989: 4) own words: "A work of Art, ...is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced and organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations..."

Closed texts contain one interpretation, the average reader's response is wholly predetermined and contained within the text; the reader needs to carefully unpack what the author stylishly engraved in the text. These texts supply all that is needed to be understood according to the author's intention, that in this case is

supreme. A telephone directory, the instruction pamphlet with medicine or the electricity bills are all closed texts. No ambiguity is left for the reader to decipher since there is none.

On the other hand, texts with an aspiration to be considered as literature generally is open to different and various interpretations, since their author does not supply them with all that is needed to be filled by the reader. Or the authors play with what Iser (1978) called 'blanks,' gaps or lacunae. By the choice of words and how they are organised one next to the other, writers offer an uncalculated number of possibilities while at the same time constrain others from having a free hand. Readers activate these possibilities according to the cultural conventions of their time; a text remains a text so long as no one reads it. An open text requires the active participation of the reader. A text is never a poem, a story, a play without the reader. A text becomes concretised upon every reading; a text needs a reader to become literature.

**Can you explain further the readers’ contribution in the reading act as you conceive it?**

Readers are more active agents than just decoders of symbols on a page. Louise Rosenblatt (1978/1994), proposed a reading model that emphasises the readers’ contribution according to the ‘stance’ they take when reading a text. A reader can either read a text just for pleasure, what Rosenblatt calls aesthetic stance (to be carried away with), or just to gain information, efferent stance (from Latin, meaning to carry away with). Following a gestalt philosophy where the whole is considered more than the sum of its constituting parts, the two stances are the extremities of a continuum, where the grey area is much bigger and richer than the tips alone. Variables within the reader can produce different actualisations of the same text upon every reading.

Possible consensus on the ‘best’ or most suitable interpretation can be reached after a lengthy discussion and dialogue among class members or community of readers. Therefore, the reading experience while being unique and personal is enriched with

its involvements within the community. Here, Fish’s (1980) concept of interpretive communities is of assistance.

**And how can Rosenblatt’s view of the reader and Eco’s conception of the text merge?**

If one superimposes both views, one has a more holistic approach to the reading act and the conception of literary criticism. Table 3.2 synthesises both approaches, with quadrant 1 being the most desirable when reading literature.

**Table 3.2: The intersection of textual features with reader’s stance**

Social Context	Reader's Stance			
	Aesthetic		Efferent	
The Text	④	①	③	②
	Closed	Open		

**Just give me some time to reflect on this model... You have the text... the reader... the social context of the reading act... And where is the *primus motor*, the first mover: the**

**author? Surely without him/her  
there can never be any text, any  
reading act, any readers!**

**Therefore, are we back to square  
one?!**

Nearly all reader-response theorists would agree that the author is better dead than alive. It is interesting to notice the shift from the text (New Criticism) to the reader. The authorial intention, so strong for ages, had finally succumbed to the second blow or attack, this time from a new paradigm with the “reader-power” (Belsey, 1980: 29) at its epicentre.

Two essays seem to supplement valuable insights on the identity of the author: Roland Barthes ‘The death of the author’ (1967/1988) and Michel Foucault (1979/1988) ‘What is the author?’ Barthes’ argument presents the idea that in literature the author distances him/herself from the text in such a way as the language speaks for itself. The release of the text from the shackles of the controlling and domineering power of authorial consciousness, creates ample space for interpretation of the text understood as an anonymous set of citations, performed by the reader,

explicated in the often quoted last sentence “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes, 1967/1988: 172).

On the other hand, Foucault is concerned with the social and historical reconstruction of the author; it is when the author disappears, in his/her absence, that s/he becomes the fountain of meaning: the author-function. Foucault (1979/1988: 202) remarks that the author’s name “mark[s] off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being.” Then, he goes on describing the author-function: as objects of appropriation; the variability of the author-function in different cultures and epochs; its non-spontaneity as the attribution of a discourse to an individual. Unlike Barthes, Foucault acknowledges that: “The text always contain a certain number of signs referring to the author” (1979/1988: 204).

### **3.2.11 Reader-response and pedagogy**

**Therefore, as you were implying in  
your last point, how do you envision**



### **the link between reader-response theory and pedagogy?**

Besides the theoretical framework/s that developed during the late 70s and early 80s, reader-response's major influence was and still is, in pedagogy.

Reader-response theories were introduced to prospective teachers by a number of American and English pedagogues. They translated into classroom practice reader-response principles and insights. Among the most influential were: Alan Purves, Theresa Rogers and Anna Soter (1995), Judith Langer (1995), Richard Beach and James Marshall (1990), Nicholas Karolides (1997) and Robert Probst (1987) in America; and in the United Kingdom, Michael Benton and Geoff Fox (1985), Michael Benton with a number of his students (1988), Stephen Parker and Michael Hayhoe (1990) to name a few. They managed to translate theoretical principles into a series of classroom friendly activities and methods.

I did not stop at reader-response as a framework for methods to be later used in the literature classroom. I

wanted reader-response theories to inspire and trace an innovative way for initial teacher training. Reader-response is not just a melting-pot of abstract and less so ideas about reading and teaching literature. I am coming to understand reader-response as a framework or paradigm through which I can comprehend such complex ideas as identity, communication and education. Reader-response principles, diverse as they are, can offer another way of reading and guiding what happens in the initial teacher education. The democratic spirit that hovers around most reader-response theories alone cannot bring about the necessary change.

I am close to those that are of the opinion that some reader-response critics have mostly valued the conceptual, and maybe ignored or assigned less importance to the practicalities of a day-to-day life in classrooms and school context. Therefore, this missing link, inherent in most if not all literary theory discourse, needs to be *grafted* with other discourses very much in vogue amongst educationalists, namely:

reflective practice (*vide* Chapter 4) and assessment for learning and portfolios (*vide* Chapter 5). About the strong relationship between grafting and writing – via the morphological root *graphion*, stylus, from which ‘graph’ and ‘graft’ derive – Jacques Derrida (1992: 153) contends that “one must elaborate a systematic treatise on textual graft” by focusing on footnotes, quotes, epigraphs, principal text etc. Derrida (1983: 389) goes as far as to contend that “To write means to graft. It’s the same word.” The metaphor extends to the reader’s role, for his action is like ‘grafting’ on the original text, hence producing a new text; intimately related to another agricultural metaphor ‘dissemination’ to scatter about seeds, the way a reader understands a text – “the process by which in language, the meaning of a term or set of terms is distributed and diffused throughout the language system without ever coming to a final end” (Nizamis, 2001: 103). It is ‘reading-as-writing,’ to use Terry Eagleton’s (1996: 122) coinage when discussing ‘pleasure’ in Barthes. While writing on Derrida, Culler (1983: 136) argues, “A simple graft,

though complex in its potential ramifications, binds two [or three] discourses side by side...” thus amplifying their resonance.

### **Can you elaborate further on the idea of pedagogy and reader-response theory?**

I consider reader-response theory to be the theoretical framework most influential among contemporary teachers of literature. The impact of reader-response theories on classroom practice is very difficult to measure precisely, however, as Probst (2003: 814) rightly contends: “Within the past 30 or so, more and more teachers and researchers have begun to take serious interest in the concept of response to literature.” Notwithstanding the difficulties teachers might face in their classrooms and on a philosophical level, a reader-response literature classroom is still the most viable alternative, for “[m]uch of the current research in response to literature lends strength, however, to a democratic vision of the classroom” (Probst, 2003: 822). And a democratic vision of the classroom is one that tallies

with the progressive movement of education and pedagogy, with Malta's National Minimum Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1999), and most importantly with the first hand experience of student-teachers on teaching practice (*vide* Chapter 10) and teachers alike who have tried experimenting and employing such a method in their classrooms day in day out. Indeed, "significant and enjoyable learning can occur when the classroom respects the unique responses of readers, encouraging them to make meaning of texts in personally significant ways" (Probst, 2003: 822).

According to Benton (1992: 17), one paradox of reading a story, albeit literature in general, is that it is both personal, private and singular, and yet, at the same time cooperative. Response is both an idiosyncratic experience, which is augmented and enhanced if shared within the "interpretive community" (Fish, 1980: 167-173), that is the classroom. The 'reader' has to work hand in hand with the 'author' (*vide* Bennett, 2005; Barthes 1967/1988; Foucault, 1979/1988) as mediated through the

'text' (that is "any instance of verbal record" Pope, 2002: 245). Within a "transactional" (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) conception of reading literature, no one reading is the same as another. This might send shivers down the spine of those stubborn believers in one plausible, objective or valid interpretation to a text, usually the one thought or intended by the author (*vide* Hirsch, 1967); rather than a series of responses valid in their own right and on their own merits.

The unpredictability and openness of response might be problematic to many teachers, especially in those contexts where schools have placed great importance on correctness, and the measurability of learning (*vide* Chapter 5). The act of sharing personal responses within the classroom or lecture room is in itself a rewarding educational experience, mimicking what usually happens among mature readers or 'reading groups' (Hartley, 2001: 73-101; 125-138) in real life situations.

**Therefore, what is the teacher's role in the response-based literature**

**classroom? For sure, in your view, s/he must do something different than just explicating the text!**

The teacher's role is another important aspect in the response-based literature classroom. The starting point is if the teacher is working with a prescriptive syllabus, or has to design one within a framework and according to the students' needs. Syllabus design or scheme of work design, related with text selection is a big difference in exerting one's professional and "pedagogical authority" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1990).

Within the classroom walls, many a time the teacher acts as a facilitator for individual exploration of the text and subsequent community sharing of response, mainly through discussions. A critical mission entrusted to him/her is the quality reading of the text. Another responsibility is making sure that an aesthetic stance is taken by all students throughout the lesson, which can then be followed and rendered unforgettable by assigning class and homework that helps the readers further elaborate their response.

**A distinctive characteristic of a reader-response classroom is what gets done with the text. Is that right?**

In the process of providing a more specific and rewarding reading experience, one of literature teacher's roles, if not his/her pedagogical imperative, is the adoption of ready-made tasks or the creation of one's own activities and exercises. The aim of these tasks related to literature teaching is two-pronged: on one hand, facilitate a deeper understanding of the text on an individual basis; but also, a means to facilitate the discussion and sharing of the community's response to that text. To that end, any literature teacher can consider a number of task-options, ranging from the most guided or closed to the most creative, unstructured or open. To put it slightly different, tasks can be typified according to "the degree to which the students' responses are **constrained** [or enabled] by the task" (Ahmed and Pollitt, 2008: 4). Consequently, in guided tasks "the student has little freedom to choose how to respond, and their response will be judged only by how *correct* it is" (Ahmed and

Pollitt, 2008: 5). Towards the other end of the spectrum, “the idea of correctness becomes relatively unimportant, and students are assessed mainly for the *quality* of their answers... the emphasis shifts from *what* students’ minds can do to *how well* they can do it” (Ahmed and Pollitt, 2008: 5).

While oral expression might seem the most obvious and, to a certain extent, natural task, schools traditionally tend to favour writing as a medium of expression. This notwithstanding the fact that “oral and the written literacy are different but supporting facets of language use” (Cook-Gumperz, 2006: 3). Indeed, this follows the preference within my Western culture of the written word over the spoken word, as exemplified in Walter J. Ong’s (1982) work, following the transition from orality to literacy. Moreover, this preference of the written word is at the heart of what Margaret Meek (1991: 124-147) calls “school literacy”, that is, the divide between the exigencies of the world outside school (talking about books) and how the school manipulates and translates them into discrete tasks and tools such

as handouts, exams, grades and attainment targets, that are considered distant, if not alien, from life outside schools.

To bridge this gap, a literature teacher with reader-response at heart might adopt or adapt one or more of the following activities that aid the student-reader in the process of making reading visible, mainly divided into four: graphics (diagrams, cartoons, charts); illustrations (photographs, posters...); performance arts (mime, music, dance...); and film/video (animation, scripted stories...) (Purves, Rogers and Soter, 1995: 159).

Writing in response to literature has particular functions: to demonstrate learning and engagement; to convey emotions; to imagine as a creative spin-off; to inform; and to persuade or convince (Purves, Rogers and Soter, 1995: 159). The sharing of response involves writing or non-verbal means of expression.

Additionally, Purves, Rogers and Soter (1995: 160) distinguish between two kinds of writing about literature.

When the writing focuses more on the text than on the reader's impressions, the end result would be an analytic piece of writing, such as a review, a critical appreciation, a summary, etc. Conversely, when more attention is paid to the reader's emotions and reactions rather than on the text – such as in character profile, a creative reaction, letters to..., and alternative beginning or endings – the written end result shares more characteristics with an impressionistic kind of writing. Within a transactional framework both should have their fair share of importance, since they are styles of writing evidencing two different stances to the reading act. However, in examination contexts “there is always the danger of squeezing out the second in favour of the first” (Protherough, 1986: 40). When the kind of written activity or activities devised by the literature teacher, are mainly close answers and nearly verging on becoming a comprehension exercise in its own right, I term these kinds of tasks as ‘pseudo-sharing activities’.

### **3.2.12 Studies on becoming teachers of literature**

**There have been a number of studies on becoming teachers of literature. Can you highlight those studies that best present a vivid picture of the transition from reader to teachers of literature?**

Spread over nearly 20 years, from 1994 to 2003, the studies in Table 3.3 document a constant flow, albeit rather sparse, of interest in the intricate and at times difficult processes of becoming teachers of literature, mostly in the United States and England. Lee Shulman's (1986) distinction between ‘content knowledge’ and ‘pedagogical content knowledge,’ has been inspiring for a number of related studies and reviews (*vide* Grossman, Wilson and Shulman, 1989; Bullough, 2001; Turner-Bisset, 1999). Not all studies refer to reader-response theories, even if implicitly they discuss a relationship between the reader, the teacher and the text.

**How can one arrive at a picture of becoming teachers of literatures based on a number of qualitative studies?**

None of the studies in Table 3.3 on their own presents conclusive evidence about the characteristics of the trajectory from readers to teachers of literature. However, when taken together – across time and places – there seems to be some common trends.

When drawing conclusions from qualitative studies it is worth keeping in mind the concept of ‘fuzzy generalisations’ (Bassey 1998; 1999; 2001). While recognising that there might be exceptions especially in the light of the highly intricate human nature, these are statements that “are expressed in a tentative way,” (Bassey, 2001: 10), “imprecisely probable” (Bassey, 2001: 20), are “reasonable and proper outcomes of the findings” (Bassey, 1999: 52), express “a possibility but no surety,” and by their very nature contain “an element of uncertainty” since “if something has happened in one place” then it might “also happen elsewhere” (Bassey, 1999: 52). Indeed the

hallmark of fuzzy generalisations are qualifiers, such as ‘may,’ ‘might,’ ‘almost,’ ‘sort of,’ ‘in all likelihood,’ ‘could,’ ‘it is highly probable that,’ ‘may be,’ and ‘sometimes,’ to name a few. Using this stratagem, qualitative researchers legitimate certain kinds of knowledge.

One major contribution of fuzzy generalisations at the end of qualitative studies is the fact that “they give cumulative coherence to the field of investigation” (Bassey, 2001: 17).

Together they present what can be considered as incremental evidence that points towards a number of strong trends or patterns of behaviour, that will be summarised in the following paragraphs.

**Table 3.3: Key studies in becoming teachers of literature**

Author	Title	Date	Participants	Method	Main findings
Murison Travers, Molly, D	The poetry teacher: Behaviour and attitudes	1984	N/A	Literature review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The teacher has more effect on the results than the particular method chosen to teach a poem.</li> <li>▪ Some of the key findings of this study support the idea that good poetry teachers in their practice adhere to some of the following: emphasise the pleasure of reading poetry; choose stimulating and engaging activities; negotiate with their students the texts to be read; listens to students' response; and supports students' emotions when reading.</li> </ul>
Grossman, Pamela L.	<i>The Making of a Teacher: Teacher Knowledge and Teacher Education</i>	1990	3 beginning English teachers without professional preparation 3 graduates in fifth year of their teacher education preparation	Contrasting case study to investigate the nature of pedagogical content knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prospective and beginning teachers may find it difficult to reconceptualise the purposes for teaching their respective subject on their own their.</li> </ul>
Clift, Renée, T.	Learning to teach English – Maybe: A study of knowledge development	1991	1, 25 year old women learning to teach secondary school English	Case study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Interviews</li> <li>▪ Videotapes</li> <li>▪ Observations</li> <li>▪ Journals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Learning to teach, at least for this student-teacher, is a multifaceted process that involves an evolving and developing: knowledge of literary analysis; principles of teaching language and literature; instructional design; awareness of assessment and evaluation; management skills; pedagogical problem solving; appreciation of student diversity; and self-image as a teacher.</li> <li>▪ While these aspects are important, this student-teacher had to negotiate between all aspects, and she found particularly difficult to fill in the gaps in her knowledge schemes rather quickly in order to function well in school, and succeed.</li> </ul>



Zancanella, Don	Teachers reading / Readers teaching: Five teachers' personal approaches to literature and their teaching of literature	1991	5 junior high school teachers	Case Studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interview (8 times per teacher)</li> <li>Observations (8 times per teacher)</li> <li>Field notes</li> <li>Transcriptions of audio-tapes</li> <li>Written artefacts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The teachers' conception of literature is limited by the 'school' approach to literature, that is an undue emphasis on comprehension and the learning of literary terms, and very much influenced by what appears in state-mandated achievement tests.</li> <li>Institutional constraints can be overcome by pedagogical knowledge already present in the teachers.</li> <li>Teachers underestimate and lack an understanding of their own personal approaches to literature, and how this can act as a counterbalance to the state's conception of literature teaching.</li> </ul>
Holt-Reynolds, Diane	Personal history-based beliefs as relevant prior knowledge in course work	1992	9 secondary student- teachers (6 English / 3 Maths) enrolled in the content area reading course	6 audio-recorded loosely structured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student-teachers prefer traditional methods (lecturing and telling) and resist new research-based methods.</li> <li>Student-teachers agree that teachers should listen to their students.</li> <li>Personal histories of pre-service teachers appear to function as prior knowledge of what makes a 'good' teacher and what they consider as 'good' teaching (p. 343).</li> <li>Student-teachers should be invited to explore their lay beliefs during training since they have a powerful influence on the way new teachers will act.</li> </ul>
Hardman, Frank and Williamson, John	Student teachers and models of English	1993	23 PGCE student- teachers	Goodwyn's (1992) questionnaire An open-ended questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student-teachers recognised all five models of teaching English proposed by Brian Cox (1991: 21-23).</li> <li>Student-teachers seem to favour personal growth model and cultural analysis, with the latter being the one with the broader degree of support.</li> <li>The student-teachers have a broad definition of canon. This may be attributable to courses on the matter in their undergraduate course.</li> <li>There seems to be an agreement between what student-teachers believe during their course, and what established teachers hold as meaningful in their practice.</li> </ul>

Holt-Reynolds, Diane and McDiarmid, Williamson, G.	How do prospective teachers think about literature and the teaching of literature?	1994	An unspecified group of undergraduate English majors who plan to teach English at high school level	Extensive audio- and video-taped interview protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prospective English teachers hold a set of beliefs about what is literature and this helps them identify their literary qualities.</li> <li>▪ Prior to interview, they were not aware about these guiding beliefs.</li> <li>▪ Teachers' reasoning about literature is context and task specific, that is depending on the text supplied to them and what they have to do with it, they elaborate their definition of what is literature as they go along.</li> </ul>
Agee, Jane	Readers becoming teachers of literature	1997	2 pre-service students in a secondary language arts program	Naturalistic case study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Field notes</li> <li>▪ Audio-taped interviews</li> <li>▪ Reading protocol</li> <li>▪ Syllabi, handouts and assignments</li> <li>▪ Portfolios</li> <li>▪ Logs</li> <li>▪ Lesson plans and tests</li> <li>▪ Videotapes of students teaching literature during pre-service teaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ To these pre-service students, prior experience with literature (documented through a life-history) is an important source of knowledge.</li> <li>▪ These student-teachers have strong pre-existing conceptions of the teachers' role that impinges heavily on their thought process before going into the classroom and their actions in the classroom.</li> <li>▪ Their ideas on the teaching of literature were in conflict with what they encountered during their methods course.</li> <li>▪ Teacher training courses need to be challenging and supportive at the same time.</li> </ul>
Round, Sue	Becoming a teacher of literature	1997	8 PGCE students	Interview held just after the first block teaching practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Developing classroom strategies or successful approaches was at the top on the student-teachers' priority list.</li> <li>▪ Student-teachers recognise the importance of reflection on their practice.</li> <li>▪ It is emphasised that beginner teachers need to have a theory of learning and teaching a subject; they need to articulate their theory and the implications of such a stance.</li> <li>▪ Student-teachers are torn between having to tell the right answer and letting different interpretations circulate during a discussion.</li> <li>▪ "Becoming a teacher of literature is not an easy process and it takes time, thought and a lot of hard work" (p. 303).</li> </ul>

Agee, Jane	Negotiating different conceptions about reading and teaching literature in a preservice literature class	1998	24 undergraduates in a secondary methods class (13 females and 11 males)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Observations during lectures</li> <li>Field notes from 20 observation sessions in class</li> <li>Audio-taped whole-class and small-group discussions</li> <li>Audio-taped interviews with students</li> <li>2 audio-taped interviews with a professor</li> <li>3 question protocol administered at the beginning and at the end of course</li> <li>Course syllabus</li> <li>Pre-service students' portfolio</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student-teachers had high-school preparation in English.</li> <li>15 student-teachers out of 24 chose English for the <i>love</i> of reading.</li> <li>10 students said they wanted to transmit the love of reading to future generations.</li> <li>18 students emphasised the importance of content knowledge.</li> <li>Most student-teachers hold a conception of literature as the classics.</li> <li>While development process is not linear, change in the student-teachers' conceptions and beliefs takes time and a lot of effort. This was closely tied to three aspects: their prior experience with literature; their culturally accepted idea of a teacher of literature; and their lecturer's influence on what it means being a teacher of literature.</li> <li>Student-teachers found the lecturer's ideas about reading and teaching reading as "too different to be credible" (p. 85).</li> <li>Course design is an important feature to bring change in beliefs and conceptions about literature.</li> <li>"Change was not only complex but also uncomfortable" (p. 85) for both lecturer and student-teachers.</li> </ul>
Ray, Rita	The diversity of poetry: How trainee teachers' perceptions affect their attitudes to poetry	1999	48 2 <sup>nd</sup> year trainees in primary teaching course before they started the part of the course relating to teaching poetry	A 9 question questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student-teachers had a positive experience of poetry during primary education. Then, their enthusiasm enjoyed in primary school, dwindled at secondary school when student-teachers "ceased to enjoy and understand poetry" (p 403).</li> <li>Enjoyment and appreciation seem not to work hand in hand when it comes to conceptualising poetry in primary (enjoyment), and secondary and university course (appreciation) where a degree of specialised knowledge seems to be required.</li> <li>Authors' visits to schools can be a wonderful experience to transmit the enjoyment of poetry, but student-teachers need to be shown how to deepen the experience with their students and learn to listen and value their comments or responses.</li> <li>Student-teachers need to have the opportunity to respond freely to a number of texts without the anxiety of examinations.</li> </ul>

Holt-Reynolds, Diane	Good readers, good teachers? Subject matter expertise as a challenge in learning to teach	1999	1 female expert enrolled in a college-level teacher training program	Case study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Entrance and exit interviews (119 question protocol in four parts: Personal History, Defining literature, Critical Theories &amp; Teacher roles) – over 18 months</li> <li>▪ One interview per semester</li> <li>▪ Total of five interviews that were audio-taped and videotaped.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Subject matter expertise does not automatically translate into an understanding of how to present literature to children.</li> <li>▪ A definition of ‘subject matter expertise’ should “include an awareness of concepts, ideas, and dispositions that must be actually taught to others” (p. 43)... very much in line with Lee Shulman’s (1986) concept of ‘pedagogical subject matter.’</li> </ul>
Holt-Reynolds, Diane	What does the teacher do? Constructivist pedagogies and prospective teachers’ beliefs about the role of a teacher	2000	Taylor, 1 of 16 English majors enrolled in any English department, 300-level courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A 119 question protocol as part of an entrance audio-and video-taped interview broken in four 2 hour sittings conducted by a team of researchers</li> <li>▪ An exit interview by a team of researchers</li> <li>▪ Brief interviews at the end of the three semesters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Some to be teachers of literature avoid questioning their personal beliefs as a knower, by uncritically taking on board a constructivist stance to teaching.</li> <li>▪ Student-teachers need to better understand the theoretical underpinnings of the practical ways of teaching literature they encounter and expected to assume as their own way of teaching.</li> <li>▪ Student-teachers should be made aware that the ‘new strategies’ in teaching are a means to an end, not ends in themselves.</li> </ul>
Beavis, Catherine	“It makes you realize, really, just how deep your subject is”: Literature, subjectivity, and curriculum change	2001	9 teachers	Interviews over three years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ While the literature curriculum changes, teachers still persist in using older discourses – more than nostalgic attachment to the ‘known’.</li> <li>▪ During their training, teachers encountered critical pedagogy, however the context they were teaching supported or undermined their willingness to individually appropriate and enact the new framework.</li> <li>▪ Curriculum reform requires a “repositioning or realignment” (p. 59) of teachers’ attitudes towards the new definition of the subject.</li> <li>▪ Teachers are committed to their subject due to the pleasure they get out of doing their job; reform should guarantee that the same pleasure is maintained.</li> </ul>

Newell, George, E., Gingrich, Randy, S. and Beumer Johnson, Angela	Considering the context for appropriating theoretical and practical tools for teaching middle and secondary English	2001	9 student-teachers (3 males and 6 females)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initial student-teacher interviews and card-short task interviews</li> <li>Retrospective student-teacher interviews</li> <li>Classroom observations</li> <li>Student-teachers debriefing</li> <li>Cooperating teachers interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appropriating new methods of teaching and learning requires an in-depth analysis of the theoretical principles underlying the practices that are promoted at university.</li> <li>Some student-teachers embraced 'theory' in three ways. First, as a way of reflecting on practice to ameliorate themselves and the quality of their students' experience. Second, a number of student-teachers considered theory as something to be "endured as a rite of passage through their respective programmes" (p. 320) before they become teachers adopting without adapting what others tell them to do. And still others regard teaching as a question of mastering procedural routines and finding what works for themselves and their students.</li> <li>Different contexts or activity settings shape and complicate appropriation of new methods and the development of identity mainly as a result of personal history.</li> </ul>
Goodwyn, Andrew	Breaking up is hard to do: English teachers and the LOVE of reading	2002	circa 700 PGCE student-teachers, mostly female, spread over 13 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group discussions</li> <li>Candidates interviewed individually by one or two interviewees</li> <li>Reading autobiographies (1000 words long) read and analysed from a phenomenological perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Circa 75% of student teachers choose English for their <i>love</i> of reading, especially novels.</li> <li>The researcher applies Appleyard's scheme of readers (as player, as hero or heroine, as thinker, as interpreter, as pragmatic reader) to the degree of involvement evidenced by student-teachers.</li> <li>Narratives help define a problem.</li> <li>The student-teachers' emphasis on reading can have a "distorting influence" (p. 77) on the students they will be teaching, as they will carry a limited view of the reading possibilities that can be explored in the classroom.</li> <li>English is perceived as being a female domain (p. 78).</li> <li>Student-teachers need to be careful when passing judgements on their students' reading development, such as interest in serial reading.</li> </ul>

Hamel, Fred L.	Teacher understanding of student understanding: Revising the gap between teacher conceptions and students' ways of knowing	2003	3 teachers and 3 students	Qualitative case study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thick accounts of practitioner reflection</li> <li>Students: Think-aloud protocols</li> <li>Teachers: Four semi-structured interviews with each teacher, Classroom observation and a brief survey focusing on subject-matter backgrounds and experience teaching literature</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers steer students' interpretation toward received interpretations.</li> <li>Teachers consider and interpret students thinking and understanding according to their own personal ways of dealing with texts.</li> <li>Reader-response methods while being student-centred do not solve the difficulties students face when reading complex texts and the mechanics of reading.</li> <li>Teachers should become aware of how students deal and interact with texts.</li> </ul>
Burley, Suzanne	Preparing future English teachers: The use of personal voice in developing English student teachers' identities as language teachers	2003	2 cohorts of PGCE students (number not specified)	Student teachers' voices – written and spoken Language autobiography (their own language development and its relation to the role of a teacher of English)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Critical review of language teacher education program at London Metropolitan University.</li> <li>The first language has powerful impact on the students' identity (p. 60).</li> <li>Student-teachers shifted their views of what is English; at the beginning of the course it focused mainly on literature, and at the end of course English was treated more holistically.</li> <li>This study is not conclusive when it comes to identifying what spurts the revision of their views... if it was the training in language teaching or 'cross subject dialogue'.</li> </ul>
Ellis, Viv	The love that dare not speak its name? The constitution of the English subject beginning teachers' motivations to teach it	2003	339 student-teachers (51 primary and 283 secondary) from 26 training providers	A double-sided A4 open-ended questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>74.6% of the student-teachers reported that they chose to teach English for their "love" of English, rather than the love of reading or literature and working with children or job satisfaction.</li> <li>This love of reading may clash with a redefinition of English as a subject that includes new areas like media.</li> </ul>

### **So what is the probable itinerary of the journey?**

The complex journey to become a teacher of literature in all likelihood consists of many paths and roads, peculiar to the institution where the training to become a teacher of literature is taking place (be it at university with a number of lecturers, school-based in direct contact with a cooperating teacher or mentor, or a healthy mix of both) and depending very much on the personality and adaptability of the student-teacher within the institution and school context (especially during teaching practice). Learning to teach, for student-teachers, including those of literature, is a complex and a non-linear endeavour (Grossman, 1990; Clift, 1991; Round, 1997; Agee, 1998).

One's personal history as a reader and student of literature (how one was taught literature from primary up to university, what and how was read during the formative years, who were the teachers that taught him/her), may be considered as the most potent agent along this journey (Newell, Gingrich, Beumer, 2001). Within each

individual personal history forms a strong idea of what it means to be a 'good' teacher of literature and what constitutes as 'good' teaching of literature (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Goodwyn, 2002). It is highly desirable that during a methods course, these personal beliefs undergo a personal and communal scrutiny.

Course design plays an important role in the facilitation or difficulty of the appropriation of new teaching styles more conducive to a modern conception of teaching literature (Agee, 1998). The studies seem to confirm the idea that the teacher is more important than the method (Murson, 1984). Among the most important ingredients in the course's philosophy one finds constant reflection (Round, 1997) and a hands-on approach (Beavis, 2001), where student-teachers have the first-hand opportunity to experience what the new ways of teaching look like.

It is very difficult to examine and deconstruct one's personal history, thus making the journey to become a new teacher of literature more difficult. However, unexamined

beliefs and untheorised practices impinge just the same on one's classroom practice, maybe more than the contribution of methodology study-units (Grossman, 1990; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). On the other hand, examined beliefs, even when new beliefs based on new ways of thinking about a subject, tend to be the most durable and lasting effect on student-teachers.

There seems to be a general trend that teaching literature study-units across the board (or better still across the old and new world) move away from text-bound criticism towards a more eclectic form of reader-response criticism, so as to produce a more dynamic reading of texts. This transition is not without its difficulties, especially in trying to conceptualise how pupils think as they interact with texts (Hamel, 2003). This lecturer's and institutional predilection seems to be a direct collision with student-teacher's belief of what it means to read literature (Zancanella, 1991). Since many a time student-teachers have not experienced a response-based approach to teaching literature, they

find it difficult to conceptualise such a classroom dynamic, this coming in direct conflict with classroom practices and creating tension in student-teachers (Agee, 1997).

These studies seem to support Lee Shulman's (1986) valuable insight, that subject knowledge and pedagogical subject knowledge, while related, are two distinct forms of knowledge (Holt-Reynolds, 1999). Student-teachers do not know all the subject content they will need to teach, thus they need to fill in the gaps during their own practice (Clift, 1991; Agee, 1998). Many student-teachers opt for becoming teachers of literature because of their love for the subject (Goodwyn, 2002; Ellis, 2003). Good grasp of the literature one is teaching and the skills to read and respond to it in a constructive way, while a *sine qua non* for any literature teacher, does not automatically convert into mastery of teaching those same texts to students (Holt-Reynolds and McDiarmid, 1994; Beavis, 2001). Knowledge of how students learn, how they read a text, how they make sense out of it, what activities are desirable to be conducted in class and



at home, creating analogies, moving from the known to the unknown in small steps according to a syllabus and the like, all contribute to the development of pedagogical subject knowledge (Murison, 1984; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Round, 1997).

Especially during their first teaching experiences, beliefs and images of learning the subject are more powerful than ideas encountered at university or while reading on them (Agee, 1997). Reader-response methods on their own do not solve the prime preoccupations when entering the classroom, especially the procedural and mechanical aspects of teaching. Therefore, student-teachers of all subjects require support at this initial stage that does not necessarily mean about the methodology, but in teaching in general. Only when student-teachers solve the initial mechanical teething problems (such as discipline and classroom routines like the timetable) can the lecturer help them move beyond in the realm of methodology. The lesson seems to be: Give them the bread and butter and you win their hearts and soul; try to convert them without supporting

their basic needs, and you are led into trouble. Literary theory and theory in general become relevant once the student-teacher sorts out the day to day problems of dealing with students. It is very difficult to empathise with pupils, when student-teachers and lecturers have different preoccupations depending on their role and professional development. But communication and understanding should come from the top, and not be expected from the bottom.

### **3.2.13 Some criticisms to these studies**

#### **Can one put forward some criticisms to these studies?**

Indeed, one might identify a number of inherent limitations in the studies in Table 3.3, and perhaps put forward a number of sympathetic criticisms too. Firstly, these studies refer exclusively to British and American studies, when the same trajectory is experienced each year by nearly all language teachers. Indeed, studies have shown that particular countries have different traditions of teaching literature (*vide*

Purves, 1973; for a European perspective of teaching poetry, Thompson, 1996; and for a world view of teaching literature, Brumfit and Benton, 1993). Their diversity in methodology makes them difficult to replicate.

While these studies are conducted by female researchers, what is more striking, for me, is the lack of a more critical account of being a teacher of literature from a feminist perspective. Within the qualitative paradigm, it is rather difficult to circumscribe to one particular aspect, in this case, study-unit, the change and development that is documented and measured in the research. Not enough details seem to be provided about the duration, the timing within the whole course, the structure and the aims of the practicum, as well as details about the nature, philosophy and mode of assessment of the study-unit. Peter Smagorinsky's (2001: 91-97) review of a Secondary Language Arts Teaching Methods syllabus, identifies the lecturer's background and the cultural context that preservice students will be entering in, as two of "the most significant influences on the

development of the overall programme." And finally, the relationship between the student-teachers and their lecturer is not explored enough.

### **3.2.14 Some limitations of reader-response**

**That has been a thorough presentation of reader-response strongest points and the processes of becoming teachers of literature. Certainly reader-response has its number of criticisms and limitations!**

One major and unwavering contribution in the critical scene is that "it has certainly altered the terms in which critical conversations are framed" (Rabinowitz, 1995: 403). Indeed, "the turn toward the reader may well be the single most profound shift in critical perspective of the post-war years" (Rabinowitz, 1995: 403). Notwithstanding such a rosy assessment, reader-response theorists and theories have their fair share of detractors and encountered criticisms too.

*Unquestioned canon.* In time of detailed scrutiny and revaluation of the canon (*vide* Bloom, 1993: 15-41), reader-response theorists seem to be oblivious of what is read; they are more involved with the reading act that their political commitment towards a democratic society, fails to examine the 'closed' list. They are engrossed in debates about reading without politicising enough what is read.

*Durability.* A second criticism that can be brought against reader-response theorists is their enduring impact of their insights. In critical discourse, they changed the focus, but they are not the lens. More prominent discourses, such as deconstruction, queer theory, feminist studies, seem to animate, if not clutter, research journals.

*Transferability.* One major side-effect of reader-response theories is their supposed impact on today's and tomorrow's teachers of literature. While it is agreed upon that reader-response seems to be prevalent at university in teacher training courses, data originating from the classrooms

(especially, but not exclusively, in Malta) seem to suggest that textual criticism, alas New Criticism, has the upper-hand in classrooms, and literature evaluation contexts such as examinations. The practice seems to lack the coherent values of traditional examinations that are valued within a community. Therefore, the effect in mainstream teaching while desirable is rather marginal.

*The gendered reader.* At the start reader-response theories had the promise of being an inclusive theory. However, in retrospect the reader many a time just happened to be the middle-age, white and white collar reader with a flair or at times enduring passion for literature. Little attention was paid to female readers, readers from different socio-cultural backgrounds, queer readers etc. I think Norman Holland's (1975: 205) 'pseudo-egalitarian' comment is rather short-sighted and presumptuous: "Nothing in this study will support the idea or suggest that superficial resemblances of gender, age, culture or class ... have any important role in and of themselves in response". As other reader-response

critics have acknowledged, these ‘superficial differences’ are all but superficial. Indeed, the “resistant reader” (Fetterley, 1978) has amply demonstrated that women read differently than men.

*Lack of a coherent manifesto, vision or programme.* Reader-response theorists seem to be happy in their own company and mix well with others. Their identity is rather in a flux, and together they do not stand so much to a coherent programme.

### **3.2.15 A paradigm shift in literary theory**

**With all these criticisms, in conclusion, can you truly say that reader-response theories can be considered as having actually attained a paradigm shift in the firmament of literary theory?**

True revolutions do not happen with a lot of fanfare. Long lasting revolutions, so much envisioned and desired by many revolutionaries, can only happen in a subdued tone, when no one is really fighting for or against

something! Similarly, the advent and popularising of reader-response.

Suleiman (1980: 3) in the incipit for her introduction to the varieties of audience oriented criticism, describes change thus:

Some revolutions occur quietly: no manifestos, no marching and singing, no tumult in the streets; simply a shift in perspective, a new way of seeing what has always been there. New words enter the vocabulary, old words suddenly take new meaning;...

Starting off as a reaction to close reading practices of New Criticism, reader-response theories have shifted the attention towards the reader’s contribution in the reading act. While different positions about the nature and quality of the reader’s contribution animate the discussion, one cannot underestimate the importance such theories have had on classroom practice in teaching literature. A number of activities and tasks inspired from reader-response theories have entered into the classroom animated by teachers that reflect about response.

On a personal level, reader-response theories have greatly influenced my consciousness of the ‘transactions’ between individuals, especially teachers and pupils, and lecturers and students.

Charles Baudelaire’s (1861/1992: 1-2) *Les Fleurs du Mal* (The Flowers of Evil), commences with a poem ‘Au Lecteur’ (‘To the reader’), which ends with a powerful nearly distressing address, not to be taken literally, for sure: “Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat, / – Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!” (vv. 39-40) [“You know it, reader, that fastidious fiend, / – Hypocrite reader you, – my like, – my brother!”].

## CHAPTER 4

### A personal reflection on reflection

#### 4.1 Professionalism and reflective practice

After reader-response theories and their relation to teaching literature, the second pillar of my research is the concept of reflection. While there is no one-size-fits-all teacher training programme (*vide* Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2005), recently, or at least for the past twenty to twenty-five years, there has been an ever increasing consensus that one key feature of any initial teacher training course that merits commendation is that of reflection (Zeichner and Liston, 1996; in the UK, Pollard, 2005; and within the European context, Clarke and Chambers, 1999). This change in emphasis, or for some, a completely new discourse altogether, was inspired from the evolving ‘professionalism’ that had infiltrated the teaching profession (McCulloch, Helsby and Knight, 2000).

In the Maltese context, there seems to be a hiatus between teachers in schools and teacher trainers at the Faculty of Education’s conception of professionalism. For people within the Faculty of Education professionalism is intimately related to reflection: “It is through reflection that you *become* a teacher” (Chetcuti *et al.* n.d.: 7). On the other hand, one picture of teachers in schools is “...all that professionalism means is the improvement of their salary attached to it and that they care nothing for anything else” (Wain, 1991: 16). These two conceptions of professionalism – one related to reflection and the other to salary – ring true with my experience as a teacher and as a lecturer. I don’t find that one can reconcile these perspectives; one has to shrewdly negotiate between the two, as a viable *modus vivendi*.

One way to improve teachers’ perception of professionalism is by instilling in pre-service teachers and novice professionals a commitment to adaptability in front of perpetual change, via reflective process. The birth of this new model of professional

teacher is synonymous with the birth of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schön, 1983; 1987).

#### **4.2 Reflection in educational contexts: Setting the stage**

As already noted (Chapter 3), the last two stages of Judith Langer's reading act, refer to looking back at an experience. Indeed, Louise Rosenblatt (1978/1995: 132-133) herself had already postulated a stage after reading, "when talking about the literary work we must have recourse to introspection and memory..." Rosenblatt (1978/1995: 133) goes on to emphasise "the reader's crystallizing a sense of experienced work as a whole, as a structure that, despite its ethereal nature, can be an object of thought." The reader entertains the work and can speak about it in retrospect. This reading stage might lead to "reflecting on what has been evoked, in the effort to realize it more keenly, to arrive at a tighter organisation, a firmer knitting-together of elements" (Rosenblatt, 1978/1995: 133). Rosenblatt (1978/1995: 134) could not have been clearer on the power of reflection in reading, than when she states: "Reflection on the literary experience becomes a re-experiencing, a re-enacting, of the work-as-evoked, and an ordering and elaborating of our response to it." Rosenblatt uses introspection and reflection rather interchangeably, but only one word found great attention in the latter half of the 1980s and first half of the following decade.

Reflection has entered the parlance of teacher education, to become "a popular slogan in both teacher education and professional education" (Leat, 1995: 161). I agree with Ardra Cole (1997: 12) when she states that reflection "might very well be one of the most frequently used (and misused) words in the teacher education vernacular." Alan Tom (1992: ix) is surprised by "the spectacular rise of reflective teaching," adding "[w]hile I did anticipate more attention to reflective teaching among teacher educators, I was completely unprepared for the explosion of interest that occurred in the late 1980s" (p. viii). I strongly agree with John Loughran's (2002: 33) contention: "Reflective practice has an allure that is seductive in nature because it rings true for most people as something useful and informing."

Kenneth Zeichner and David Liston (1996: 4), in their influential monograph *Reflective Teaching: An Introduction* contend that: “During the last decade, the slogan of reflective teaching has been embraced by teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers all over the world.” Zeichner and Liston (1996: 7) claim that “many teacher educators” from diverse if not opposite backgrounds, “have jumped on the bandwagon” of some version of reflective practice, making it one of the most “powerful and valuable” movements in the American educational system. Apart from making the strong case for reflective teaching, they identified and theorised five different traditions of reflective practice that have acted as guiding principles in education reform and teacher education: the academic; the social efficiency; the developmentalist; the social reconstructionist; and the generic tradition (Zeichner and Liston 1996: 51-62). I find these categories useful to frame my own training as a teacher, thus appreciating better my values, and my own beliefs and practices with my student-teachers. I always find myself moving back and forth models according to particular events or periods.

Generally speaking, reflection is considered “to be a desirable attitude and practice to foster among educators” (Cole, 1997: 12). One valuable contribution of reflective practice, as recognised by Morwenna Griffiths and Sarah Tann (1992), is that it can serve as a link between personal with public theories. Different levels of reflection – I. Rapid reaction, II. Repair, III. Review, IV. Research, V. Retheorising and reformulating – were identified as possibilities to engage with the ‘self’ (levels I-III), and the ‘other’ or public (levels IV-V). Others, consider reflective teaching as a “reaction against the view of teachers as technicians who narrowly construe the nature of the problems confronting them and merely carry out what others, removed from the classroom, want them to do” (Zeichner and Liston, 1996: 4).

#### **4.3 Delineating the contours of reflective practice: Dewey and Schön**

In 1933 John Dewey’s *How We Think*, distinguished between ‘routine thinking’ and ‘thinking as reflection.’ Routine thinking is associated with impulse, tradition and authority, uncritically maintaining things as they are. This is in line with what Dan Lortie (1975: 61) claimed to be “an apprenticeship of observation.” Indeed, different professions pass from one generation to the next by sheer observation and meticulous



copying the person who already possesses the trade; likewise, one enters the teaching profession after a process of socialisation with those who already have grasped the trade. Lortie (1975: 67) recognised that this kind of socialisation within the teaching profession alone “does not, however, lay the basis for informed assessment of teaching technique or encourage the development of analytic orientation towards work.” The major shortcoming within this kind of thinking and acting is the lack of innovation, creative and critical thinking, space for improvement or the problematisation of events that occur ‘naturally’ within a school or classroom setting. The end result is a model of ‘teacher-as-technician’ (Zeichner and Liston, 1996: 2-4) or to use a metaphor from science fiction literature, a ‘replicant’ or ‘cyborg’ (that is, a half-human and a half-technological being). Lortie (1975: 67) stresses the importance of “training experiences which offset their individualistic and traditional experiences,” otherwise “the apprenticeship-of-observation is ally of continuity rather than change.”

On the other hand, a reflection – in part rational and logical, but one that is also emotional and intuitive – is a conscious and deliberate stance towards reality as a whole rather than fragmentary or isolated event.

*Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought. ...it is a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of reasons.*

(Dewey, 1933: 6)

These are: (a) a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt; and (b) an act of search or investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts which serve to corroborate or to nullify the suggested belief.

(Dewey, 1933: 10)

According to Dewey, there are three attitudes that are necessary for reflective thinking: open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness. A reflective thinker is open to different alternatives, entertains different solutions, embraces the possibility that one’s thinking might be limited and that others can contribute to the better understanding of a situation or problem be it the students, the teaching/learning process or the school. Responsible action is being aware of consequences. Underlining every student-teacher’s and teacher’s action, is a moral and ethical dimension. And finally, wholeheartedness is elaborated by John Dewey (1933: 30) accordingly: “A genuine enthusiasm is an attitude that operates as an intellectual

force. When a person is absorbed, the subject carries him on.” Undivided commitment to the cause at hand is a requisite for reflective practice.

It is interesting to note how these three attributes resonate with, if not derived directly from, Oriental philosophy, mainly Zen. And are not open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness, three attributes through which one achieves inner peace, serenity, and long-lasting happiness by focusing on the here and now? “The challenge of Zen is to meet each day, each moment with a clear mind and a cleansed spirit, so that the moment to moment union with existence becomes the highest teaching” (Dunn Mascetti, 2000:14). Dewey’s three attributes offer an insight to me as a teacher, teacher-trainer and a person with a keen interest in oriental philosophy and especially haiku/senryu literature (Portelli, 2008). They are a means to focus on the present: by being a responsible agent of one’s actions, staying open to different points of view or interpretations of phenomena that naturally occur, and engaging with all one’s passion with the present, what is usually called ‘mindfulness.’ Shunryu Suzuki (1970: 40) rightly concludes that: “The awareness that you are here, right now, is the ultimate fact.” However, reflection in Deweyian terms and according to Zen philosophy is not a process of self-mortification, but rather a means towards self-improvement... “Our practice cannot be perfect, but without being discouraged by this, we should continue it. This is the secret of practice” (Suzuki, 1970: 73).

Zeichner and Liston (1996: 11) identify three kinds of consequences achieved by reflective thinking: personal, academic, and socio-political. Reflective action is sceptical about commonly held beliefs and solutions, always on the lookout for possible explanations for unfolding events and problems that ensue, preferring the broader picture to the micro-event. For example, rather than asking if I have reached a goal during a lesson, the reflective teacher might consider the implications of his/her actions. Reflective teachers in this sense act in a way that reflective action becomes their second nature. Wholeheartedness refers to the authentic enthusiasm or passion, and unconditional commitment to a cause.

In *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön (1983: 61) states that it is through reflection that a professional “can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of specialized practice, and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he (sic) may allow himself to experience.” As a reaction to ‘technical rationality’ (Schön, 1986: 21-49) and based on *when* the reflection takes place, he distinguished between: ‘reflection-on-action’ – defined by Jennifer Greenwood (1993: 1185) as “a cognitive post-mortem” – and ‘reflection-in-action’. Both are necessary to the reflective practitioner. However, a word of caution is necessary... in emphasising these two moments of reflection, Schön “implicitly undervalues reflection-before-action” (Greenwood, 1993: 1186) or fails to appreciate ‘anticipatory or prospective reflection’ (Conway, 2001).

The subjects of reflection are as unlimited as the situations (protected, messy, indeterminate and more), contexts (predictable or unexpected) and experiences s/he enters in. If the teacher reflects prior to a lesson for example during the planning stage, and just after an educational event for example when s/he is writing a lesson evaluation, the outcome of a lesson, then this type of reflection is called reflection-on-action. The kind of reflection that takes place during a lesson, is called reflection-in-action. In such situations, reflection-in-action “hinges on the experience of surprise” (Schön, 1983: 56) and “is central to the art through which practitioners cope with the troublesome ‘divergent’ situations of practice (Schön, 1983: 62). According to Schön, teachers must frame a problem, consider possible solutions, decide on one way to tackle and possibly solve the problem, review the outcome of such an action and reframe the problem or the new context. In so doing, one “becomes a researcher in the practice context” (Schön, 1983: 68), even if it is “not generally accepted – even by those that do it – as a legitimate form of professional knowing” (Schön, 1983: 69).

By this distinction, Schön gives credit to knowledge that is generated during practice, knowledge-in-action. If teachers scrutinise their behaviour and try to problematise their actions and maybe theorise from their practice, in a process of ‘framing and reframing’ (*vide* Schön, 1983, 1987, and for a practical application of this concept Yusko, 2004) of a situation, then they may have set foot on the path of self-improvement. That is why for the reflective practitioner, the process of reflection on his/her experience, is a life-long endeavour. One might rightly conclude, as Zeichner and Liston (1996: 22, my

emphasis) do, that Schön's "contribution of reflection-in- and on-action and the accompanying spiral of appreciation, action, and reappreciation *adds both texture and substance* to Dewey's understanding" of reflection.

#### **4.3.1 Some 'other' definitions of reflection**

Both Dewey and Schön, and other studies have come up with a plethora of meanings of the word under scrutiny. Nearly every author defines reflection or reflective practice in his/her own particular way, to an extent that reflection becomes "a nebulous concept not necessarily amenable to simple translations articulated in the abstract" (Stefani, Clarke and Littlejohn, 2000: 163). I am very much aware that too much talk and writing about reflective practice may have "brought with it a confusing and potentially distorting set of definitions and uses of the concept and possible meanings" (Bright, 1995: 69). My search for an initial meaning of reflection stands from the fact that I had to share with my student-teachers my own conception of reflection (*vide* Chapter 9) to get the communication going, and progress from there. I cannot but agree with: "If as teachers and tutors we cannot share with our students a concise operational definition of the concept [reflection], it is difficult to present reflective learning as a highly valued means dealing with the complexities, challenges and uncertainties inherent in personal and professional development" (Stefani, Clarke and Littlejohn, 2000: 164). Therefore, I intend to present some definitions that in more than one way have attracted my attention, and most of which I have discussed with my student-teachers, and then reflect on what I find engaging, and at times, perplexing in them.

Philippa Cordingley (1999: 183) suggested that reflective practice "is sustained activity, which uses research, evidence and some research-related processes as the basis for continuing professional development, and for identifying, understanding and tackling teaching and learning problems in classrooms." Two key points seem to emerge from the above definition... While I acknowledge the valuable contribution of research, I am very disquieted by the quasi-blind importance assigned to research- and evidence-based decision making. Second, the labelling of events as 'problems' may carry negative connotations. Once more, if I shift from a Western frame of mind to the Far East's, this

latter contention immediately brings along a ray of hope: just shifting the word to another dictionary, Chinese to be exact, problems, alas, are problems, according to the first symbol, but the second character that together forms the word problem denotes ‘sites for opportunities.’ Further, this way of coming close to a definition of reflection in relation to problem solving is very much related to and dependent on consciousness, for indeed... “becoming more reflective means achieving greater consciousness through some form of speech that is embedded in, and generated through, action” (McLaughlin, 1997: 186).

James Calderhead (1992: 140-141) defines a reflective teacher as one who is able to: “critically examining one’s own and other’s educational beliefs, and developing a coherent, articulate view of teaching and learning. [...] analyze their own practice and the context in which it occurs; the reflective teacher is expected to be able to stand back from their own teaching, evaluate their situation and take responsibility for their own future action.” Reflective practice may be an essential tessera in breaking the cycle of routine decision making, and looking from a distance at one’s practice within the broader picture of a professional practice. Thinking of oneself as a translator of somebody else’s programmes, syllabi and schemes of work, may lead to burnout, a sense of helplessness, lack of professional satisfaction, and possibly viewing oneself as an under-respected member within an impersonal system. However, the practice of teaching is greatly enhanced when teachers have the time to reflect individually and as a group. I agree with Thomas Farrell’s (2004: 7) unavoidable, albeit negative, conclusion, if reflection is not given the importance it merits: “Teachers who do not bother to reflect on their work can become slaves to routine and powerless to influence their future careers.”

Christopher Day (1993: 84) points out that reflection “is identified as being an essential part of learning” and goes as far as describing this characteristic as “under-researched.” This facet of the definition of reflection was picked up by Jennifer Moon (2001: 1) who stresses that one central feature of reflection is “that it lies somewhere around the notion of learning.” Within this particular context, I like Jack Mezirow’s (1990a: 1) definition of learning “as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action.”

A definition of reflection and its twin sisters, critical reflection and critical self-reflection, by Jack Mezirow (1990b: xvi) emphasises the idea of problem solving and the undeniable importance of one's beliefs in coming to terms with it.

*Reflection:* Examination of the justification for one's beliefs, primarily to guide action and to reassess the efficacy of the strategies and procedures used in problem solving.

*Critical reflection:* Assessment of the validity of the *presuppositions* of one's meaning perspectives, and examination of their sources and consequences.

*Critical self-reflection:* Assessment of the way one has posed problems and one's own meaning perspectives.

I particularly like the heightened consciousness and responsibility of one's actions, that emanate from these definitions. Apart from that, these three definitions of reflection encapsulate the idea of problem solving, by 'framing and reframing' (Schön, 1983) what was perplexing or puzzling in the first place. In the practice context, John Loughran (2002: 35) emphasises the importance of "developing a range of ways of seeing a problem." It is not automatic for student-teachers to identify a problem, and it is a question of having a teacher trainer to tell them this is a problem. Prior experiences determine what one identifies as a problem. Therefore, communication between teacher trainer and student-teachers is important to better understand what constitutes a dilemma, how it could be framed and reframed, and identify possible ways of action to solve it. "Reflective thinking generally addresses practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity before possible solutions are reached" (Hatton and Smith, 1995: 34). A suspension of quick judgment opens a door for reflection, develops an attitude that is hesitant to conclude without careful consideration of alternatives.

One final definition is that by Andrew Pollard (2005), in the influential publication *Reflective Teaching*. Based on the work of Dewey and others, Pollard (2005: 14-15; and for a deep discussion of these characteristics pp. 15-24) identified seven key characteristics of reflective practice, amongst which I consider the most important the following four quoted 'maxims':

- Reflective teaching is a cyclical or spiralling process, in which teachers monitor, evaluate and revise their own practice continuously.
- Reflective teaching implies an active concern with aims and consequences, as well as means and technical efficiency.

- Reflective teaching is based on teacher judgment, informed by evidence-based enquiry and insights from other research.
- Reflective teaching, professional learning and personal fulfilment are enhanced through collaboration and dialogue with colleagues.

I specifically chose these four because they tally with my practice. I consider reflection as a process, very similar or in relation to experiential learning philosophy (Kolb, 1985); very much in Dewey's spirit, reflection is bound by a sense of responsibility, ownership and an awareness of consequences with deep impact on people's lives – no one can reflect for oneself; responsibility brings with it an informed appraisal of possibilities and a careful selection of a course of action, better still if informed by theory and research; and finally apart from the fact that "reflective practice occurs within a social context" (Day 1993: 84).

I tend to lean towards a dialogical conception of reflection, which is enhanced when done in collaboration with others, in what Jürgen Habermas (1979; 1984) calls 'an ideal speech situation' which "can be understood as the projection of the conditions for a perfect discussion" (Edgar, 2006: 65). The participants sort of adhere to a tacit 'contract,' by which each individual: is acknowledged equal rights to use speech acts in a dialogue; is permitted to bring to the discussion any argument s/he deems right as a claim, counterclaim, queries recommendations, answers and explanations; is allowed to question any assertion made by other members; there is 'free' speech throughout, so that everybody can express his desires, attitudes, and needs; and finally, so long as the participants are honest to each other, they are not to be prevented by internal or external coercion from exercising their rights to participate freely. Such an ideal situation would be very desirable among practitioners who want to improve their practice through collaborative reflection.

#### **4.4 Why and how to reflect?**

Student-teachers and teachers alike ideally might find ways to constantly monitor their own practice, which is one means towards achieving constant renewal and embark on the road of professional development. "The process of reflective teaching supports the development and maintenance of professional expertise" (Pollard, 2002: 5). George Posner (2005: 21) summarised a lengthy and complicated argument thus:

“Experience + Reflection = Growth.” That is why choices that student-teachers and teachers have to make are closely related to the kind of teacher they want to become (Grant and Zeichner, 1984: 1). No one can deny that “becoming a reflective teacher is a continual process of growth” (Grant and Zeichner, 1984: 13)... a never ending process of ‘becoming’ (*vide* Intermezzo II). Reflection might be considered as a break from the hustle-and-bustle of everyday classroom and school life. Within a nursing background, but still relevant to teaching, reflective practice is considered as “the tool or instrument to promote the process of continuous development” (Gustafsson and Faberberg, 2004: 272), and “offers a powerful milieu for enabling the practitioner’s empowerment and development” (Gustafsson and Faberberg, 2004: 279). Student-teachers that are trained within a reflective paradigm, or inquiry-oriented approach, have “the propensity to improve, not just endure” (Cruickshank, 1987: 2) the hardships of initial teaching practice. In encouraging reflection in initial teacher education, as early as possible, student-teachers become “thoughtful and wiser” (Cruickshank, 1987: 3). Another important characteristic of effective reflective practice is that it broadens one’s perspective on a problem:

Reflection is effective when it leads the teacher to make meaning from the situation in ways that enhance understanding so that she or he comes to see and understand the practice setting from a variety of viewpoints.

(Loughran, 2002: 36)

Various pedagogues have identified techniques and methods to facilitate reflection. Since most of reflection’s processes are hidden to the eye – at times, concealed even to the I-eye – these methods and techniques are aimed at capturing those hidden fleeting moments of reflection, and possibly structure the thought processes that bring them to life in those that feel at a loss in front of a blank page or in a group discussion. Jennifer Moon (1999a: 171) stresses the fact that “if reflection is to be guided, the structure of a task provides the best guide for reflection” and consequently, “different types of reflective exercise[s] will generate different types of reflection.” Moon (1999a: 171) goes on to suggest that while initially students might need a lot of guidance, later on as they get the hang of it, presumably they would require less assistance and structure. In Table 4.1 I summarised the most popular methods and techniques supported by the relevant research.



**Table 4.1: A synthesis of methods and techniques used in reflective practice**

Method or Technique	Description/Comment
<i>Critical Incidents</i>	Writing and/or analysing “critical incidents” (Tripp, 1993) or “working back through memories, from the private to social” (Mitchell and Weber, 1999: 46-73).
<i>Life History Approach</i>	Using a life history approach, documenting one’s past and reflecting on the impact this has on one’s current beliefs, prejudices, preferences and the like (Knowles, 1993), what is generally called ‘autoethnography’ (Etherington, 2004: 137-158).
<i>Reflective Journal</i>	Keeping a reflective journal or filling a learning log (Holly, 1989; Fulwiler, 1987; Moon, 1999b). This is particularly indicated when one wants to document a period of time rather than just an instance or event; the sequential nature of the whole end product will then be used in finding patterns, continuities, tensions, and the sort, in what would later be another moment of reflection.
<i>Personal Philosophy</i>	Writing a personal philosophy about teaching and learning, “starting with your teaching experience, why you became a teacher and what you like about being a teacher. ... present your aims and goals as a teacher and your philosophy of teaching and learning. ... your preferred style of teaching, what you value most in teaching, how you look at the learners and what you would like to accomplish at the end of each day” (Chetcuti <i>et al.</i> , n.d.: 1.2).
<i>Analysing Metaphors</i>	Using metaphors (Korthagen, 1993: 321-322; Taggart and Wilson, 1998: 200-201).
<i>Analysing Photographs</i>	Selecting and commenting on photographs ( <i>vide</i> Mitchell and Weber, 1999: 74-123), drawings, paintings or pictures ( <i>vide</i> Korthagen, 1993: 322-324). Once an image is identified, a set of questions (Mitchell and Weber, 1999: 84) can prompt reflection by indicating aspects to focus on.
<i>Analysing Videos</i>	Turing the video camera on ourselves or on others, can later on, upon viewing, and possibly during a frank discussion with peers, lead to reflection (Mitchell and Weber, 1999: 189-217).
<i>Reflective Tasks</i>	Working out “tasks” (Moon, 1999a: 175-176), “action strategies” (Taggart and Wilson, 1998), “self-questioning protocols” (Posner, 2005) or “guided individual reflection protocol” (Hole and Hall McEntee, 2003).
<i>Reflective Dialogue</i>	Participating in “reflective conversations” (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998: 19-24), “seminar group discussions” (Loughran, 1996: 7-8) or simply ‘discussions’ (Brookfield and Preskill, 2005). These conversations or discussions can be defined as “practitioners creating understanding by exchanging information, opinions, or experiences while working towards a common goal” (Taggart and Wilson, 1998: 10).
<i>Guided Fantasies</i>	Letting oneself go in what are called ‘guided fantasies’ (Korthagen 1993: 323-324).
<i>Stories or Case-study Analysis</i>	Using and sharing stories as a springboard for thoughts (Burchell and Dyson, 2000). Rather than analysing similarities across stories or general themes, instead focusing on and “values the messiness, depth and texture of experienced life” (Etherington, 2004: 213). Recently there has been a burgeoning interest in the use of case-study in teacher training ( <i>vide</i> Shulman, 1986; Shulman, 1992).
<i>Creative Writing</i>	Immersing into creative writing, like poetry or drama, can act as a springboard for reflection... “As we reach inside to find words and form, we begin to express our thoughts and feelings through language, rhythm, metaphor, sound, imagery, that invite us to use both hemispheres of the brain (Etherington, 2004: 152).

These and other techniques or methods serve to prompt reflective thought. Using these techniques or methods, one might reach different levels of reflection.

#### 4.5 Levels of reflection

One interesting off-shoot from the research on reflection deals with the levels of reflection that student-teachers and teachers can aspire to. The following are just a few examples of studies on the levels of reflection that, for various reasons usually summarised at the end of each description, inspired my practice during the design and research phases.

One very influential article on reflection is that by van Manen, who way back in 1991 identified three types or levels of reflection:

- *anticipatory reflection* when teachers think in advance about their actions and their consequences;
- *active or interactive reflection* allows teachers to decide there and then as the events unfold; and thirdly,
- *recollective reflection*, that kind of reflection that tries to make sense of past experiences and assign deeper meanings to them.

van Manen's three levels of reflections are based on the conceptualisation of time as past-present-future (in a 1995 article van Manen labels them as 'retrospective,' 'contemporaneous' and 'anticipatory' reflection) progression or "time frames" (Hatton and Smith, 1995: 34), caught in a spiral act of thinking about the three phases and finding interlocking links between them. I find van Manen's scheme interesting since it finds resonance with Schön's ideas about reflection. Furthermore, I think these three kinds of reflection are easily identifiable in practice, since in normal day events, one naturally practices this kind of reflection without great effort.

John Bain, Roy Ballantyne, Colleen Mills and Nita Lester (2002: 14) developed the 5Rs framework, first devised to assess student-teachers' journal writing (Table 4.2). Later on, the same framework was also used to help student-teachers understand what serious reflection entails, and to help them self-assess their journal writing. The 5Rs framework or scale consists of five major levels or components of reflection on an event that might be either an issue, an incident or a situation.

**Table 4.2: Bain, Ballantyne, Mills and Lester’s 5Rs framework**

Level	Description
I. Reporting	When student-teachers describe or report an event.
II. Responding	When in their reflective writing student-teachers give an emotional or personal response to an issue, when they let loose their emotional side.
III. Relating	Finding commonalities between theoretical insights and the incident under investigation; connections can be made to personal past experiences.
IV. Reasoning	A tentative exploration or explanation of an event, emphasising the details and how these impinge on the understanding of the event.
V. Reconstructing	Based on the reasoned understanding of an event, consisting of framing and reframing of the circumstance, the student-teacher conceptualises a possible conclusion and drafts an action plan to guide future performance.

Each major component is further subdivided into three or four levels (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills and Lester, 2002: 15-16). It is interesting how the authors used the scheme and provide detailed examples from student-teachers’ journals to illustrate each point and level. On a more practical side, the researchers found that: most writings were descriptive in nature; student-teachers need assistance to develop their reflective writings skills; self-assessment of ones’ writing heightens the awareness of the quality of writing even if no guidance is given; and that feedback from a trained and committed tutor improves the level of writing and greatly influences the way student-teachers conceptualise reflective writing in their professional development. These findings truly opened my eyes to avoid common mistakes and at the same time prime my practice in order to be more research-based.

Another major study, that by Patricia King and Karen Kitchener (1994: 1-13), situates reflective judgement within critical thinking, demonstrating rather convincingly that reflection has been “a neglected facet of thinking.” Spread between childhood and adulthood, their model of Reflective Judgments is divided into eight stages, grouped under three steps: Pre-reflective thinking, Quasi-reflective thinking, and finally, Reflective thinking. What distinguishes the three stages is the idea the individual holds of knowledge and the kind of justification brought forward to defend one’s position. These set of assumptions “develop sequentially,” with subsequent stages developing on earlier stages, “which suggests a pattern in the emergence of cognitive structures” (King and Kitchener, 1994: 42). The very basic kind of assumption about knowledge is that it is concrete and observable. When one’s idea of knowledge becomes more ambiguous, since the person becomes aware the knowledge is rather idiosyncratic and dependent on situations and context, takes it a step further up. The

last stage of reflective judgment is attained when knowledge “is the outcome of a process of reasonable inquiry in which solutions to ill-structured problems are constructed (King and Kitchener, 1994: 15). Reading information about this model, one is immediately struck by strong “developmental progression” (King and Kitchener, 1994: 17). While the researchers bring forward a rather strong argument on the importance of stages of development and I find their schematisation neat and logical, I cannot but wonder how one really progresses through the stages. Is it the individual that makes the leaps from one stage to the other, or is it the environment, context or situations (sequence of events) that initiates the whole process? They identify a ‘solution’ to this problem by hypothesising that there is an optimal level and a lesser functional level gaining access to a stage, that is marked by a period of strong sustained growth called a spurt, and then a plateau that is required for acquiring a new skill or the application of the learned skill to other situations. Indeed, these new skills “are constructed through a sequence of micro-development steps between levels” (King and Kitchener, 1994: 35). I find a second criticism to the whole scheme, that is, it values one kind of knowledge, abstract knowledge; the rest is either assigned a lesser importance, or not considered at all “...true reflective thinking presupposes that individuals hold the epistemic assumptions that allow them to understand and accept real uncertainty” (King and Kitchener, 1994: 17). In this sense, Howard Gardner’s (1983; 1993) studies on multiple-intelligences and David Goleman’s (1995) studies that homes in emotional intelligence, are indeed an eye opener for everyone interested on reflection as a way of thinking about the World in several ways without being too rigid in or dogmatic about one position or stage.

#### **4.5.1 The object of my reflection**

Another way of theorising about reflection is by focusing on the object of reflection. A model that is “cyclical, flexible, focused and holistic” is that proposed by Anthony Ghaye and Kay Ghaye (1998: 6-11). The four foci of their model are: reflection on context; reflection on values; reflection on improvement; and reflection on practice. Furthermore, one can have different kinds of reflection on practice, ranging from descriptive reflection up to critical reflection, passing by perceptive, receptive and interactive reflection (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998: 24). To achieve a deep kind of reflection, Ghaye and Ghaye (1998: 19-24) propose “a reflective conversation” that

embodies some of the following characteristics: focuses on values; its trajectory is from the private to the communal and public; is based on a question and answer format; is forward looking; and finally, has the possibility of providing insight and at the same time empowering teachers when they question their experiences. Reflective conversations have an added value over and above other kinds of conversations when they draw attention to what might be in terms of valued outcomes, critically challenge the teaching and learning process as is, and consequently provide a strong argument in favour of change based on principled and ethically-grounded improvement (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998: 122). These reflective conversations tally with “seminar group discussions” proposed by, for example, John Loughran (1996: 7-8). I like this model since it is very schematised, avoids dualisms, and maps down the territory that might be involved in reflection-on-practice. The constructivist idea of reflection as part of a community of practitioners that share practically the same core principles and values towards an improvement of practice, attracts my attention. Reader-response theorists value discussion not only as a pedagogical tool albeit more or less structured and well led by an informed teacher, but also a philosophy of practice. In dialogue one finds an existential modus that is a more matured and developed response (practice) is attained that could never be achieved all alone. The solitary figure of a reflective critic is demystified and set aside for a more progressive discourse of social inquiry of prospective critical readers of a democratic society where no one should be left behind.

#### **4.5.2 Critical reflection**

One dimension of reflection that seems to surface a lot in the literature on reflection is the question of criticality of the whole endeavour. Critical reflection, “the highest level of reflection” (Yost, Sentner and Forlenza-Bailey, 2000: 41), has gained momentum, especially after the publication of Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis’ *Becoming Critical* (1986), and Stephen Brookfield’s *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995). Both books hold the position that the starting point for critical reflection is teachers’ knowledge, that is later scrutinised in the light of historical, intellectual and social context. This reflective process can be taught and learnt, especially if a number of suitable and generative techniques are employed. The

following is another definition of reflection I was particularly drawn to for its clarity and simplicity:

...reflective teaching is peeling back the layers of our daily work, looking under the surface of our teaching, making a conscious attempt to see our teaching selves as students see us, or as an observer in our classrooms would. It also means looking at the wider contexts that affect our teaching – issues of social justice, of school structure, of leadership.

(Check and Hall McEntee, 2003: xiii)

For me, the most straightforward and lucid model is that by Hesook Kim (1999) who identified three distinct phases: the descriptive phase; the reflective phase; and finally the critical/emancipatory phase. Above all, “[c]ritical reflection holds out the promise of emancipatory learning, learning that frees adults from implicit assumptions constraining thought and action in the everyday world” (Stein, 2000: 2). Within a transformative learning environment, reflection carries with it a particular function: “reassessing the presuppositions on which our beliefs are based and acting on insights derived from transformed meaning perspective that results from such reassessments” (Mezirow, 1990a: 18). Critical reflection gains a deeper meaning when ethical and moral dimensions are related to it as major attributes (van Manen, 1977; Liston and Zeichner, 1987).

#### **4.6 On the road of reflection**

For my own conception of reflection I picked on and adapted Christopher Day’s (1993: 84; my emphasis) insight: “reflective practice is seen to exist along a *continuum* or ‘reflective *spectrum*’”. In praise of ‘dichotomies,’ Lee Shulman (1988: 33) notices “virtue on both sides of the divide, and that there was a deep set of principles through which the dichotomy could be resolved.” I cannot but sympathise with and make my own Vicki Kubler LaBoskey’s (1998: 43) powerful criticism against dichotomies:


Dichotomous thinking is not only a waste of precious time, it is highly detrimental. It often pits one important goal against another, making it less likely we will achieve either because it divides our resources .... Lastly, it detracts us from the real issues and promotes a futile search for one right answer.

This same solution was proposed by Louise Rosenblatt (1978/1995) when she immediately resorted to the ingenious idea of the spectrum or continuum (rather than bi-polar opposites) when she discusses aesthetic and efferent reading (*vide* Chapter 3). If one were to pursue dichotomous thinking, one should be aware of Shulman's (1988: 37) admonition: "Either-or thinking may be rhetorically effective, but in practice it is limiting and provincial."

#### **4.6.1 Reflection in a Maltese context: A home-grown metaphor**

In Malta, one rite of passage at the age of 18 to 20 is getting past the driving licence test. It doesn't matter if one owns a car or not, the licence *per se* has a liberating aura to it. During the study-unit 'The Literary Experience in the Secondary School' I had to find a way to explain defining characteristics of reflective writing to my student-teachers. I don't remember when or how it happened but I resorted to driving *ala Maltija* as the guiding metaphor. It is worthwhile knowing that a myth that still persists about the Maltese is that when it comes to driving officially they should stick to the left (one of the very few countries in the world with this peculiarity, remnant of the time Malta was a British Colony), and not on the right (like what other neighbouring European countries do). However, generally speaking, Maltese tend to prefer to drive either in the middle, or more cynically, where they find the shade! Therefore, when I presented the student-teachers with the 'Road of Reflection,' they immediately got the idea or sense of what I was trying to convey. One can easily compare reflective writing to driving on a Maltese road, especially when a driver is still green and zigzags along the way, until s/he learns to steer on the proper side of the road. Likewise, when learning to write reflectively – preferably tending towards critical reflection rather than descriptive writing – there is a more desirable and effective way of directing oneself. Furthermore, Table 4.3 was used as a tool for self-reflection when student-teachers had to evaluate their quality of reflective writing and deciding the way forward.

**Table 4.3: On the road to reflection...**

Narrative-descriptive writing		Critical-reflective writing
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A writing that hints at different incidents and situations without ever focusing in, expands or elaborates on one.</li> <li>2. A by and large detailed recollection of an incident as it evolved, without however helping the reader arrive at a conclusion about the matter.</li> <li>3. The writer's responsibility in the incident is not clear and/or not evaluated.</li> <li>4. All that happened is accepted as if it were destiny, without any will to challenge this defeated mentality.</li> <li>5. There is little if no evidence that this incident be interpreted against a theoretical backdrop; evidencing a belief in the dichotomy between theory and practice. In most cases theory is considered irrelevant or even not considered at all in the writing.</li> <li>6. A blind faith in routines. Little if no curiosity in understanding how and why things happen.</li> <li>7. An absolute and monolithic writing interpretation of an incident; there is no analysis of different possibilities: "I know exactly why things happened... let me tell you..."</li> </ol>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. A critical incident selected among others for its reflective potential.</li> <li>B. A critical incident narrated in enough detail whilst being concise, in order that the reader can reach his/her own conclusions.</li> <li>C. A writing with a particular voice.</li> <li>D. A detailed analysis of the context that the incident or experience evolved in, so as to identify those factors that give it birth and impinge on it.</li> <li>E. A writing with clear evidence of an open mind ready to entertain multiple interpretations of and different perspectives on the incident.</li> <li>F. Relates lived experience to theoretical framework explored at university; writing refers to seminal studies and theories on the subject and on education in general.</li> <li>G. Poses a number of questions so that the incident is understood in all its ramifications.</li> <li>H. The lived experience inspires a series of targets for further development.</li> <li>I. The writing contains possible routes towards those desired aims/goals.</li> <li>J. The writing contains ethical and moral ramifications inspired by the incident or situation.</li> <li>K. The different actors/players in the incident or situation are considered responsible and free agents of their own consciousness.</li> <li>L. One can learn from experience.</li> </ol>



#### 4.6.2 Research backing the road to reflection

Table 4.3 is based on research that tries to typify reflection, normally in levels or stages. The following are just four examples presented chronologically:

- van Manen's (1977) three levels of reflection: technical reflection, practical reflection and critical reflection;
- Day's (1993) three hierarchal levels of reflection: actions and behaviour, theories and beliefs, ethics and morals;
- Hatton and Smith's (1995) four levels of reflective writing: descriptive writing, descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection and critical reflection; and
- Bain, Ballantyne, Mills and Lester's (2002) 5Rs framework for the five major levels of reflection: reporting, responding, relating, reasoning and reconstructing.

Jennifer Moon (2004: 96), reviewing a number of these studies, concludes that: "Generally this material seems to be consistent, attributing similar qualities to the deeper levels of reflection and generally viewing superficial reflection as descriptive." While I am aware that some models (eg. Sparks-Langer, Simmons, Pasch, Colton, and Starko, 1990: 27) consider 'no descriptive language' as the most basic level that can be attained, however following different models (mainly, Hatton and Smith, 1995), I choose to call the first column that encapsulates the lowest level of reflection: 'narrative-descriptive writing.' On the other hand, the second column gathers under one heading the most inspiring characteristics drawn from the literature that promulgates deep reflective writing: 'critical-reflective writing.' These are just a few examples: critical incidents (Tripp, 1993); voice (Graves, 1983: 227-228); openmindedness (Dewey, 1933); research-based action and interpretation of event (Pollard, 2005); steps back and poses questions (Hayes, Nikolic and Cabaj, 2001); considers multiple points of view (Hatton and Smith, 1995); identifies goals/targets for further development in self-directed learning or autonomous learning model (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2006); assigns a moral and ethical dimension to reflection (Day, 1993; Liston and Zeichner, 1987; Sparks-Langer, Simmons, Pasch, Colton, and Starko, 1990: 27); awareness, consciousness and mindfulness (McLaughlin, 1997; Suzuki, 1970); responsibility of one's actions (Dewey, 1933) and learning from experience (Kolb, 1985).

#### 4.7 Some problems with reflective practice

Although reflection has been hailed as a very positive movement in education during the last two or three decades, this has not been without some detractors and a fair share of criticisms.

Two difficult questions related to effective reflective practice are ‘what is reflective practice?’ and ‘can it be taught?’ Related, then, are a number of other ensuing questions: ‘if no, why bother so much about it?’ ‘if yes, how best can it be taught?’ ‘what methods best suit student-teachers’ to be inducted into this skill?’ ‘is reflective practice simply a writing skill or a rhetorical device to achieve empathy and possibly conviction in a receptive or gullible audience?’ ‘is reflective practice an art, a science, or both?’ ‘does it really matter if it is an art or a science?’ ‘what background knowledge and dispositions best aid the development of reflective practice?’ ‘when it is best to be taught reflective teaching?’ ‘is it best taught individually or as a group?’ and lastly, a dilemma suggested by Day (1993: 83) ‘how does reflection lead to change? One thing seems to be clear, encouraging student-teacher to reflect by simply telling them to do so, is not an effective way of achieving that end (Loughran, 2002: 33). However, these difficult questions are nearly all unanswered, or at best only tentative answers seem to emerge from the literature. Indeed, a more thorough understanding of the complex nature of reflection is desirable, especially in programmes that capitalise on this notion for their *raison d’être*. Otherwise teacher education programmes that promote reflection as one of their core values “are vulnerable to criticisms about credibility” (Sumsion and Fleet, 1996: 129).

One might list a whole list of barriers to reflection residing either internally to the learner or externally to him/her (Boud and Walker, 1993). Unexamined beliefs, prejudices about the learner, and one’s personal emotional state, are examples of internal barriers. Examples of external barriers are the school environment, cultural expectations, colleagues, and social life of the individual. To the above list, Ardra Cole (1997: 15-21) adds: anxiety, fear, a sense of helplessness and loneliness, and contextual hostility. These and other barriers to reflection should not be considered as insurmountable stumbling blocks in the journey to becoming a more effective reflective practitioner.

Although reflective practice proponents seem to be inspired by John Dewey's conception of reflection, as elaborated and popularised by Schön, many still believe that as a concept it is still very 'vague and ambiguous' (Zeichner and Liston, 1996: 7) making it difficult to make accurate sense of what it actually entails. Another bone of contention is the moment when one can claim that reflection differentiates itself from simply thinking about something, what Barry Bright (1995: 69) identified as "a problem of recognition." How can one differentiate between an action inspired by reflection and another that is simply non-reflective? One way to go about it is by considering all teachers' actions as based on some form of reflection but then they diverge on cases of efficient and inefficient reflection (Bright, 1995: 70).

One difficult problem with reflection is finding time to reflect (Hatton and Smith, 1995: 37). Student-teachers are learning the first moves, and therefore it stands to reason that they "are hard pressed for time, interested in practical outcomes, and seek out tried and tested strategies as a first port of call, rather than trying to re-invent the wheel" (Cordingley, 1999: 183). Both as a lecturer and researcher I lived this problem, and I had several dialogues with my student-teachers about the time factor (*vide* Chapter 10).

A lack of a 'value scheme,' for want of a better word, or "a suitable knowledge base" (Hatton and Smith, 1995: 37) to contrast with experience, is another difficulty frequently encountered by prospective teachers in their training phase. Some might even dismiss reflective practice by student-teachers thinking that they do not have the necessary experiences to be able to reflect. However, this criticism was tackled forcefully and convincingly by John Smyth (1989: 7) when he argues that reflection should not be the privilege of the experienced teacher because that would often mean "to deny a long and sometimes harsh history of being treated in certain ways as students... These histories are most decidedly worth unpacking in some considerable detail for the more just and humane alternatives they will reveal." Student-teachers may have a rather idealised image of teaching, and since reality is more fragmentary and complicated, they immediately retract to their small comfort-zones if they are not led to reflect in a structured and appropriate manner, possibly using some of the techniques suggested above.

Some might question whether reflection is a solitary or a community endeavour. For example, subject meetings within schools or colleges, can serve as a safe place where practitioners bring their experience and generate knowledge together. However, Schön's (1983; 1987) idea of reflection seems to present a model that is based on the individual rather than also on the community. If one draws parallels with reading and response within a literature classroom setting, students can respond individually, and there is nothing wrong with that, but when they participate in group or classroom discussions, then the quality of response to a text is greatly enhanced. The same might apply to reflection-on-action by teachers. I share the same strong belief of Zeichner and Liston's (1996: 77) that "good reflective teaching is both democratic and self-critical."

Greater awareness of barriers of reflection may lead one to think of ways to overcome these hindrances. With prospective teachers, one should be careful how to tackle reflectively the first experiences. David Leat (1995) has identified stress, self-doubt, and loss of self-esteem as the three main drawbacks when student-teachers are examining their own practice, and identified a dire need for emotional support in examining their practice. Rita Newton (1997: 146) identified three remedies or possible solutions, to overcoming barriers to reflection: by oneself; with the help of a group (maybe with the help of 'critical friends' (Smyth, 1989) – what I reckon to be a gross misnomer); and/or with the help of a facilitator. Like in a twelve-step programme, one must start by admitting that there is a difficulty, and try to clarify the boundaries of this constraint. Sharing experiences within a supportive and like-minded people may reinvigorate one's desire to achieve more and excel. Groups may have the tendency to create an atmosphere of trust and challenge. An informed person may give guidance to the perplexed and help the person feeling lost to set realistic and achievable targets. I remember the Yiddish story of a man in a deep hole crying for help, and the passers by simply ignored him or presented him with a long list of advice, that seemed irrelevant to him at that time, until a man jumped in the same hole; and when he asked why, the answer was 'because I've been here once, help will arrive soon, stay calm... I'm here with you...'

To evaluate or not reflective writing or practices is another problem or dilemma that people working with this framework have to face, and try their best to resolve within their particular context. From the literature I surveyed, there are very few instances when reflective writing is assessed. One lone proponent of such a state of affairs, to who's perspective I do not subscribe, is Cruickshank (1987: 37) who concludes that "performance in reflective teaching can be evaluated for grades if that is desirable." However, further studies have amply demonstrated that the opposite seems to be the case:

At present, there are substantial difficulties involved in attempting to identify and assess reflection. Given current methodological and pragmatic limitations, the assessment of reflection raises complex issues of consistency and equity as well as broader pedagogical and ethical concerns.

(Sumsion and Fleet, 1996: 128)

One solution to this rather insurmountable problem is the adoption of alternative methodologies, such as formative assessment and their most famous emblem portfolios, as will be tackled in the following chapter.

#### **4.8 Two images of reflection**

If I had to choose two images that embody what I believe is reflection, I would pick two very contrasting ones. Auguste Rodin's 'The Thinker' is an iconic image of someone absorbed in one's thoughts or lost in deep self-analysis, and possibly highly sophisticated navel-gazing. The man embodies an idea of thinking or reflection as a 'solitary' endeavour. Most probably, very few would know that originally the same sculpture was named 'The Poet' representing Dante at the doorstep of hell in *La Divina Commedia*. Had Rodin kept the original name, then thinking would be a momentous solitary activity, in wait of a guide, in Dante's case a Virgil of all importance. Thus, maybe, the same statue would hint that another person, teacher/mentor is round the corner to alleviate the weight of self-reflection. From an image of near despair, since it is just a transitory phase, it would be transformed into an image of hope.

The second image that comes to my mind if I had to choose an iconic piece symbolising reflection or better still meditation; for sure I would travel far away, in search of a person lost in *zazen* (literally meaning ‘seated meditation’), the seated posture Zen Buddhist practitioners painstakingly exercise throughout their entire life to calm their body and mind to achieve or experience *satori*, enlightenment, “the point where, released from the grip of worldly passions and at one with the universe, the life is illuminated” (Verity, 1996: 29). Like reflection, meditation is taught through techniques, amongst which: concentration with special emphasis on breathing “until the mind is concentrated” (Lowenstein, 2006: 88); *koan* introspection (a riddle, a seemingly illogical story or statement that is understood only by direct introspection); or just sitting and be aware of one’s environment. One classic Zen story (in Baldock, 1994: 15) related to *zazen* states:

A monk asked a Zen Master, ‘What does one think of while sitting?’  
‘One thinks of not-thinking,’ the Master replied.  
‘How does one think of not-thinking?’ the monk asked.  
‘Without thinking,’ said the Master.

Reflection and meditation as conceived in this way is completely different from Western high emphasis on rationality. Instead, Eastern philosophy can be conceived as an endless search towards “deep interiority” and “becoming one with nature” (Masciotra, Roth and Morel, 2007: 107-126; 127-150). Indeed, when in circa 1689 the most famous Japanese haiku master, Bashō, set along his journey on the *Narrow Road to the Interior* – which “much, much more than a poetic travel journal” (Hamill, 1999: x) – he was not only walking around Japan but also performing a journey inside his own consciousness. Trying to act in the present means that experience is savoured to the full, taking deep pleasure in doing what has to be done. “Consciousness manifests itself in and through action, or better still, it embraces action to constitute unity with it” (Masciotra, Roth and Morel, 2007: 112). Finally, the aim is not a person in search of relationality that “expresses situated and situating knowing-in-action and thinking-in-action, while reflectivity reveals its best out of direct action” (Masciotra, Roth and Morel, 2007: 210-211). “Relationality refers to practitioners as they develop as Self-in-their-professional world. ...is part of and develops in praxis” (Masciotra, Roth and Morel, 2007: 211). What a completely different frame of mind; not a heavy burden of thought but an aspiration for lightness. Serenity emanates from

the face of the person in *zazen* posture... what a contrasting difference to Rodin's sculpture and reflection as conceived nearly throughout the whole chapter.

Somewhere between these two conceptions of reflection, I find my own interpretation, "embracing contraries" (Elbow, 1986) at times. Reflection leads to thoughtful action, to self-awareness, to transformation, to peace of mind, to enlightenment...

## CHAPTER 5

### Assessment: The issues and three emblems

#### 5.1 Introduction

Examinations have a long history (Black, 1998: 7-8; Foucault, 1979: 184-194) and their status seems to be unchallenged... until recently!

#### 5.2 The examination culture

Examinations have been promoted in the name of reliability and validity, even if a number of aspects, such as errors in marking and variability of pupils' effort on a particular day might, theoretically, threaten them (Black, 1998: 37-57). However, while contentious to some, tests and examinations have served, and still are serving, a number of purposes, as summarised in Table 5.1:

**Table 5.1: Some purposes of examinations**

- Guiding teachers in ability grouping within their class.
- Facilitating and, to a certain degree, 'objectifying' the school administrators' task of progressing students from one class or level to another; in Michel Foucault's (1979: 184) words, examinations make "it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish."
- Identifying and measuring a school's success rate.
- Determining the way one views knowledge and how subjects are structured and possibly taught.
- Providing and sustaining "the enormous bureaucratic structure" that everyone can see at work from primary schools up to higher education institutions (Peim and Flint, 2009: 344); establishes a visibility through which individuals are differentiated and judged (Foucault, 1979: 184).
- Helping employers to pick a particular candidate rather than another who has performed less successful; Foucault (1979) indicates how examinations have become a principle of bio-power, for instance they are inscribed in the governmental machinery of the capillary state.

Evaluation practices cannot be understood in a vacuum, but rather are a product of historical development of educational systems and other social factors (Black, 1998: 7). For example the "extraordinary success" of "English language examinations would never have assumed such prominence had English not emerged as the World's second language during the course of the twentieth century" (Raban, 2008: 1). Examinations generate a business and revenue quantifiable in millions. Examinations



set by Cambridge University alone have over 8 million candidates a year, in over 150 countries (Raban, 2008: 1). Susan Raban (2008: 2, my emphasis) describes with great enthusiasm the change in name in one internationally renowned examining body, as being part of that revered tradition of building “on past achievements *while belonging quintessentially to the world of the future.*” It is as if she is saying, examinations are here to stay!

One cannot underestimate the importance of examination culture in Malta, either. This is another remnant of Malta’s colonial past: “...one has to keep in mind that the British examination system, with its emphasis on summative assessment, was taken up lock, stock and barrel by the Maltese educational system and incorporated within its foundations and structure” (Mifsud, 1991: 115). Indeed: “Examinations are rated by a number of Maltese as their first priority, sometimes coming even before health” (Anon, 2009: 90). This is done to such an extent that in “Malta, even at our University, the importance of examinations and the way they are conducted is perhaps overrated. They are often considered to be the all of one’s being” (Anon, 2009: 90). Since I lived within this examination culture, I am very much aware of the positive and negative impact it had on a personal level and have witnessed its effects on countless friends and acquaintances (*vide* Chapter 1).

### **5.2.1 Some criticisms to the examination culture**

Summative assessment is not immune from criticisms. Reviewing a number of assessment practices across the European Union, Birenbaum *et al.* (2006: 2) identify the negative effects summative assessment practices have on students and teachers. Students fail because current assessment practices focus on assessment *of* learning rather than assessment *for* learning; are limited in scope; drive teaching for assessment rather than for learning; and ignore individual differences. Consequently, traditional forms of assessment, discriminate between high- and low-achieving students, and marginalise ‘failed’ students. Anxiety and low self-esteem are the collateral damage of a summative assessment culture (*vide* Assessment Reform Group, 2002b).

Assessment is presented as objective and possibly more insidious than that: “Assessment partakes of scientific absolutism of western metaphysics and is therefore implicated in its necessarily delimited determination of the truth – the truth of the student’s work, the truth of the student’s Being, the truth of the subject...” (Peim and Flint, 2009: 352). Indeed, “[e]xams have an aura of science and promote standardization, characteristics that have considerable appeal in our society” (Ricci and Berger, 2005: 47). In fact, the widespread practice of examination “is not an exact science, and we must stop presenting it as such” (Gipps, 1994: 167) and these pseudo-objective characteristics “obstruct good teaching” (Ricci and Berger, 2005: 47). Caroline Gipps and Patricia Murphy (1994) have demonstrated rather convincingly that tests and examinations are not as ‘fair’ as one might initially think. Gender, social class and ethnic differences impact on the performance and success rate of any test (Gipps and Murphy, 1994).

On the other hand, teachers are also ‘failed’ by the current test- or examination-driven assessment systems. These are just a few limitations based on Birenbaum *et al.*’s (2006: 2) review: teachers are forced to teach for evaluation instead of developing ways to support integration of subjects and topics across the curriculum – or, as Carlo Ricci and Ellie Berger (2005: 45) in a motto fashion describe, as: “Teachers do not teach students; they teach curricula”; streamlining teaching without proper care for individual differences and regarding all learners as identical; drawing a big chunk of teaching time exclusively for coaching for examinations; limiting the teacher’s professional autonomy and development.

One cannot underestimate the negative effect examinations have on parents or care givers either. The level of anxiety about their children’s performance is unlimited especially in those cases where there is a heightened awareness of the repercussions related to high-stake testing, such as streaming.

To sum up... the practice of teacher’s test and formal examinations encourages rote learning and learning at a very superficial level, contributing significantly to ‘a poverty of practice’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 5). As highlighted by Birenbaum *et al.* (2006: 1-2): current assessment systems tend to be un-economical, inauthentic, context independent, time consuming, inflexible, and demotivating for both learners

and teachers. Therefore, the winds of change that are blowing, “are not innovations for innovation’s sake, but changes designed to improve student learning after traditional approaches to assessment have become problematic in some way given the changed context” (Gibbs, 2006: 21).

### **5.2.2 Who is leading the attack on the examination culture?**

Actually, a number of criticisms were put forward by those who subscribe to an assessment culture that favour ‘authentic assessment’ (*vide* Torrance, 1995), ‘performance assessment’ (*vide* Broadfoot, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1994), and more recently, ‘assessment for learning’ (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 2002a, 2002b). To this new terminology one might add ‘formative assessment’ (*vide* Torrance and Pryor, 1998), ‘school-based assessment’ and ‘coursework assessment,’ that by and large refer to the same set of practices and principles. The counter-culture proposed by these pedagogues “is a culture of success, backed by a belief that all can achieve” (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 9).

Caroline Gipps (1994: 1) aptly introduced *Beyond Testing* by hinging immediately on the assessment-turn that was (and I believe, still is) taking place in educational spheres and at all levels: “Assessment is undergoing a paradigm shift... from testing and examination culture to an assessment culture.” Paradigm shifts occur when there is a generalised dissatisfaction with the prevailing thought, and little by little a counter argument evolves that meets the required exigencies and creates an interpretive framework for the understanding of new events (Kuhn, 1970). Paul Black (1998: 4) pointed out that while there is some “overlap” between the two, ‘testing’ carries with it an aura of “being hard, rigorous, inflexible and narrow-minded” and ‘assessments’ as “being soft, sensitive, and broad- or woolly-minded.” While one might theorise about the relationship between formative and summative assessment practices (for example Harlen, 2006), I am of the opinion that it is too early in the paradigm shift to find continuities or trace similarities, rather than stress the striking and not so evident differences.

### 5.3 Assessment *for* Learning

Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998: 3), two of the strong proponents of assessment for learning, rightly *do not* conclude that “in formative assessment, we have yet another ‘magic bullet’ for education”, and I might add, at any level of education. However, in the critique of the Assessment Reform Group (2002b) of traditional forms of evaluations, and the principles (2002a), practices and research (Gardner, 2006) they have undertaken during the last few years, a new paradigm has been gaining momentum among the community of educationalists.

Under the name of ‘Assessment *for* Learning’ an awareness is emerging of a way of conceptualising assessment, that shifts attention towards “...the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there” (Assessment Reform Group, 2002a). “By definition, the purpose of formative assessment is to lead to further learning” (Stobart, 2006: 136), or as Royce Sadler (1998: 77, my emphasis) put it, “assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve *and accelerate* learning.” My personal conviction to move away from evaluation towards a more formative kind of assessment stems from the not so often acknowledged fact that “there is a relationship between assessment and the way in which subject matter is presented in teaching: this in turn affects – through the tasks in which pupils engage – what and how pupils learn” (Gipps, 1994: 18). The paradigm shift from evaluation to assessment for learning, rests on the following premise: “...instruction and formative assessment are indivisible” (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 10).

Drawing on the research and findings of the Assessment Reform Group (2002a), assessment for learning has been characterised by ten principles. Amongst these ten principles I consider the following four as the most important for their clarity and at the same time radical reorienting factors when it comes to thinking about my own personal assessment beliefs and practices:

- *Assessment for learning should focus on how students learn.* Simple as this might be, evaluation tends to forget that students’ learning is the important all embracing feature. The idea of delivering a lecture lends itself rather easily to subsiding the

- *Assessment for learning should be regarded as a key professional skill for teachers.* Teachers are viewed as ‘technicians’ when they unreflectively construct and/or administer tests and examinations. On the other hand, within an assessment for learning framework, teachers are aware of the negative consequences of summative assessment on motivation and self-esteem (*vide* Assessment Reform Group, 2002b) and strive towards a re-interpretation of their role and their greater responsibilities towards students (*vide* Assessment Reform Group, n.d.). A wider, more comprehensive picture is attained when tests and examinations are just part of the evidence collected about a student’s performance and attainment.
- *Assessment for learning should promote commitment to learning goals and a shared understanding of the criteria by which they are assessed.* When students are actively involved in their assessment, when they share the same meaning with their teachers about the criteria, then the assessment becomes more meaningful. The development of criteria with my students was a necessary final step in divesting my authority and democratically sharing it with my students (*vide* Chapter 11).
- *Assessment for learning develops the learners’ capacity for self-assessment so that they can become reflective and self-managing.* The “link of formative assessment to self-assessment is not an accident – it is indeed inevitable” (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 9). Meta-cognition is hailed as being a desirable feature of an assessment for learning framework (Burke, 2005: 133-145). Students should be encouraged to think about what and why they are doing, how they are learning, and furthermore, self-assess their own progress. Gipps (1994: 4) makes this point clear: “If we wish to foster higher order skills including application of knowledge, investigation, analyzing, reasoning and interpretation for *all our pupils*, not just the élite, then we need our assessment system to reflect that.” Related to this, the study-unit ‘The Literary Experience in Secondary School,’ from the very start was infused with reflective tasks and during the second year, even if against my better instincts, I made the leap of faith in self- and peer-assessment (*vide* Chapter 11). In my journey I always kept in mind the fact that: “Teachers taking on formative assessment are giving their students a voice and in many cases acting so as to make that voice louder” (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam, 2003: 98).

I agree with David Boud (2006: xviii) that while the assessment sphere is in continuous change, “it is not clear how it will settle down from the current flurry of activity,” discussions, conferences, debates, and the like. Much attention is paid to assessment, and new evaluation regimes are always trying to creep in and become part of the *status quo*. However, formative assessment or assessment for learning are all manifestations of the dissatisfaction with traditional forms of evaluation practices. I choose to expand on three related concepts very much at the heart of assessment for learning. Feedback, portfolios, and finally, rubrics and self-assessment. I picked these three for the value they had in my research (*vide* Chapter 11).

#### **5.4 Feedback**

While feedback to students is acknowledged to be a crucial area, like many other areas in education, it is “relatively under-researched” (Mutch, 2003: 24). Within the classroom or lecture room, feedback “is a process which begins with a reaction to aspects of the initial message as received by the student .... is essential to good classroom communication; it exerts *a measure of control* over the activities of teachers in their role as communicators” (Curzon, 1997: 144). This latter definition is rather behaviouristic or mechanistic in nature, with a stimulus and a response, and assigns great importance on the teacher as the person in control or “managerial function” (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 6) of a supposedly caring profession. It tallies very much with the Initiate-Response-Feedback (IRF) structure of primary, but not exclusively, classroom interactions or discussions, where the teacher initiates an interaction which, in turn, elicits a response by a student and is followed by a more or less extensive feedback or comment by the teacher (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). However, within a teaching literature context and within assessment for learning, response and feedback may be more profound. Reader-response theories, especially when they refer to the sharing of response with the community of the classroom, require attentive listening by the teacher and other members.

Within my Faculty of Education, but certainly not exclusively, feedback is defined as “the sharing of information upon a task assigned by the lecturer and completed by the student-teacher” (Assessment Committee, 2006: 18). This definition provides a rather descriptive, loose framework for feedback. Ramaprasad’s (1983: 4) cogent definition

of feedback is widely used in educational contexts: “Feedback is the information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way.” This latter definition is an elaboration or extension of Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘zone of proximal development’. Feedback brings to the fore and bestows with a reinvigorating meaning the whole communicative act, emphasising the limit or ‘gap’ that needs to be overcome, as well, within a formative assessment framework, an indication of the possible ways that can help in successfully closing the gap (Wiliam and Black, 1996). Thus, within a formative assessment framework, feedback is firmly grounded in the teaching and learning process, where information is used to feed back the whole chain reaction or process (Gipps, 1994: 129-136).

According to Caroline Gipps (1994: 129-130), feedback serves at least two purposes: “it contributes directly to progress in learning through the process of formative assessment, and indirectly through its effect on the pupil’s academic self-esteem.” And as Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam (2003: 122) stress: “Feedback can only serve learning if it involves both the *evoking* of evidence and a response to that evidence by *using* it in some way to improve the learning.”

I note the close relationship between feedback and one of Louise Rosenblatt’s (1978/1994: 48-70) key terms in her reader-response approach to literature, evoking a poem. In Rosenblatt’s theory, ‘evoking a poem’ comes into two stages, first during reading and then after reading in a sort of recollection of the primary experience. The second function of evoking a poem, a story or a play, leads naturally to a state where “the reader-critic can respond to it, evaluate it, analyze it” (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994: 48). This does not mean that the critical response to a text happens after the reading has taken place... that would oversimplify the complexity of the matters. Indeed the critical response to a text happens during the reading act and after the first reading has taken place. The student makes choices throughout the whole process, such as the writer and reader make choices during their first reading.

Furthermore, the literary transaction “to some degree always embodies, an interplay between at least two sets of codes, two set of values” those of the author and those of the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994: 56). Likewise, within the classroom setting, the

feedback is a transaction between at least two codes or cultures, the teacher's and the student's culture. Therefore, it is important that open dialogue between the teacher/lecturer and the students is in place, for growth to take place mediated through transactions. Sharing the same meaning about criteria ensures that communication can take place in a productive manner.

Furthermore, evocation and response transform into "a continuing flow of responses, syntheses, readjustments, and assimilation" (Rosenblatt, 1978: 58), likewise it is through feedback that accommodation and learning takes place.

#### 5.4.1 Characteristics of effective feedback

Table 5.2 summarises some of the key characteristics of effective feedback.

**Table 5.2: Characteristics of effective feedback**

Quality	Comment
Based on multiple sources rather than one single task.	Different learning styles lend themselves better to different tasks than others. Differentiated assessment sources are corollary of differentiated learning.
Perceived by the student as being authentic, supportive, relevant and sensitive to one's growth and development.	One should keep in mind that "providing individual feedback is more difficult to organise and manage – but at least is more likely to have impact" (Lambert and Lines, 2000: 135). It is preferable that feedback be given on an individual basis rather than given to the whole class.
It contains specific reference to examples/parts from the work.	When feedback is focused on concrete examples extrapolated from the work itself (Gipps, 1994: 130) it becomes more meaningful to the recipient.
Couched within a non-threatening judgmental language.	A certain kind of feedback that negatively impinges on students' self-esteem ought to be avoided. Dweck (in Gipps, 1994: 132) calls the damage of repetitive nature of this kind of feedback as "learned helplessness." Effective feedback should help build one's self-esteem. One way to go about it is by avoiding unnecessary comparisons with other students (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 9). Caroline Gipps (1994: 41) is adamant: "Performance feedback must also emphasise mastery and progress, rather than normative comparison."
It is based on "detailed facts... conceptual help or feedback on strategies used" (Gipps, 1994: 130).	Feedback is most effective when it is not focused on grades. It is most effective when it is focused "on the particular qualities of the work" (Lambert and Lines, 2000: 137) or it contains specific references or to how the student's work may be improved upon to achieve better recognition of both effort and mastery of competence in a specific field or domain.
Is related to specific prior knowledge of assessment criteria.	Specific comments are preferable, rather than based upon undisclosed generalised expectations. Feedback helps the student enter into "the frame of reference of the teacher, to share the model of learning which gives meaning to the criteria that are reflected in assessment" (Black, 1998: 123).



It is structured.	Structured feedback may take the following format: a) highlight the positive merits of a work, remembering Caroline Gipps' (1994: 39) reproach: "Praise should be used sparingly, and should be task-specific." b) identify some negative aspects, keeping in mind that "criticism is usually counter-productive" (Gipps, 1994: 39); c) indicate how these may be improved upon or closing the gap between the desired goal and present position (Black and Wiliam, 1998: 9-10; Gipps, 1994: 131); and finally d) end with an encouraging comment.
Given within an agreed-upon time frame.	Since students are held responsible to hand in their assignments on a particular date, lectures are to be held accountable to do their part within a reasonable announced period. This is strongly backed up by research: "The longer the delay in the receipt of feedback, the less the effect of feedback on performance" (Ilgen, Peterson, Martin and Boesch, 1981: 324).
The students have the patience to focus on the comments and extrapolate learning targets from them.	Lecturers have frequently encountered the situation when after investing their time in writing detailed feedback to each and every student, they simply dismiss this by focusing exclusively on the grade. Students should be encouraged not to focus exclusively on the grade.
It is considered as an asset both in the learning experience of the students and also relevant to the teaching experience.	Data gathered during the feedback period is valuable for further learning. Feedback should be an important evaluative and reflective tool that modifies future teaching experiences. Effective feedback enables the teacher to learn about his/her students and, within an open dialogue, create 'shared meaning' (Lambert and Lines 2000: 137). Feedback should provide information that can be used to improve future teaching and learning experiences. In other words, good feedback provides relevant information to both students and teachers alike (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Nicol and Milligan, 2006).

#### 5.4.2 The tricky business of feedback

From my experience, informal or formal feedback sessions are always a tricky business. First there is the kind of power relationship between the giver of feedback (tutor, lecturer, examiner) and the recipient of feedback (usually the student but, at times, the lecturer receives feedback about his/her performance); the kind of relationship determines how the feedback is given, received and most importantly of all interpreted and acted upon. Then there are personal factors, such as the skill in giving feedback to someone, and the personal belief in one's role. Similarly, how well trained is the receiver in receiving feedback, listening and learning from the feedback, rather than being resistant or on the defensive. The cultural context impinges on the whole process, and infuses different roles and meanings to the feedback act. One barrier towards effective feedback frequently cited by some Maltese student-teachers is the idea of mixed messages from different sources, let's

say two different examiners on teaching practice giving rather conflicting messages to a student on a rather identical performance within the same school.

Feedback during teaching practice is considered as vital to identify students' strengths, acknowledge their weaknesses and most importantly guide student-teachers to find ways, means and energy to improve upon their practice. Within my Faculty of Education, as part of the Regulations and Codes of Practice for Tutors (later on called 'Examiners') on teaching practice, clearly state that:

Tutors are expected to give verbal and possibly written feedback to students straight after the lesson(s) observed.

Written feedback has to be passed on to students by not later than 5 days (where applicable) after their visit.

(Office of Professional Practice, 2002: 25)

It is evident that feedback is at the heart of formative assessment. Learning to deliver/negotiate and receive feedback is an art that needs to be constantly learnt and improved up. The teaching/learning experience is greatly enhanced if all participants appreciate the importance feedback time has on the whole process and dynamic. The portfolio is one particular aspect of formative assessment that necessitates constant open dialogue including feedback for its success.

## **5.5 Portfolios**

It is interesting to note how certain words and concepts find a common thread connecting them to each other under one vision: "Teaching, learning, reflection, and assessment are intimately related in the portfolio model..." (Barton and Collins, 1993: 200). If assessment for learning is an English movement which does not feature much in United State's educational policy (Wiliam, 2006: 169-183), the introduction of portfolio knows its birth place in the United States with the National Writing Project and Arts-PROPEL project (an initiative between Project Zero at Harvard and Educational Testing Services) both emphasising in their own ways the 'processing' aspect of learning (Wiliam, 2006: 178; and for a review of portfolios in the United States *vide* Zeichner and Wray, 2001). 'Literacy portfolios' can be considered as the first examples of portfolio use across the United States (*vide* Valencia, 1998; Weiner and Cohen, 1997).

Certainly, portfolios in education are in their infancy, and “like most infants, the possibilities of portfolios are limitless” (Graves, 1992: 12). For me, the link between the two is quite obvious: If one had to choose a symbol for formative assessment, this will certainly have to be, portfolios! Valerie Janesick (2001: 7) lists over a dozen of authentic assessment techniques – some of which are, performances, demonstrations writing essays, journal writing, formal observations, and role plays – portfolios are: “the most recognised of authentic assessment techniques.” Portfolios are considered an important assessment tool because “they manage to reflect the basic principles of alternative models of assessment” (Chetcuti and Grima, 2001: 17) and may be seen as “an *authentic* assessment – assessment that looks at performance and practical application of theory” (Pitts, Coles and Thomas, 2001: 351). Very much in line with evaluation and assessment culture, Dennie Wolf (1998: 41) augers the creation of a “portfolio culture” meaning “developing a kind of learning environment of intense expectations, care, and richness ...a shift away from minimum competency education.”

It is imperative to bear in mind that “a portfolio is a broad metaphor that comes alive as you begin to formulate the theoretical orientation to teaching that is most valuable to you” (Shulman, 1998: 23). Indeed, I find parallels with portfolio construction and the methodological concepts of bricolage and bricoleur (*vide* Chapter 7). The person constructing the portfolio has the flexibility and ingenuity of the bricoleur, while his/her actions mimic those of bricolage, for they can be idiosyncratic, making something useful from the artefacts at hand, and holding everything together by reflecting on what s/he has done.

### **5.5.1 Defining portfolios in educational contexts**

Portfolios have only recently featured in educational contexts. A professional portfolio might seem at a glance a collection of related or at times disparate testimonials. Others contend that educational portfolios, when conceived to serve as a cornerstone of assessment for learning, bring along a completely new way of thinking, planning, implementing and assessing the learning experience. I tend to agree more with the latter.

In the Maltese education sector, portfolios are relatively new (Ministry of Education [Malta], 1999: 78). It is used mostly in the tertiary sector, with a stronger tradition in certain faculties than in others. In the Faculty of Education [Malta], this word has been newly introduced and has not yet acquired a precise definition.

Simply stated, a portfolio means a collection of artefacts, or a container to carry documents (LaBoskey, 2000: 593). This follows the etymology of the word; historically speaking 'portfolio' has a Latin origin and is made up of two words: 'porta' and 'foglio'. 'Porta' is the imperative of the Latin verb 'portare', which means 'to carry.' 'Foglio' originates from another Latin word, 'folium' meaning 'a sheet of paper.' Black's (1994: 97) definition is quite straightforward too: "a portfolio is a collection of pieces of work some of which will be, or have been, used for performance assessment," very much in line with (but not the same as) 'Records of Achievements'.

Apart from being a collection of artefacts, a portfolio may also include a "purpose/s" (Barton and Collins, 1993: 200; Klenowski, 2002: 2, 10-25). Some of the aims that a portfolio may endorse are: revealing one's knowledge and showing one's successes; document different phases of development, and demonstrating the process of reflection that one went through while collating, selecting and justifying the different artefact. As stated by Black (1994: 97), portfolios "are meant to give a comprehensive record of all aspects of a pupil's life in school, including but going well beyond classroom learning."

While definitions of portfolio abound, the following was my (Portelli, 2004) working definition of a portfolio, one that I evolved and used with my student-teachers and explained at length the different components when required:

A portfolio is a careful collection of artefacts<sup>1</sup> prepared consciously and purposefully<sup>2</sup> by the student-teacher according to some agreed criteria and/or other criteria according to one's personal choice<sup>3</sup>, that reflect and present in a multidimensional and comprehensive<sup>4</sup> way the level of effort, progress and quality attained<sup>5</sup> during a program of teaching and learning in a specific area<sup>6</sup>, spread over a period of time<sup>7</sup> and potentially assessed with the participation of the teacher/lecturer and student/s<sup>8</sup>.

My definition touches upon eight different dimensions that can be considered as fundamental to the process of portfolio development.

The portfolio is a more flexible and versatile means of assessment; forms part of what is known as formative assessment and alternative assessment (Chetcuti and Grima, 2001: 17). By means of a portfolio, one can make knowledge creation one's own. One can connect better to the learning process, since one can apply what has been learnt according to one's interests, over a period of time, giving meaning and substance to Harm Tillema's (2001) dictum "portfolios as developmental assessment tools."

First and foremost, the purpose of a portfolio should be made clear to each and every student. Teachers and lecturers should make explicit the purpose of the portfolio. Val Klenowski (2002: 10-25) lists four key purposes for portfolios: for summative purposes; for certification and selection purposes; to support learning and teaching; and for professional development.

Portfolios have been explained metaphorically as being "portraits" (Graves and Sustain, 1992) of individuals, "a kind of autobiography of growth" (Järvinen and Kohonen, 1995: 29) or an "autobiography" of professional identity (Antonek, McCormick and Donato, 1997). Since along the portfolio process one gathers a range of artefacts that act as evidence towards a purpose, portfolios provide a wider, more complex, multidimensional and deeper picture of what a person actually has managed to learn. To a certain extent, the kind of portfolio that student-teachers developed for the study-unit 'The Literary Experience in Secondary School,' follow Bonnie Sunstein's (2002: xii) proposal that "[p]ortfolios ought to be a personal document of our personal literacy history," and more specifically, their journey of becoming or acting as teachers of literature during a six week block teaching practice. This was in line with other experiments with portfolios elsewhere, where rather than "voluminous scrapbooks of favourite memorabilia" (Brock, 2004: 8), student-teachers were encouraged to select artefacts that illustrate their pedagogical understanding and progress, in my case throughout their six weeks teaching Maltese in a secondary school. Achievement is open to all; success in portfolio assessment, like other forms of formative assessment, is a possibility for all to share and celebrate.

By means of the portfolio collated specifically in relation to the study-unit ‘The Literary Experience in Secondary School,’ student-teachers were invited to experience for the first time not so common form of assessment at tertiary level in Malta: authentic assessment or formative assessment. The creation of a portfolio as part of a study-unit, touches upon and embraces some if not all of the following aspects related to formative assessment and portfolio implementation, as featured in Table 5.3.

**Table 5.3: Features and aims of a portfolio system of assessment**

Feature/Aim	Comment
A question of ownership	The student-teacher’s ever increasing participation in and a feeling of “ownership” (Baron and Collins, 1993: 202-203; Krause, 1996: 130; Wiggins, 1992) of their program of study. Or as James Barton and Angelo Collins (1993: 200) contend: “The experience of developing a portfolio provides the prospective teachers opportunities to become decision makers about curriculum, to develop various instructional repertoires, to create productive classroom environments.”
Becoming autonomous learners	Captured an authentic experience chosen and developed by the student-teachers as autonomous learners. Indeed, I capitalised on the research-based conclusion, but also my personal conviction, that “...students tested in real-world environments in which that could demonstrate their knowledge and skills performed better and were significantly more motivated to continue to learn” when compared to students assessed in a traditional paper-and-pencil manner (Hancock, 2007: 229).
Improved feedback	Improved sincere communication, with greater emphasis on ‘feedback,’ between lecturer and student-teacher, and hopefully more help and solidarity among student-teachers. Within this context ‘collaboration’ (Mullin, 1998: 81-82) or ‘coached activity’ (Shulman, 1998: 27-31) are the key-words.
Enhanced critical and creative thinking	Enhancement of reflective, critical and creative thinking (Klenowski, 2002: 2), what is also known as higher-level thinking, in real life situations, pushing as much as possible an authentic agenda.
Multi-sourcing	The development of student-teacher is shown in different forms, or “multisourced” (Barton and Collins, 1993: 202). “Each item or feature was to represent some belief they [student-teachers] had about teaching – some value or goal” (LaBoskey, 2000: 592).
Bridging the teaching/learning divide	The institution of a stronger link between what normally are considered as binary opposites: teaching and learning, theory and practice, university and school life, lecture room and classroom, private and community (Barton and Collins, 1993: 200). Val Klenowski (2002: 2) contends that a portfolio “has the potential to make more explicit the important relationship between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.”
The development of criteria	The evaluation based on a number of possible criteria, descriptions of attainment rather than numbers, all negotiated with student-teachers as they were collating their portfolio.
Self- and peer-evaluation	Self- and peer-evaluation ( <i>vide</i> Orsmond, Merry and Callaghan, 2004) admit strong commitment and respect for student-teacher’s autonomy. Furthermore, “self-assessment is an important tool for professional development” (Järvinen and Kohonen, 1995: 25). On the other hand, one must be aware of inherent limitations that spring from self- and peer-assessment ( <i>vide</i> Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans, 1999).

### 5.5.2 Artefacts

A careful and mindful collection of artefacts with accompanying reflections explaining their selection, are the backbone of the portfolio. One cannot have a portfolio without artefacts. The collection of artefacts must act as “portfolio evidence” (Mullin, 1998: 83) and contributes towards the successful attainment of the purpose. Table 5.4 presents an overview of different artefacts that student-teachers enrolled in ‘The Literary Experience in Secondary School’ could experiment with over a period of time to include in their working portfolio and later on presentation portfolio. Some practical suggestions also fit a pupil’s literature-inspired portfolio at secondary school. Since student-teachers did not have a portfolio system when they were at secondary school, I found it rewarding to present a horizon of possibilities that in turn they could use with their pupils.

**Table 5.4: A selection of artefacts related to teaching literature at secondary school**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personal reflections on the world of literature</li> <li>▪ A recording of yourself reading to your students</li> <li>▪ A certificate that you distribute to your students after they read a book in a voluntary way</li> <li>▪ Report on an initiative that you take in school so as to succeed in the act of reading Maltese books (reading club)</li> <li>▪ Comments on the reading of books and articles along the teaching practice that you consider them as an inspiration</li> <li>▪ Create a mug with a literary message / quotation</li> <li>▪ Quotations that impress you on the subject of reading literature</li> <li>▪ Choice of music that you feel matches a particular book</li> <li>▪ A short anthology of literature writings of your students</li> <li>▪ A description of the ideal textbook in the literature classroom</li> <li>▪ An hypothetical article for the school journal on an aspect on the literary word</li> <li>▪ Poster/s or banner/s to advertise a book event in your school</li> <li>▪ An original book (written by you) for the students in the secondary school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A play about a situation that you have experienced in the literary classroom</li> <li>▪ A literature-based board-game</li> <li>▪ A chart related to the teaching of literature</li> <li>▪ The set of questions that you used for a quiz about the Maltese literature at the end of your teaching practice</li> <li>▪ A list of desiderata about the teaching of literature</li> <li>▪ Your students’ desiderata on learning Maltese literature</li> <li>▪ A top-ten of the most popular authors in your secondary school</li> <li>▪ The drawing or comic for students in the secondary level</li> <li>▪ A set of lessons for students with special needs in reading</li> <li>▪ A video of you reading a literary text</li> <li>▪ An interview with a co-operating teacher about teaching literature in your school</li> <li>▪ An interview with a student in the secondary level regarding how s/he views him/herself as a reader</li> <li>▪ Your reply to a letter to the editor or an article regarding the teaching of Maltese literature</li> <li>▪ A book mark</li> <li>▪ A list of your suggestions to have a change in the teaching of literature in schools</li> </ul>
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The time factor is also important in portfolio assessment. Portfolios need time to grow, explore possibilities, evolve, transform and maybe mutate. That is why it is best to keep the definition of portfolio rather open, “before we freeze them in a definition or a standardized mandate” (Sunstein, 1992: xii). Indeed, certain standardisation of content is a way of ensuring validity, however having exclusively mandated artefacts harnesses creativity. That is why I proposed a portfolio divided in two sections: a section dedicated to required artefacts and another section equally essential, to be developed more creatively according to one’s personal interests (*vide* Chapter 11 for a detailed analysis of the contents of portfolio I developed with my students). Table 5.5 outlines a sample portfolio content list, with compulsory artefacts in the left hand column, and a selection of typical artefacts in relation to individualised topic.

**Table 5.5: Typical contents of a portfolio based on teaching Maltese literature in a secondary school**

Section I Compulsory Content	Section II Individualised Content**
<p><i>The context where I taught Maltese literature</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The school where I had my teaching experience and where I taught literature</li> <li>▪ My relationship with the co-operating teacher/s</li> <li>▪ My students and the teaching of literature</li> </ul> <p><i>Models of positive practice</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ My best literature lesson during the last six weeks</li> <li>▪ Three resources that had a positive impact on teaching of literature</li> <li>▪ The reading act: Voicing and interpretation</li> </ul> <p><i>Reflection and evaluation*</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The evaluations I wrote after each and every literature lesson</li> <li>▪ My reflections before and after the two conferences</li> <li>▪ An evaluation of the whole portfolio process and product</li> </ul> <p>* The first group had to keep a reflective diary too, that was deemed irrelevant when one wrote lesson evaluations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A justification for the topic and aim of the individualised content section</li> <li>▪ A model certificate I handed out after we finished reading the class novel</li> <li>▪ A short selection of quotations related to teaching of literature that were particularly inspiring during the last six weeks</li> <li>▪ A selection of pupils’ work done during the literature lessons</li> <li>▪ The poster I did to inform the pupils about the mid-day break book club</li> <li>▪ Some comments I received from the students at the end of my teaching practice</li> </ul> <p>** The content of this section varies from student to student according to one’s desires, effort and inventiveness. In Table 5.3 I gathered some examples of what they could produce</p>

Decisions about portfolio “must include the reality of living and growing with the process of keeping one” (Graves, 1992: 5). Unfortunately, when portfolios are used in large-scale assessment there is the tendency to standardise their contents to make

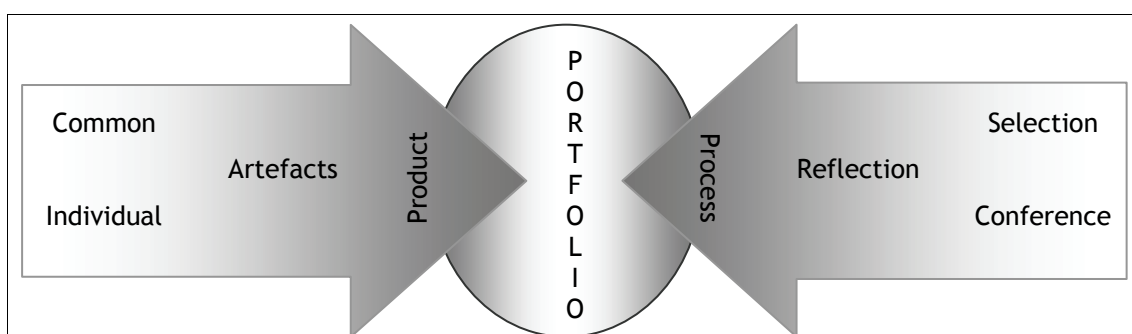


comparisons easier (Graves, 1992: 2), and worse of all, use traditional teacher/lecturer assessment only.

### 5.5.3 Portfolios: Process or product?

It may be useful to question whether in portfolios product or process aspects prevail. Both perspectives are justifiable and one can find sound arguments on both sides (*vide* Meyer and Tusin, 1999: 135-136). Influenced by the fear of false dichotomies (LaBoskey, 1998) and taking on a moderate perspective – “a necessary antidote to the excesses that result when this or that element in any rhetorical transaction is turned into an exclusive center” Booth (1995: viii, commenting on Louise Rosenblatt) – I find peace in trying to reconcile both perspectives into a coherent model that embraces both. After experiencing the development and growth of a number of portfolios in relation to teaching literature for the first time in a secondary school, I can safely conclude that a portfolio signifies both a product and a process at the same time, as shown in Table 5.6.

**Table 5.6: The relationship between process and product dimensions of a portfolio**



### 5.5.4 Assessment of portfolios

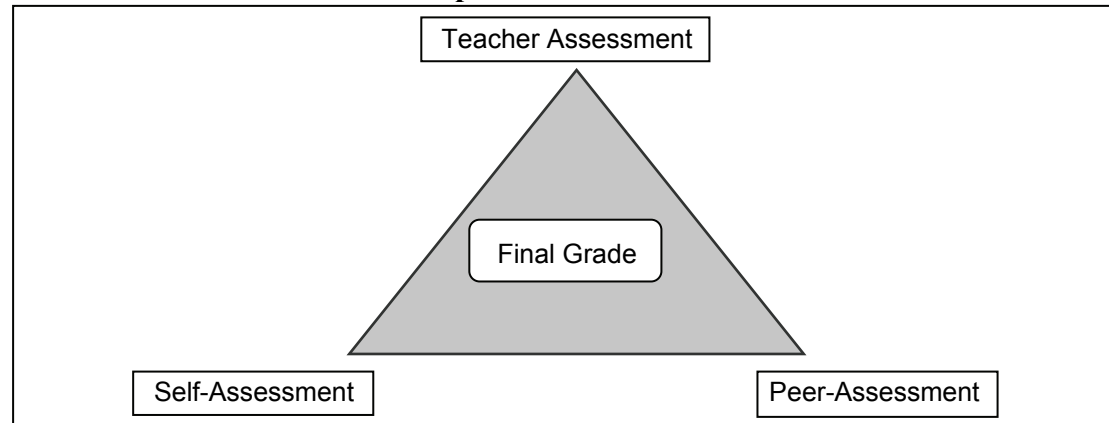
Criteria development and rubric construction and evaluation, are all stages of the portfolio process. Student-teachers’ involvement throughout the duration of the study-unit or programme of study ensures that criteria are owned by everyone involved. Discussions can lead to the explication of criteria and refinement of the descriptors of attainment that would later be used in grading achievement.

In fact, portfolios lend themselves wonderfully to self-assessment (Chetcuti and Grima, 2001: 57-58) or “self-grading” (Mullins, 1998: 84) and peer-assessment, especially when criteria and rubrics are developed along the portfolio process. Students are to be considered “as one of the essential evaluators in the portfolio process” (Graves, 1992: 3). I was particularly sensitive about some shortcomings related to self- and peer-evaluation, such as “validity and reliability of peer evaluations is debatable” (Ryan, Marshall, Porter and Jia, 2007: 50), and the tendency for good students to under-rate themselves and vice-versa, poorer students tend to over-rate themselves (Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans, 1999). On the other hand, there are some practical measures that I tried to implement as much as possible, to increase the likelihood that self- and peer-assessment yield the desired result, such as involving students in the process and product at an early stage as possible, involving students in discussions about criteria, and limiting the dimensions used in assessment (Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000: 317). Portfolios can be granted with the credit of having “institutionalize[d] norms of collaboration, reflection, and discussion” (Shulman, 1998: 36).

I prefer a joint-assessment model where teachers and students work collaboratively or in “partnership” (Graves, 1992: 5) when assessing a portfolio, what Rebecca Anderson (1998: 9) calls “the shared model” or a balanced approach, notwithstanding the fact that “portfolio assessment inevitably involves some degree of subjectivity” (Driessen, *et al.*, 2005: 214). Engaged in this way, student-teachers “can gain multiple perspectives on their work” (Anderson, 1998: 13) especially from peers. At the same time, the lecturer does not feel any more the need to feel and shoulder on his/her own the responsibility of assigning grades, thus “becoming conductors and facilitators of learning” (Harris and Bell, 1990: 114). Periodic portfolio conferences – meaningful meetings on a specific aspect of the portfolio during the whole process of collating, selecting and presentation – are great opportunities to discuss the criteria and explore different ways student-teachers can work towards their attainment. The final conference, that is the very last conference before submission, student-teachers “begin the process by reviewing their portfolio files, analyzing and synthesizing patterns, and evaluating their own professional progress” (Brock, 2004: 9). Rubrics devised during the different conferences and through an open discussion (some of

which using e-mails) were used in assessing the different portfolios; their efficacy and principles behind their development is expounded in the following section.

**Table 5.7: The kind of balanced portfolio assessment I envision**



Some might start to question the practicality of portfolios, with all the added time, work and energy they entail, coupled with the validity and reliability issues. Shulman (1998: 34-35) identifies five dangers or pitfalls with portfolios: lamination all through, or being exclusively exhibition portfolios; heavy lifting or the fact that portfolios require countless hours to produce and assess; trivialisation being inconsiderate about what should and should not go in a portfolio; perversion, or the fact that they may misrepresent an individual's attainment to accommodate a standardised system that is easy to administer and monitor; and misrepresentation, that is choosing only the best samples may distance one further from what is typical day-to-day performance. Finally, I believe that all rests on the commitment one has to a vision of education that is more participative, engaging, authentic, and worth living. I agree with Shulman (1998) when he describes a portfolio as a "theoretical activity." Each infinitesimal choice, from a simple artefact to include or leave out, to a lengthy reflective writing explaining a particular choice or decision, evidences a commitment to a particular way of thinking about education and conceptualising pedagogy.

## 5.6 Rubrics

Rubrics are a valuable tool when one tries to assess authentic teaching and learning. They are considered as "one of the handiest aids to educators since the invention of the blackboard" (Stevens and Levi, 2005: vii) or "the most effective grading device

since the invention of red ink” (Stevens and Levi, 2005: 3). Similarly to assessment for learning or performance assessment, their “construction and use is in its infancy” (Taggart and Wood, 1998: 74). They are the link that amalgamates what is taught with what is learnt; they bring to the forefront the relationship inherent between instruction and assessment.

Deriving from Latin meaning red colouring matter used to write in margins of old manuscripts to give directions to the reader, rubrics later became associated with a protocol, a set of rules, *ergo* ‘criteria to be followed.’ To put it simply... “Rubrics are guidelines that measure degrees of quality” (Burke, 2005: 6). According to Ethel Edwards (1998: 3) “scoring rubrics offer very exacting definitions of the outcomes being evaluated.” Apart from definition of outcomes, it is highly suggested that all rubrics contain: “an identified behaviour within an assessment task; quality or performance standard; descriptors of the desired standard; and a scale to be used in rating student performance” (Taggart and Wood, 1998: 58-59). By and large, these four characteristics – task description, scale, dimensions and description of dimensions – can also be found in Stevens and Levi’s (2005: 5-14) research.

Rubrics tend to present a more comprehensive picture of a student’s abilities, potential and differences, in a particular area, unlike the description of achievement translated in grades very common in traditional forms of evaluations. Typically, rubrics are accompanied by a numerical scale, verbal descriptors or some other form of differentiated attainment towards a given criteria; a raw score can be achieved by ticking a number of boxes with the relevant attainment. Thus, grades that derive from a rubric may be more meaningful. Apart from grades, rubrics normally suggest further room for development rather than setting the minimum standard expected by a student.

Three major benefits when using rubrics are, that they “save time, provide timely, meaningful feedback for students, and have the potential to become an effective part of the teaching and learning process” (Stevens and Levi, 2005: 17). Unpacking the third benefit, one might add the fact that rubrics encourage critical thinking, facilitate communication with others, help teachers and lecturers refine their teaching skills (Stevens and Levi, 2005: 21-28). Then there is the question of ownership; a truly

dialogic rubric “is created by collaborative development and constant dialogue regarding the merits of the rubric” (Taggart, Phifer, Nixon and Wood, 1998: ix). Rubrics are not ready made for the students – actually students have to take part in their construction to be a truly valuable and authentic assessment tool. “Rubrics are only as good as their ability to fit the situation for which they are used” (Taggart, Phifer, Nixon and Wood, 1998: xi). In writing and redrafting a rubric, the challenge most of the time is to find a balance between standardisation, and creativity and flexibility, on the other hand, in such a way as to “accommodate students’ different styles and processes of writing and of portfolio-making” (Burch, 1997: 55).

While constructing a rubric for the first time may be a daunting experience for teachers and students alike (Burke, 2005: 85), and most probably “may take more time than save” (Stevens and Levi, 2005: 14), it is time well invested. Stevens and Levi (2005: 29-38) suggest four stages for rubric construction:

- *reflecting* on what is going to be expected by the students, the reasons behind the task and their expectations;
- *listing* the specific learning objectives to be reached by the completion of the task;
- *grouping* and *labelling* what was reflected upon and listed in the previous two stages; and in the end
- *applying* the dimensions and descriptions to the final rubric.

One way of internalising the criteria is by involving the students from the beginning. One might even be amazed to find out how many times: “Students frequently have excellent insights on how they’d like to be assessed, and designing a rubric certainly helps them understand the seriousness of their undertaking” (Burch, 1997: 58). Indeed, one of the suggestions frequently given on rubric construction is: “Share the rubrics prior to use with your students so that predetermined criteria are understood by all and ownership of the rubric is certain” (Taggart, Phifer, Nixon and Wood, 1998: xi).

Criteria are best understood when accompanied by a number of exemplars illustrating different levels of attainment and explicating the meaning of each standard. Appendix B sets out the two rubrics devised with my student-teachers to assess their portfolio on teaching literature for six weeks in a secondary school.

Rubrics will facilitate feedback on a given task, and they are to be viewed as an ongoing process or creation, revision, editing, and periodically revisited.

## **5.7 Imagination and assessment**

Reading literature may lead to feeling lost in a “secondary world” (Tolkien, 1938/1964), the world of imagination. On the other hand, imagination or creativity are rarely mentioned in literature on assessment practices. Assessment and evaluations are part of reality at school, to an extent that they are inextricably tied together. The often quoted *Inside the Black Box* (Black and Wiliam, 1998) recommends a rethinking in the right direction. However, assessment for learning principles and practices do not save schools from becoming an “apparatus of *uninterrupted examination* that duplicated along the entire length the operation of teaching” (Foucault, 1979: 186; my emphasis). But I believe more can be done...

Let us take a step back... In their over 500 page report on 9/11, the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, known as the 9/11 or Kean/Hamilton Commission, identified ““failure of imagination” and a mind-set that dismissed possibilities” (2004: 336) as one of the key four failures that were revealed by 9/11; while on the other-hand, the terrorists’ mastermind applied his “imagination, technical aptitude, and managerial skills” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: 145). I think no one would dispute the fact that: “Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: 344). Even policy challenges are intimately related with imagination (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: 349). I find it rather strange to read, as one of the recommendations: “It is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination” (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: 344). Even in the most bureaucratic environments, like examination boards, imagination should be a constant ingredient that guides review and improvement.

So let us imagine a world without assessment... There seems to be a limit or psychological barrier in many individuals to envision such a world. This seems to be

because “assessment... is a constructed generalised idea that has come to colonise the world” (Peim and Flint, 2009: 353). Others (radical or innovative educationalists – it depends how you want to look at them – such as John Holt, and A. S. Neil at Summerhill School) opt for a kind of examination- or assessment-free future, a possibility for everyone to share its fruits.

## INTERMEZZO I

### My passion for writing: A counterpoint

I must admit that I always had a difficult relationship with writing. More than a love-hate relationship, it is a passion in the two etymological senses of the word. Passion comes from the Late Latin *passionem* (nom. *passio*) “suffering, enduring,” and from Latin stem *pati* “to suffer, endure”. Then, around the sixteenth and seventeenth century, from the Late Latin use of *passio* and from the Greek *pathos* its meaning was extended to include “a strong emotion, desire” and “strong liking, enthusiasm, predilection.” Writing is a passion in the sense that it is always difficult, an extenuating endeavour that takes away all my energies and at the same time I feel nearly morbidly attracted to it, very much similar to a pyrotechnic affair with fire.

In this first Intermezzo piece, I am going to present a collage of reflections on my writing journey/passion, a mélange of poetry mainly haiku and senryu which I have been composing now for some time (Portelli 2008), and a number of illuminating quotes that have struck a chord with me on writing. A collage has the power of juxtaposition, disparate items are placed close to each other and create a tension that is perceived by the reader, instantaneously, visually. A collage creates a problem or challenge with reading too, since the writing conventions are played upon to create an unusual effect.

#### ❶

This reflection was written in a frenzy on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2006, the day Christians commemorate Good Friday. Today Malta is packed with processions of different statues that represent different moments leading to the Christ's crucifixion.

Indeed the following day, Saturday, is a time of deep sorrow, a day that culminates in the Via Crucis; once more a narration of the stations to the cross, with reflections to inspire the believers. The Via Crucis set in Rome in the Coliseum is led by the Pope himself. The Via

Crucis or as it is also known, Via Dolorosa, is that stretch of road in Jerusalem between the Antonia fortress and the Golgotha, along which Jesus Christ walked bowed under the weight of the Cross.



②

finding a book  
in second hand book shop  
and a new friend

just before the break  
pupils with their lunches on their table  
an open air Moroccan bazaar

locked in a laboratory  
garments hanging by the door  
as if wanting to leave

short study-visits  
in breath freezing weather  
warm heart from Leicester

③

Writing cannot be considered a part of my life as much as my whole life. Research cannot be a portion of my life, either. Research is a way of living. Being analytical, searching for patterns, scrutinising the evident, being sceptical about what is at hand, delving deep into

the known to get a glimpse of the unknown, new, mysterious... are all skills and attitudes that shape one mentally and condition a way of life, a way of perceiving reality. Therefore, experience is always mediated through the *a priori* conditioning that has taken place once a decision - conscious with unconscious ramifications -

has been taken that lead to a swarm of other decisions all reflecting the former. Hence, all experience including doing research, is always felt with great intensity, with an engagement that I cannot shed off or set aside. I am what I read... I am what I write.

④ *On Serendipity*

"...false beliefs and discoveries totally without credibility could then lead to the discovery of something true [...] they are about ideas, projects, beliefs that exist in a twilight zone between the common sense and lunacy, truth and error, visionary intelligence and what now seems to us stupidity, though it was not stupid in its day and we must therefore reconsider it with respect"

Umberto Eco (1999) *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy*, pp. viii-ix.

⑤

thousand words  
but no one opens my heart  
as *my dear*...

women faces  
reflected in puddles of fresh rain  
immediately fade

striptease  
what is left to chew on  
bare bones

## ⑥ *Writing and phenomenology*

These are some quotes from Max van Manen (1997: 126-132) that left me reflecting every time I read them. They are a source of inspiration for my writing...

- i. "To write is to measure the depth of things, as well to come to a sense of one's own depth"
- ii. "To write means to write myself, not in a narcissistic sense but in a deep collective sense."
- iii. "To write, to work at style, is to exercise an interpretative tact, which in the sense of style produces the thinking/writing body of text."
- iv. "Writing plays the inner against the outer, the subjective self against the objective self, the ideal against the real."
- v. "Writing distances us from lived experience but by doing so it allows us to discover the existential structures of experience."
- vi. "Writing teaches us what we know, and in what way we know what we know."
- vii. "Writing is a kind of self-making or forming" (pp. 126-127)
- viii. "Writing intellectualizes."
- ix. "...the writing of the text is the research."

## ⑦ *Discussion*

moving to the left

the teacher returns to the centre

and then moves to the right

- ⑧ "In the end, what turned out to be missing was much more important than teaching. What turned out to be missing was living, learning to live the life of a teacher - which means first of all learning to live the life that is the life of yourself."

Tremmel Robert *Zen and the Practice of Teaching English* (1999: 9)

## ⑨ Earnestly waiting my day of courage, like Cesare Pavese then I could say

Non più parole.  
Ma azione.  
Non scriverò più.

[No more words / But action / I will not write anymore.]

But until that day, I write....

### Words crucified on a page

Every writer has a love-hate relationship with words. Writing is the labour required to give birth to a text on a paper. The following is a poem I wrote about this relationship and birth that cannot be withheld.

Found words in a dictionary	Pinned on a velvety surface
A graveyard of words missing in action	Insects in an etymologic tray
Progress/regress in language	Inspection with/out deceit
A necessary collateral damage	
	Ideas start to grow
To write	A foetus in an unwanted womb
Is to forget oneself	Strings of a colourful DNA
OR	A horses' tail
To think only about oneself	Neatly prepared for the race
Is to write	Paragraphs that strangely find their way
	Paragraphs that should have stayed in
	Chapters that should have stayed
I know some of you...	Dark unspoken
Play with you...	
Love you...	
I Despise - Hate - Abhor - Detest >	Committing words to paper is
All the rest	Forging ones' thoughts
You spy on me	Hammering ideas
Like a secret mafia collaborator	On disinfected white paper
A mole digging its grave	Ideas that please
In a hard granite hearth	Delight
Without soul	Makes you want to cry
	So what?
Words loom inside	
Discreetly	I hate myself for doing it
Travel far and wide	I do not like to do it
Colliding stars in my imagination	I have to do it.
	I do...
Cells that gravitate towards each other	
Tear each other apart	
Roll, dance, fight, despise	

**PS**

forgetting lessons to remember

## **PART II**

### **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS IN THE FIELD**

## OVERVIEW

My research is based on a number of codified practices blended together according to situational requirements and contextual needs. This approach embraces an image of the researcher as a bricoleur, with his actions revolving on the concept of bricolage. In Chapter 6 I explore and explain the relationship between research methods, methodology, epistemology and ontology. From these four, I then explain a number of postulates that underpin my research. The practicalities of my research, such as sample and selection of data generating experiences in sequence are presented in Chapter 7. Finally, ethical issues are considered in their different facets pertinent to my research, evidencing a predilection towards an ethical practice based on what I call an ethically informed responsible agent.

## CHAPTER 6

### Some philosophical underpinnings to my methodology

#### 6.1 Preamble: My quest

I arrived at this thesis with what the Japanese call *shoshin* or “beginner’s mind” (Suzuki, 1970: 21). I was open to a horizon of possibilities, ready to entertain tentative answers to myriad of questions. Although previously I wrote a dissertation and a thesis, I did not feel at all secure in my capabilities, what would be considered as an ‘expert’ in my field. Yet, I was willing to move beyond the limits of my previous research.

Both as a student and as a supervisor of undergraduates and postgraduate student-teachers, I read on both qualitative and quantitative paradigms with equidistant involvement. In a way, I started to feel disengaged with both paradigms, viewing them rather mechanistically... one can either choose this or that... and then this would follow. Guiding student-teachers finding their own road in the methodological terrain became part of a year-in year-out routine.

However, things were not as simple when I finally had to choose *my* methodology for *my* research. Torn between my traditional training in educational research methods bi-forked in qualitative and quantitative research, I was rather convinced that there must be something ‘more’ to research than just selecting methods and following them verbatim.

Most of my doubts, hesitations and in a way dissatisfaction, found relief not in research methods books or Western philosophy, but rather in teachings originating in the orient. And through my research I was convinced about one thing: I wanted to make a meaningful difference in my life and in those people around me, namely student-teachers. Why else would I have fallen in love with teaching and pedagogy?

Humbly, I was very much aware of what Shunryu Suzuki (1970: 22) calls “the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner.” Indeed, I found great relief in Suzuki’s (1970: 22) insight:

When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. The beginner’s mind is the mind of compassion. When the mind is compassionate, it is boundless.

I felt that I had to do away with my certainties, move beyond my “comfort zones” (Powell and Brady, 1985: 167-171), and be open to new and enriching possibilities.

Just when I was going to succumb to the dualistic nature of research as traditionally conceived and divided between positivistic and naturalistic inquiry, or qualitative and quantitative research (*vide*

Cohen and Manion, 1994: 1-43), another precious maxim came to my rescue. As Bashō (in Hamill, 1998: xxx) used to say to his students: “Do not simply follow in the footsteps of the ancients; seek what they sought”.

## 6.2 The journey metaphor

The journey metaphor has been widely used, documented and analysed (*vide* Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 44-45, 89-96; Lakoff and Turner, 1989). One might unpack and better understand this metaphor by identifying the slots in its schema map...

All journeys involve travellers, paths travelled, places where we start, and places where we have been. Some journeys are purposeful and have destinations that we set out for, while others may involve wandering without any destination in mind.

(Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 60-61)

Different religions share the journey as one of their leitmotifs. The hajj is one of Muslims’ sacred pillars, a journey to Mecca that each and every Muslim has to do at least once in their life. A religious group within the Roman Catholic Church known as the Neo-catechumen, emphasise the concept of embarking upon a journey, leading to a greater awareness of Jesus and his teachings. Jungian psychology has identified in the journey a powerful archetype usually associated with the series of tribulations that the protagonist or the hero has to undergo to reach his or her destination, epitomised in some new knowledge or intellectual truth. This archetype finds a natural context in literary figures like Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Dante’s long journey taking him from Hell to Purgatory to Heaven in *The Divine Comedy*, Malta’s most important poem after the national anthem ‘Il-Jien u Lilhinn Minnu’ [‘The self and beyond it’] written by the national poet Dun Karm Psaila (1980), and Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* by James Joyce. On the other hand, it is still very much alive in popular films like *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994) and *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff, 1994). “[T]he understanding of life as a journey permits not just a single simpleminded conceptualization of life but rather a rich and varied one” (Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 61).

My quest for *my* methodology has many contact points with the journey metaphor. During my research, the most rewarding experiences or parts of the journey were those with no predetermined aim or goal...

We conduct research because we don't know something and are setting out on a process to find out. This is emotionally and intellectually slippery territory, and frequently we are challenged to unlearn things we hold dear, view the world differently, let sacred cows be slaughtered and live with different ways of knowing and different knowledges (sic).

(Pinn, 2001: 194)

I cannot but agree, especially in the light of Martin Heidegger's (1993: 374) paradoxical comment on the value and necessity of unlearning: "...we can learn thinking only if radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally. To do that, we must at the same time come to know it." And when discussing technology, Heidegger (2003: 279) begins his essay by reflecting on the relevance of the 'question' in the quest for knowledge:

Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is a way of thinking. All ways of thinking, more or less perceptibly, lead through language in a manner that is extraordinary.

Therefore, the direction I was to take on my journey was intimately related to the kind and type of questions I was to make and try to answer. Different researchers have tried to codify a typology of questions (*vide* Barnes, 1971; Brown and Wragg, 1993) but none seemed to satisfy my desires. Things remained obfuscated until I read Jack Whitehead's two related articles: 'Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind: "How can I improve my practice?"' (1989), and 'How do I improve my practice? Creating and legitimating an epistemology of practice' (2000). These two articles put emphasis on the kind of questions and research I was looking for at that time (*vide* Chapter 1). They put emphasis on the self as a research subject. At last, *my kind of question/s* started to emerge...



### 6.3 Method/s, methodology, epistemology and ontology

What follows is a bottom-up analysis of four concepts pertinent to my research. “Research seeks to generate knowledge” (Higgs, 2001: 48), which in its crudest form is data collected with the aid of *research method/s*, within a coherent framework known as *methodology*. Each researcher’s act, consciously or unconsciously reflects and enacts a set of assumptions about the nature of knowledge, *epistemology*. Finally, the way data will be transformed into evidence presented within a sound argument to substantiate knowledge claims, relates to a particular paradigm, a world view or *ontology* and involves a hermeneutic process.

#### 6.3.1 Methods and methodology

A useful starting distinction is that between methods and methodology. Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion (1994: 38) refer to methods as “the range of approaches used in educational research to gather data which are used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction.” Examples of methods are interviews, questionnaires, personal accounts, observation checklists and episodes. However, recent developments oppose the conception of method as “a more or less successful set of procedures for reporting on a given reality” (Law, 2004: 143). Instead, the new definition of method emphasises their dynamic, creative and performative aspect:

It helps to produce realities. It does not do so freely and at whim. There is a hinterland of realities, of manifest absences and Othernesses (sic), resonances and patterns of one kind or another, already being enacted, and it cannot ignore these. ... It reworks and re-bundles these and as it does so re-crafts realities and creates new versions of the world. It makes new signals and new resonances, new manifestations and new concealments, and it does so continuously. Enactments and the realities that they produce do not automatically stay in place. Instead they are made and remade.

(Law, 2004: 143)

On the other hand, methodology refers to the reasons why these methods were used, their relation and rationale. The etymology of ‘methodology’ elucidates its meaning: a word coined from two Greek elements: *meta-* meaning “after,” and

*hodos* meaning “way, a travelling”, in other words, walking in others’ footsteps, following what others found to be effective in problem solving or reaching an objective. Action research, case-study, ethno-methodology and deconstruction are frameworks that guide either research or the writing of research. Whilst methods refer to a set of discrete techniques, methodology tries to philosophically explain what is achieved by these methods and why they were employed. Therefore, one can distinguish between the two as between the ‘how’, and the ‘why’ of research.

### **6.3.2 Epistemology**

What is collected and interpreted as data useful to the task at hand, refers to even deeper questions about the nature of knowledge, at times referred to as the theory of knowledge, or epistemology. The theory of knowledge or epistemology poses fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge, how it can be known and validated and the relationship between knowing and being. The following are just a few examples of epistemological queries that philosophy tries to ponder on and maybe try to explain: How and by whom knowledge is constructed? What counts as knowledge? Is there one kind of knowledge or are there many kinds of knowledge? How can one explain the difference between facts, opinions, beliefs and interpretations? What role do values have in the process of understanding? How can one describe and maybe qualify the relationship between the knower and the known (Greene, 1966)? Can someone ever say that he/she knows something in an absolute sense? Or to put it differently, what is the difference between certitude and partial/relative knowledge? What is the role of experience in this process? What counts as true or error in an argument? Who and how can one judge?

### **6.3.3 Ontology**

Any epistemological discussion is framed within a particular worldview. Ontology, or a theory of existence, “deals with what exists, what is reality, what is the nature of the world” (Higgs, 2001: 49). Therefore, one key ontological question queries the nature of reality, and what differentiates reality from mere appearances. Indeed,

“[t]he ontological assumptions we make about the nature of things lie at the core of the theories we use to interpret the world” (Higgs and Titchen, 1998: 74). In a sense, ontological questions are unavoidable in any research, and the researcher should feel a responsibility to explore them early on in his/her research. Joy Higgs (2001: 49) recommends that: “Researchers need to understand the assumptions about existence underlying any theory or system of ideas we use to research and interpret the world.”

#### **6.4 My assumptions or framing my research**

Two other words necessary to frame my research are: *paradigms* and *assumptions*. Paradigm was made popular in Thomas Kuhn’s (1962/1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It has come to mean “a set of overarching and interconnected assumptions about the nature of reality [...] provides the basis on which we build our verifiable knowledge” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994: 4). In my case, I consider ‘qualitative research’ (*vide* Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) as my general frame of reference draws on the reflective process as exemplified in ‘action research’ (*vide* McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). Then, each paradigm is erected upon a number of assumptions that “cannot be proved but may be stipulated” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994: 4). These philosophical underpinnings are also known as postulates, “that is something given the status of acceptance in order to get on with the task at hand” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994: 10). In my case, the different assumptions or postulates that I wholeheartedly and at times critically embrace, are derived not from a single specialisation, but rather, from a blend of three fields of knowledge: reader-response theory (Chapter 3); the relevance of reflection in education (Chapter 4); and issues related to evaluation and assessment (Chapter 5). Further, the following are some of the assumptions and tenets of my research, that I have come to believe from when I commenced this thesis to date. My methodological awareness evolved during the past few months, and with all probability will carry on changing.

#### **6.4.1 Multiple constructed realities**

Qualitative research assumes that what is commonly called ‘reality’, in fact consists of “multiple constructed realities” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 89) or “multiple worlds” (Law, 2004: 45-67). Lincoln and Guba (1985: 83) are doubtful whether ‘reality’ exists or not, and conclude that: “If there is [a reality], we can never know it. Furthermore, no amount of inquiry can produce convergence on it.” Instead, Lincoln and Guba (1985: 83-84) postulate what they call a “constructed reality”:

There is, in this ontological position, always an infinite number of constructions that might be made and hence there are multiple realities. Any given construction may not be (and almost certainly is not) in a one-to-one relation (or isomorphic with) other constructions of the same (by definition only) entity. The definition is implied by the use of some common referent term, which is nevertheless understood (or constructed) differently by different individuals (or constructors).

I agree that there are different versions of reality depending on the particular point of view and who is the onlooker. Or as expressed by John Law (2004: 54): “Objects, then, don’t exist in themselves. They are being *crafted*, assembled as part of a hinterland”; or as expressed even more succinctly by Kim Etherington (2004: 27): “reality is socially and personally constructed.” Changing the mode of reality analysis will invariably produce a different version. Realities are always ascribed with meaning by those that participate in them rather than having a meaning in themselves that the participants or constructors have to dig out. Therefore, I believe that experience is assigned meaning as it evolves and is always mediated through my language and the interactions with others within that particular reality, according to my beliefs, ideologies, gender, and the like. These complexities “cannot be understood by one-dimensional, reductionist approaches; they demand the human-as-instrument; they demand indwelling” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994: 27).

#### **6.4.2 The primacy of reflexivity**

Indwelling is synonymous with the stance taken by the qualitative researcher, that is, reflection, “the *interpretation of interpretation* and the launching of critical self-exploration of one’s own interpretations of empirical material (including its

construction)” (Alversson and Sköldberg, 2000: 6). In educational discourse, reflection has gained ever more prominence that perpetuates the new ideology (*vide* Chapter 4). Not only is the teacher considered a professional by virtue of his/her reflective quality, but also the practitioner researcher is endowed with this quality (Parson and Brown, 2002). It may be propitious to start to “think of *research as constituted by processes of social reflexivity, and then, of self-reflexivity as social process*” (Steiner, 1991: 3). Numerous topics in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) touch on the value of reflection within a qualitative design. Indeed, reflection would be the link between the practice and interpretation of events, within a cycle of experiential learning (Moon, 2004: 121-130). This importance is transferred to different models of action research, as highlighted by these definitions extrapolated from key books in the area: “Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry...” (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 162) and “Action research involves learning in and through action and reflection...” (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002: 15).

#### **6.4.3 The relationship between the researcher and the researched**

Quantitative research assumes that the researcher and the researched are “interdependent” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 104). Practitioners who use themselves in all areas of their research tend to “value transparency in relationships” (Etherington, 2004: 16), and at the same time “close the illusionary gap between researcher and researched and between the knower and what is known” (*ibid.* p. 32). Furthermore, action research is at times called participatory research (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998), emphasising the dialogical nature of the inquiry. The researcher acknowledges his/her personal limitations and works to overcome them in conjunction with other participants. Collaboration is the key. The researcher negotiates with the other participants her/his power. In addition, when writing the final script, the qualitative researcher attends to their voice, extrapolating selections from the participant’s contributions (*vide* Chapters 10, 11 and 12).

#### **6.4.4 As a researcher I acknowledge and embrace my subjectivity**

Dealing with subjectivity has become one of the most pressing issues within qualitative research. “My subjectivity is the basis for the story that I am able to tell. It is the strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person and as a researcher...” (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 104). I go as far as to contend that objectivity is impossible to achieve “when my personal engagement is so interwoven with the intellectual and political aspects of the project” (D’Cruz, 2001: 19). Indeed, my beliefs, my critically examined preconceptions, my gender and ethnicity, my personal values and history, are all considered important to the research process and contribute to my identity as a researcher. For as Hilary Radnor (2001: 31) explains: “The researcher cannot remove her own way of seeing from the process, but she can engage reflexively in the process and be aware of her interpretive framework.” Values determine the nature of research and one cannot but declare in advance his/her position. Declaring one’s position or mapping one’s co-ordinates (*vide* Chapter 1) is the only way to move forward in a terrain in constant state of flux.

#### **6.4.5 Situated knowledge(s)**

Morwenna Griffiths (1995: 61) concludes that “knowledge must be grounded in individual ‘experience’, ‘perspectives’, ‘subjectivity’, or ‘position in a discourse’” and since all knowledge is subject to critique, “there is no possibility of the acquisition or creation of stable, unchanging knowledge.” Learning from experience in an action research project will yield a number of insights emerging from a methodical and detailed analysis of the situation, time or context under study. That is why “...knowledge can only be partial and built upon culturally defined stocks of knowledge available to us at any given time in history” (Etherington, 2004: 27). Situational knowledge is entangled in a particular discourse, open for revision, and is neither innocent, permanent, value-free, pure, neutral, transparent, or absolute. Indeed, all knowledge is ultimately revisable, partial and provisional. Law (2004: 3) makes the point that maybe “we will need to rethink how far whatever it is that we know travels and whether it still makes sense in other

locations, and if so how. This would be knowing as situated inquiry.” This is in sharp contrast with what quantitative research strives at, that is generalisations and universal truths.

#### **6.4.6 The sense of endings**

The end. To a certain extent, those two small words give the viewer or reader a sense of momentary relief since things seem to fall into place at the end! Things seem to arrive at their destination by achieving their purported purpose. However, this sense of security brought about by the full stop of a sentence, has been replaced by the more elusive ellipsis that rather poetically reflects “a trailing off into silence” (Anon, 2007). This apparently slight stylistic modification has brought around a desire for a new burgeoning ‘sense of endings,’ in the plural; not to be confused with Frank Kermode’s (1968) use in the singular.

Researchers, like viewers and readers, must come to terms with a set of completely new narrative characteristics: ambiguity, uncertainty, irrationality and indeterminacy. Thus, the researcher must be open to what the unfolding events suggest. Data emerges from the ashes of everyday encounters like the mythological phoenix. Qualitative research may be viewed as that stance toward knowledge production that considers invaluable not just the final product but values also the way one arrived at that destination; as elegantly expressed in Bashō’s (1998: 3) most famous travelogue written circa 1694, *Narrow Road to the Interior*, “...every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.”

#### **6.4.7 Language, discourse and identity**

I share Griffiths (1995: 13) assumption about language, that is: “...language creates us but is also created by us.” Two important related features of language that act rather covertly on personal and collective identities are power and ideology (Fairclough, 2001). Power is infused in every relation(ship) and is unavoidable like ideology that permeates all languages. As Griffiths (1995: 1) contends “...my

individuality is shaped by political forces and what I feel as deeply personal is affected by public systems control.”

The relationship between language, power and ideology, points toward another related term, discourse. Gee (2005: 21) defines Discourse with a capital ‘D’ as: “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity.” The self is immersed within particular discourses that constructs and construes it.

### **6.5 My role as practitioner researcher: Birth of the *bricoleur***

After months in conducting research that draws on action research, I was still very much in the dark about my exact role and identity. Initially, I conceived research as a series of discrete decisions based on fundamental choices that ultimately would lead the research project forward: Would this research be a qualitative or quantitative project? What would I be trying to answer in my research? How do I improve my practice? Have I read enough on the subject? What methodology would enable me to best answer my research question/s? What method/s is/are available to collect data within my particular setting more effectively? Are there any financial or technical requirements or constraints? Who will be participating in this research project? Are there any ethical issues involved in conducting this research project? Questions of this sort were very much similar to the ones action research theorists suggest to prospective action researchers in their section “Getting ready for action” (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead: 2003: 73-95).

At that time, I was not satisfied with the technician metaphor (Zeichner and Liston, 1996), acting without thinking, enacting a conditioned response to a stimulus, a sort of “a reflex action such as a knee-jerk” (Steiner, 1991: 163). For ultimately, the technical approach to thinking about teaching and by extension, to conduct research, is “inadequate,” “very limited” and “an ineffectual way to solve educational problems” (Zeichner and Liston, 1996: 4).



Therefore, I was in dire need of a more powerful metaphor for my role and conceptualisation as a researcher. Before conducting my research, I had done a thorough analysis of the different methods and methodologies that were used in similar researches (*vide* Chapter 6, Table 6.2). Hence, I was able to identify a series of aspects that at the time I considered as positive to emulate. However, I ended up with a set of seemingly disparate attempts without what I felt was a coherent model. Initially, I was making small paces with a reconnaissance of the context. I was experimenting with different methods and techniques, learning how to improve upon them for future use, especially the second cycle. Some moves were even negotiated with my student-teachers, and some methods or reflective tasks were even specifically suggested by them.

Mid-way through the first cycle, I doubted my exact role and *raison d'être*. I was debating with my supervisor different orientations and horizon of possibilities. To be more precise, I was anxiously looking for some overarching name or metaphor for my practice. I was frantically searching for a name that would in a sense justify and reinvigorate my practice. Finally, when in September 2005 I was attending the BERA Annual Conference organised at the University of Glamorgan, Wales, I came across a newly published book by Joe Kincheloe and Kathleen Berry (2004) with an intriguing title *Rigour and Complexity in Educational Research: Conceptualizing the Bricolage*. I was working within a complex environment and aiming at a rigorous research. However, what did the French word 'bricolage' have to do with them?

The terms bricolage and bricoleur were popularised in qualitative research by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) who used them to define the action/product and the prime player of qualitative research. Whilst conceding that "[t]he qualitative researcher may be described using multiple and gendered images", they demonstrate a predilection for "a bricoleur, as a maker of quilts, or, as in filmmaking, a person who assembles images into montages" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 4). They identified at least five kinds of bricoleurs: interpretative, narrative, theoretical, political and methodological. The interpretative bricoleur produces a bricolage, that

is: “A pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation... that changes and takes new forms as the *bricoleur* adds different tools, methods, and techniques of representation and interpretation to the puzzle” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 4). Firstly, the bricoleur makes use of what is readily at hand, and secondly, if necessary invents or constructs from ready-made material, new tools or techniques to use within a particular setting or context. This latter characteristic tallies with that used by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) in *The Savage Mind*, and later critically picked up by Jacques Derrida (1978: 285), when, paraphrasing the former, describes the bricoleur as:

someone who uses “the means at hand,” that is, the instruments he finds at disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogenous (sic) –and so forth.

What strikes me most in this interpretation are the words “not hesitating”. I was intrigued by this sort of methodological detachment that the qualitative researcher must feel in order to ascribe the best fit method/s according to the reading of the complex and ever evolving and unfolding context. Table 6.1 gathers some of the characteristics that delineate a profile for my conceptualisation of bricolage and bricoleur:

**Table 6.1: My characteristics of bricolage and bricoleur**

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Before being a theoretical concept or an ideal researcher’s image, the bricoleur is grounded in my practice and experience finding my way/s through the meandering roads of qualitative research for the first time.</li> <li>▪ The bricoleur takes his/her positioning (subjectivity) in a web of discourses as a point of departure in any inquiry. It is the bricoleur’s task to uncover and unravel the influence and power exerted by particular discourses on individuals within a context.</li> <li>▪ The bricoleur, aware of the inherent limitations of singular stance, searches for connections and relationships between different forms of knowledge (situated knowledges), methods (multi-methodological research) and disciplines (inter-disciplinarily) according to exigencies of the context he/she is immersed in.</li> <li>▪ The bricoleur is not discouraged by the complexity of his/her undertaking. The bricoleur tries to find relations between different parts of inquiry.</li> </ul> |
|---|

- Research methods within the hands of the bricoleur are the tools to construct and deconstruct reality. Indeed, the bricolage is a manifestation of the eclecticism that the researcher and the researched have undergone to interpret their lived experience. The eclecticism in data generated is reflected in the fabrication of the final text.
- The bricoleur is always open to work with others who might contribute to an improved way of understanding and representation of events. The bricoleur is well read in Western and non-Western philosophy. In a certain way, the bricoleur is aware that given different tools of inquiry, the result would be different.

based on

Hatton (1988); Honan (2004); Kincheloe (2001); and Kincheloe and Berry (2004)

## **6.6 Conclusion**

Before the invention of the compass, travelling at sea was previously possible during the night, by the close observation of the stars. In Maltese the polar star is called ‘kewkbet is-safar’, literally ‘travelling star’. These assumptions are my guiding stars on the methodological journey I set out to embark upon. They reveal my position or location within an ever-evolving seascape. Were I on land, these postulates would be the signposts I have passed indicating where I have come from. They are not enshrined in stone or chiselled in marble. I would rather liken these assumptions to be scribbles in sand, that silently wait their own destiny... the arrival of an ever bigger wave or stronger gale that would modify the contours of my journey.

## CHAPTER 7

### My project

#### 7.1 Qualitative Research and Action Research

Whilst I recognise the value of both qualitative and quantitative research methods I have come to this research with a predilection for qualitative research methods due to personal circumstances and a number of epistemological convictions. One rather decisive issue that got me really thinking was what kind of relationships I wanted to establish during my research. Since I valued and still cherish the personal communication with different people who share their experiences within a community of practice, I was very much inclined to opt for a qualitative design.

One further step forward occurred when I had to decide about a general framework to position my research endeavour. I knew in advance that the research questions I would like to tentatively answer would focus both on myself as a researcher – in line with Jack Whitehead's (1989; 2000) questions (*vide* Chapter 6, Section 6.2) – and on my student-teachers as they were becoming novice teachers of literature.

##### 7.1.1 Action Research

One of the main attractive attributes of action research is that it “directly addresses the problem of the division between theory and practice” (Noffke and Somekh, 2005: 89). This bipolar distinction is short circuited when the researcher takes active part in his/her own research. Notwithstanding that the researcher may at times feel alone: “Action research is an enquiry by the self into the self, undertaken in company with others acting as research participants and critical learning partners” (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002: 15). Action research involves a dialectical process of action and reflection, that ultimately bring about demonstrable change in many, if not all, participants. Two related concepts required within an action research cycle

are planning one's actions and time for observation. These four stages – observation, planning, acting and reflection – form part of the learning cycle, that should be conceived similar to a spiral rather than a circle. When it comes to reflection, there is no difference between the researcher and participants, all have come together and reflect. Usually, reflection within an action research project produces a series of other small actions that are aimed at fostering awareness of one's condition, identifying ways to move forward and develop ways of assessing what was aimed for and what was actually achieved. Action researchers see knowledge as something they create together rather than finding it somewhere out there. Therefore, the encounters with others are viewed as an opportunity to share experiences and create knowledge together. Hence, action research is a powerful method to research within a community, like my University.

## **7.2 My research design: An overview**

The following are a number of aspects related to my research design.

### **7.2.1 The sample or cohort**

Since I am a full-time Assistant Lecturer within the Faculty of Education, University of Malta, I conducted research within my own institution. The research was spread over two consecutive academic years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 with two different groups of prospective teachers of Maltese at secondary level in their third year of a four year B.Ed.(Hons.) teacher training course. A very common trend within the Maltese education system is that pupils move from secondary to a two year post-secondary college, also known as Sixth Form, at the age of sixteen, and then immediately enrol at university at the age of eighteen. Therefore, at the time of research the participants were around 21-22 years old. There were nine third year student-teachers in 2003-2004 followed by ten student-teachers in 2004-2005. The gender distribution follows the general trend within the languages, that is slowly becoming a gendered profession.

**Table 7.1: Gender distribution according to the different cycles**

	<i>First cycle</i> Academic year 2003-2004	<i>Second cycle</i> Academic year 2004-2005	Total number of students in both cycles
Female students	7	10	17
Male students	2	0	2
Total number of students	9	10	19

These nineteen students specialised in two subject areas, both considered of equal importance. The following is the second subject specialisation of the students participating in the research: Art (1 student); Music (1 student); Spanish (1 student); History (2 students); Home Economics (2 students); French (3 students); German (4 students); Personal and Social Education (5 students). Certain subjects do not feature in the list due to particular restrictions that are imposed by the Faculty of Education. The total number of students in the different cycles could have been slightly different since one student that enrolled for the first cycle had to suspend her studies for one year since she did not obtain a ‘Pass’ in her English proficiency test; she later managed to obtain this prerequisite and joined the second group.

In Table 7.2 I offer profiles of each individual with reference to: social background, reading habits, values, aspirations, feelings, attitudes, memorable quote or contribution, and the like. Hopefully, describing some of their particularity one gets a glimpse of those features that shaped the research process, and had an effect on the degree of appropriation of pedagogical skills inspired by reader-response to teach Maltese literature in a secondary school for the first time. These differences can serve as contextualising features of their responses and stances.

**Table 7.2: Participant profiles**

Pseudonym	Profile and description
Priscilla	A responsible student and a hard worker. A serious student who liked very much to participate in discussions and presentations. A joy to have her in my lectures since she would be the one to ask the most difficult questions. Very supportive of her peers and always had an encouraging word to her students. Among her favourite books one finds <i>The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes</i> by Conan Doyle and Colleen McCullough's <i>The Thorn Birds</i> . But her romantic vein is most evident when she chose Danielle Steel's sentence from <i>Summer's End</i> as a memorable quote, "They didn't need words; they had each other in a world where time had stopped." Indeed, if she had to write a book, it would definitely be a romantic novel.

James	From a very young age his reading habits revolved around football. He did not venture far from the school canon of Maltese literature. The Bible would be the book he would save before Armageddon. Notwithstanding being rather laid back during lectures, when asked, he used to provide poignant comments. He used to find it hard to write at length; indeed his responses in the reflective tasks were rather short compared to the rest of his peers. He wrote his first ever poem to his girlfriend and shared it with the group during the one-day seminar.
Carla	Positive personality. While giving the impression of being very strong, coming from a rural family, once one gets to know her one immediately becomes aware of how fragile and emotional she can be in reality. Her favourite author was Danielle Steel. Very serious in her work; gave great detail to the presentation of each and every task. Indeed, a turning point in her academic year was when she obtained a 'not satisfactory' in one of her visits (she went on to pass her teaching practice), but that blemish changed her drastically. After her teaching practice experience, she became very doubtful of herself, and suspicious of and verging on the cynical about the relevance of theory/practice at University. However, towards the end of academic year with the help of her peers she overcame that emotional stress. Had she to write a novel, she would address it to introverted people in need of help and who do not know how to give voice to their turmoil.
Samantha	A goal oriented person and very much in touch with her emotional side. She cherishes her memories of her school days, with school outings and prize days as her most memorable ones. Apart from Maltese authors, she liked reading Enid Blyton and C. S. Lewis. She became acquainted with one of her mottos in life, when just fourteen, after reading a notice in the school's assistant head's office: "The trouble with not having a goal is that you can spend you life running up and down the field and never score". As a reader she likens herself to being sensitive and curious, jumping quickly to the last few pages to know the end, before carrying on with the book. During lectures she liked to participate and share her experiences, while being also a very good listener.
Ilona	Rather shy and reserved. Had the habit of writing Maltese poetry. When encouraged, she managed to write a poem in English and have it published in an anthology in the United States. Apart from the usual local authors, she preferred reading Graham Green, Charles Dickens and Emily Bronte ( <i>Weathering Heights</i> was read a couple of times with similar joy). Very close to her mother who supported her incessantly. She would recommend the Bible for politicians to read in their free time. Down to earth as she was, in her reading history she claimed: "I believe that each and every teacher of literature should be an avid reader of literature, but the die hard truth is, that very, very few do indeed literature". She could be considered a novice poet with the passion for teaching what she loves most... literature.
Marika	Diligent. Perfectionist. Motivated. Hard-working. Proud to be the first prize winner for Maltese at post-secondary level for her year. This lucky streak goes back to her primary school years when in year five she won a prize for best composition. Her confidence was boosted further the subsequent year when she played in the school concert. No wonder she wanted to become a teacher. Working within this engaging environment was her dream from a very early age. Christian values permeate her life, with the book she read most often and with pleasure being: <i>Your Faith</i> . Her love for Maltese and teaching came together during her first teaching practice, as was evident in one of her reflections: "I took teaching very seriously, failure was not an option from the very start!"

Belinda	<p>A born creative person! Always willing to participate with wealth of experiences and reflections. A passionate reader of Maltese children's literature. She adorned her reflections with photos of her school days. The book that left most impression on her was <i>Agony and Ecstasy</i> by Irving Stone, an account of the tribulations of Michelangelo. In personal significance she compares <i>The Story of Art</i> by E. H. Gombrich to the Bible! In her hands, even a simple lesson plan or section separators in her teaching practice file would be presented in a creative fashion. In more than one way, a resourceful and hard-working student-teacher. While finding the new methods for teaching literature enticing, she was uncertain how these would be adopted by students in secondary classrooms. During her training, one of her aims as a teacher was to design creative lessons that meet students' needs and interests. Indeed, in class she had a flair for teaching, that emerged more confidently as time went by, especially after receiving reassuring comments from her examiners and positive feedback by her students.</p>
Cleo	<p>Bridging between theory and practice was somewhat difficult for her. The marriage between her life in school and insights from literature ended up to be more similar to pastiche rather than to an ensemble of a coherent and sustained critical reflection. She used to work through the reflective tasks as if the prompts were an interview questions. Did not take too much initiative, feeling rather insecure at times, especially since she had rather weak orthography. This attitude reflected itself during lectures... she hardly ever participated in the discussions, and when asked to supply an example to explain what she claimed to have understood, most probably than not, she would remain embarrassingly silent.</p>
Luigi	<p>A very industrious and humble student-teacher but with evident pedagogical and content knowledge limitations. The role of his diary was mainly to regurgitate or paraphrase the lecture. This obviously was pointed out many a times, coupled with strategies to improve his writing, but the message seemed never to push through. Struggled throughout the study-unit to finish on time all his work; with special concessions having to be agreed upon from time to time. Complacent to the level of being exasperating. Found great difficulty to appropriate and contextualise the relevant pedagogical skills inspired from principles drawn from reader-response rather than the tried and tested formulas or magic recipes. The short-circuit between practice and reflection meant he found it difficult in learning from experience, thus the process of self-improvement hardly every found its way.</p>
Gianna	<p>A meticulous student-teacher. Rather shy, and participated sparingly during discussions, preferring the comfort and security of group work. On the other hand, rather sincere in her diary like when she complained about having to come to University on a Thursday during teaching practice, and the fact that she was already giving her utmost and the lecturer during a conference was trying to push them to identify further areas for improvement. When compared to her peers, she had a broad knowledge of literature, having read the classics. This gave her insights that sounded strange to her peers but angel's music to my ears. At last, a true reader.</p>
Julie	<p>An attentive and articulate student-teacher, with a passion for languages. Very ambitious; she was the one to ask about a Masters while still reading an undergraduate course. Calm and with a positive outlook, resolute to succeed during teaching practice. A person eager to put into practice what she heard, read about and experimented with, at University. Apart from reading practically anything written in the foreign language she was specialising in at University, travelling seemed to be another dear hobby of hers. A very sensitive person to her students' needs, as was very well demonstrated during teaching practice.</p>



Mia	A student-teacher with great potential but for some reason did not seem to make her own ideas presented during the lectures. Being rather diffident about how these novel ideas propel change in the education system and most importantly, bring about change on an individual level. She acted rather passively during lectures, dismissive of most that was explained. I believe she would be one of those student-teachers that try to please her examiners during teaching practice but than do differently once the 'cat' is away. A very sociable person and an unacknowledged leader.
Cecilia	A very reserved person, if not an introvert. During lectures one hardly ever hears her express her thoughts. Then in a secondary school classroom she would be transformed into this completely different person... a real orchestrator of lively activities with her students. At the time of my research, her family was a very powerful influence in her life. These extreme personalities resurfaced in her reading interests: as a devout Christian she would definitely save the Holy Bible if all the books were to perish, but then, Dan Brown's <i>The Da Vinci Code</i> , left a lasting impression on her. Likes to work with her best friend rather than on her own or within a large group.
Suzanne	Had her profile been an adjective list... and only an adjective list... it would be something like this: Competent, optimistic, honest, bright, kind, dependable, helpful, courteous, imaginative, sincere and quite... probably in that order too!
Anne	While lacking in self-confidence and acting very cautiously, she definitely liked the challenge of new reader-response inspired ideas. She was very critical about the way she was taught literature, thus her commitment to change and total experimentation with innovative methods during teaching practice. She preferred traditional Maltese literature and found it hard to venture on her own and read new material. Her reading habits were a direct and unmistakable result of schools' literary canon. She was torn between her love for Maltese and the newly found passion for her foreign language. If she had to write a book it would certainly be a romantic novel. Meticulous, industrious, very emotional, reliable... all these adjectives describe her character probably more than she would openly admit to herself.
Victoria	If most student-teachers tend to become anxious and tense just when teaching practice approaches, alas, she would be the one living in a permanent state of anxiety. Everything seems to be a source of stress for her, especially keeping a reflective diary and trying to meet deadlines. Most probably, this character trait hindered her from enjoying fully a special period in her life that of setting the first steps in becoming a teacher of literature. Notwithstanding this outlook, she used to empathise a lot with her students, mainly because she sees in them her own past and present tribulations. I think she was only fair when she unequivocally stated that this study-unit involved too much work when compared to the amount of credit value.
Kim	A well organised, conscientious and respectful student-teacher. While giving the impression of being very calm and carefree, actually she was very much like a petard waiting to be ignited, nervous and panicky. During lectures, a simple introductory question would be enough to show her true emotions and heartfelt thoughts and opinions on education in general and teaching Maltese. Always frank and fair in her comments. She never complained too much about the amount of work assigned for she understood the rationale behind it even if ultimately it was either ill-timed or boring (one of her favourite adjectives). She was always eager to share with peers and students her love for teaching, especially literature. Apart from her family, she had a great love towards all animals.

Ella	A timid and modest student-teacher with not so high expectations for herself. Always in need of emotional support and groaning about how much work needed to be done. A keen observer of school life, identifying and reflecting upon details that would easily go unnoticed to many. Her preoccupation with discipline ultimately hindered her from enjoying life in school to the maximum. Indeed much work related to teaching practice – developing primarily a portfolio – was considered as an added burden to her. Pedagogy for her was a list of methods, some more creative than others, to be used sparingly in schools if one does not want to compromise classroom management. Rarely opened her mouth during lectures, and it was very difficult to ask her questions since she evidently did not like being put on centre stage.
Allison	Easily bored with even the newest of ideas. Nothing impresses her. Acted as if she knew it all or heard about it already somewhere else. Rather cynical about the effectiveness not only of reader-response but worst still, of teacher training in general. She needed to be encouraged to do everything, and deadlines were her one and only motivator. She felt content with being an average student-teacher. Her famous quote, in relation to formative assessment, ‘Isn’t this your job?!’

### 7.2.2 The study-unit

Since the B.Ed.(Hons.) course basically follows a two-plus-two model (the first two years ‘subject content’ and the final two years ‘education’) their subject methodology study-units actually commence in their third year. Apart from Educational Studies (Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology) each individual subject has a total of eight subject-specific methodology study-units, distributed as four study-units in the third year, with the remaining four in their fourth year. The study-unit I monitored – ‘The Literary Experience in the Secondary School’ – forms part of the Maltese specialisation methodology core study-units, is delivered during the third year of the course, and is spread over two semesters with a total number of 28 hours contact/lecturing hours. Table 7.3 presents a schematised version of what took place during those 28 hours. There are some differences between the first and second cycles that are indicated with a symbol, and the months on the bottom part are only an approximate indication of when activities actually took place.

**Table 7.3: An overview of the data generating experiences for the two groups**

	Student's Journal <sup>1</sup>	Reflective Tasks <sup>2</sup>	Comments on Selected Articles from Reading Pack <sup>3</sup>	Teaching Practice Portfolio <sup>4</sup>	Test <sup>5</sup>	Interview <sup>6</sup>
Oct.	A journal entry at least once a week for the duration of the study-unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What would you like? A self addressed letter</li> <li>Reading history I – Early memories</li> <li>Reading history II –Y our literary tastes</li> </ul>				A 20 min. to 30 min. interview
Nov.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reading history III –What type of reader have you become</li> <li>Reasons for teaching literature at secondary school</li> </ul>	Participants negotiated a threshold of one article/ chapter response every fortnight			
Dec.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A description of a traditional literature lesson</li> <li>My first literature lesson</li> </ul>				
Jan.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why did you want to become a teacher?</li> <li>The influence of a teacher</li> <li>Metaphorical images of a teacher of literature</li> <li>Looking at yourself as a teacher of literature</li> </ul>	The first 4 summaries-comments were collected and given feedback on how they could be improved upon	Participants were provided with a manual on the portfolio to read in advance. First conference on the portfolio.		
Feb.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Designing a literature syllabus</li> <li>Choosing a literary text</li> </ul>		Participants were assigned in a secondary school for a six week block teaching practice		
Mar.				During teaching practice, participants were asked to collate a portfolio. Participants attended two conferences during teaching practice and one conference before submitting their portfolio. On-line discussion on the criteria for the rubric that would assess the portfolio.		
Apr.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The anxiety of theory</li> <li>Does literary theory liberate or stifle the teaching of Maltese literature?</li> </ul>				
May		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The (ir)relevance of literature</li> <li>Towards a personal definition of literature</li> </ul>	All summaries-comments were collected and assessed	Participants self-assess and peer-assess their portfolio		
Jun.					Test	A c. 45min. in-depth structured interview

<sup>1</sup> The main difference was that the first group kept their journal during teaching practice, while the second group had an exception during that period.

<sup>2</sup> There was a slight difference in the sequence of reflective tasks between the first and second group due to a different emphasis during the study-unit.

<sup>3</sup> The first group did not have this item as standard practice, only the second group filled in 25 responses.

<sup>4</sup> The Teaching Practice Portfolio focusing on the teaching of Maltese literature at secondary level from cycle one to cycle two, evolved to better respect the formative nature of the task. The peer-assessment was only introduced with the second group. A conference/focus group interview was held every fortnight for the duration of teaching practice.

<sup>5</sup> The test was an activity conducted only with the first group. Other forms of assessment, mirroring an assessment for learning philosophy, were introduced with the second group.

<sup>6</sup> The in-depth interview was conducted twice with the first group, at the beginning and at the end, and only once towards the end of the study-unit with the second group since initially I laid greater emphasis on their reading history reflective writing tasks.

### 7.2.3 The field

The binary opposite ‘theory/practice’ can be amplified and exemplified in another related binary opposite ‘methodology/field’. The positive connotations of ‘the field’ might go back to when we used to go with our Biology teacher on a ‘field trip’. Packed lunches, singing on the coach, valleys, rubble walls, trees, plants, flowers, sunshine, clouds, rain, wind... and above all, jokes between the enthusiastic ‘*fieldworkers*’, pushed by their preoccupied teacher to take ‘*field* notes’ on their ‘*fieldwork*’. What a difference from the impersonal walls of the classroom where most of the time teaching (not learning) took place. (I like to think that Milan Kundera might have coined the title of his novel *Life is Elsewhere* (1973/2000) at school!)

However, the distinction between methods/practice is perpetrated in such an all embracing methods textbook (eg. Somekh and Lewin, 2005b). Each chapter is written in a way as to present two discrete but interrelated aspects: ‘The key concepts section’ followed by ‘The stories from the field’ section. This is the editor’s description of the scope and writing style of ‘the stories from the field’ section, extrapolated from the ‘Introduction’:

...provide a narrative account of carrying out a research study using this specific methodology or method. They are accounts ‘from the inside’ revealing the complexity and fascination of carrying out research and dispelling any notion that there is one right way to be followed. In most cases they reveal how and why decisions about the research design were taken, describe the experience of carrying out the work, including some of the problematic issues that arose and how they were addressed, and reflect on the way in which knowledge and understanding developed. Alternatively, in a few cases they provide a vivid description of the research issues and outcomes in a form of reporting appropriate to the methodology concerned.

(Somekh and Lewin, 2005b: xiii)

However, these intentions are critically read by Erica Burman and Maggie MacLure (2005: 287) in their chapter collected in the same book: “‘the field’ is no less a textualized, power-infused space than that of theory, though its contours are different.” They carry on making the case by unpacking/deconstructing the title/concept itself:

‘Stories from the field’ seems oddly modernist and objectivist, the agricultural metaphor suggestive of the discourse of data flourishing ‘out there’ (where? anywhere that is not ‘here’, perhaps?), awaiting collection like ripe fruit [...] ‘stories from the field’ seems a suspect activity, replete with gendered, age and colonial relations.

(ibid. p. 287)

I agree with Burman and MacLure’s (2005) analysis. To a certain extent, my field is a very typical arena not very much different from other lecture room situations in England. On the other hand, I have become very suspicious of the romanticised vision of the lecture room, or have re-elaborated the concept to better reflect my vision: a *battlefield* or arena. Stratagems and strategies, power relationships, gender issues, deadlines, ultimatums, working under duress, mediations and negotiations, hidden and overt agendas, cold wars, and interrogations to mention just a few, all form part of the conceptual map of the classroom as battlefield metaphor.

Everything takes place at the University of Malta. The academic year commences in October and reaches its completion in late May/early June of the following year, spread over eight to nine months; one cannot but notice the fearful symmetry with the human gestation period. The academic year is divided into two semesters, with one hour lecture per week. During the second semester, between February and April of their third year, student teachers are assigned to secondary schools for the teaching practice for six weeks, thus the remaining lectures are of two hours duration. During teaching practice some lecturers, usually subject co-ordinators, organise a number of support group-like tutorials.

Within this context, the mere “collection” of data seems to be devoid of the intentional deliberate component; therefore I prefer a more value-laden active verb “generation” within the more precise phrase: ‘data generating experiences.’

#### **7.2.4 My personal understanding of data generating experiences, alias methods**

“We [practitioner researchers] aren’t outsiders peering from the shadows into the classroom, but insiders responsible to the students whose learning we document” (Zeni, 2001: 154). Responsibility and documentation may be considered as two essential components of tactful research design. Indeed, emphasis is laid upon the mindful selection of method or methods (*vide* McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 2003). Suggestions abound and the novice researcher is overwhelmed by the plethora of methods and their possible combinations. Methods are at times considered as an add-on feature to the research process as if they were just a tool. Furthermore: “Research which is ‘method-led’ can be uneconomical, inappropriate and unjustifiably biased” (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 21).

My understanding of research methods is informed by M. C. Wittrock’s (1979; 1991) research on text comprehension, and more philosophically, on one aspect of Paulo Freire’s (1997) liberation pedagogy. Both of them happen to use the word ‘generative’ in particular nonetheless complimentary ways. Resorting to their definition will only elucidate my personal understanding of the term ‘data generating experiences.’

Research methods are part of the teaching/learning process, to the extent that one cannot distinguish between what has happened and how it was documented. The word generative refers to the construction of knowledge in a dialogical way. The research on generative teaching contends “that comprehension depends directly on what students generate and do during instruction” (Wittrock, 1991: 169). Data generating experiences therefore aim at challenging one’s preconceptions and beliefs, exploring new possibilities, and finally end up with a coherent new knowledge or experience. Some of the benefits of the generative teaching are that students develop metacognitive skills whilst they are engaged in their own learning without the need for additional time or equipment (Wittrock, 1991). Hence teaching and learning become a way to facilitate knowledge construction.

To comprehend instruction, students invent new models and explanations or use or revise old models and explanations to organize new information into coherent wholes that make sense to them and are consonant with their experience and knowledge. Generation includes the processes of relating individual events and ideas presented in class and relating instruction to knowledge and experience.

(Wittrock, 1991: 176)

Likewise, data generating experiences develop self-reflective critical thinking without particular and significant modifications to the teaching/learning process. Students become responsible for their own learning. Indeed, the data generating experiences need to be as unobtrusive as possible such as not to condition, contaminate, modify, or in any way alter the natural setting and flow of events. While student-teachers are generating the data they are becoming more aware of their own motivations, perceptions, beliefs and knowledge. Finally, “generative teaching focuses on teachers’ responsibility for getting students to generate new meanings or understandings by revising their preconceptions” (Wittrock, 1991: 179).

My conceptualisation of data generating experiences, alias methods, is very much similar to Freire’s (1997: 83) concept of “generative themes” because “they contain the possibility of unfolding into again as many themes, which in their turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled.” Freire (1997: 78) is convinced that generative themes are endowed with richness, significance, plurality and transformations, with a historical composition. Similarly, I believe that data generating experiences produce an intricate web of meaning-charged information that brings along change in those that metaphorically speaking, weave or fabricate it. Performing a top-down analysis, Freire (1997: 84-85) demonstrates how generative themes move from the general to the particular, as if located in concentric circles: the broadest circle would be the epochal unit which contains universal themes, and within the smaller circles one would find the limit-situations characteristic of societies which, in turn, are subdivided into other sub-themes. “Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or of cultural action of a

liberating character” (Freire, 1997: 88). To achieve such a goal, Freire (1997) suggests a methodology of *conscientização*, consisting of a problem-posing education (the investigation of generative themes contained in the minimum thematic universe), which is a critical form of thinking about the world. Likewise, data generating experiences are not simply tools in the hand of the researcher but an empowering and liberating experience in the hands of the students “to investigate people’s thinking about reality and people’s action upon reality, which is their praxis” (Freire, 1997: 87). Most of the data generating experiences I used were intended to prompt and guide students in: “Producing and acting upon their own ideas – not consuming those of others...” (Freire, 1997: 89).

### 7.3 Data generating experiences in practice

To overcome the inherent limitation of any data generating experience on its own, I planned, enacted and documented a number of different activities around the same event or issue, that when taken together act as a basis for “triangulation,” that is different data sources that can be “cross-validated” or “shed light on each other” (Somekh and Lewin, 2005a: 349). The first distinction around data was the source: myself as the lecturer/researcher, and my nineteen student-teachers. The different data generating experiences can be further categorised in two broad groups depending if they ultimately generated oral texts (later on, selectively transcribed and translated for further analysis) or written texts, as shown in Table 7.4.

**Table 7.4: Data generating experiences**

Data generating experiences that produce...	
Oral texts	Written texts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pre- and Post- study-unit interview</li> <li>▪ Focus group interviews/Conference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ My personal research diary</li> <li>▪ Student-teachers’ journal</li> <li>▪ Reflective task, that inspire personal accounts and/or critical incidents</li> <li>▪ Documents</li> </ul>

The different data generating experiences were aimed at documenting the lived experiences around the study-unit ‘The Literary Experience in Secondary School.’



### **7.3.1 My research diary and student-teachers' reflective diaries**

My personal research diary naturally was my weekly or fortnightly commitment for at least two years. "Research journals" (Borg, 2001; Thomas, 1995) can be considered as a written document where the researcher keeps a record of the different experiences and reflections on them throughout the duration of a research period. It is also known as: "Project journal" (White, 1988); "Personal-professional journal" (Holly, 1989); "Action research journal" (Oberg, 1990); and "Reflective log" (Bridges, 1999). I found this experience rather difficult, especially if I did not write immediately after the session. But I made it a point to write/type at least a page, and identify one critical incident.

My experience helped me to better understand my student-teachers' version of a diary, known as "Weekly/daily log" (Holly, 1989); "Project journal" (White, 1985); "Personal notebook" (Fulwiler, 1987); "Lecture journal" (Moon, 1999); "Learning journals" (Moon, 1999); and "Think-place/think-book" (NCTE in Fulwiler, 1987). The research on the validity of a reflective diary by student-teachers at tertiary level in diverse fields is extensively documented especially the positive effects on the quality of reflective writing (*vide* Francis, 1995; Parks, 2003; Morrison, 1996; Spalding and Wilson, 2002; Thorpe, 2004). Student-teachers were encouraged to keep a reflective journal throughout their study-unit; with a short suspension during teaching practice with the second cohort. I used to gather their journal each term to prompt further reflection and guide their reflective writing process by suggesting other possibilities.

I specifically selected at times lengthy quotations from a number of student-teachers: "to understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insights into the collective"; or as expressed slightly differently "every in-depth exploration of an individual life-in-context brings us that much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in context" (Cole and Knowles, 2001: 11). What was intensely felt among an array of experiences is brought to the forefront. For this reason, while

both voices and sources are drawn upon, as much as possible the student-teachers' voice is preferred and commented upon at length.

### 7.3.2 Reflective Tasks

While in Part III I use profusely and liberally data from the two diaries, I cannot underestimate the other major source for the whole research: the twenty reflective tasks. Reflective tasks were a way to infuse reflective principles and practice in my practice. They were aimed at focusing student-teachers' attention on a specific aspect of the issue of becoming teachers of literature. Table 7.5 gathers the different reflective tasks that were devised, implemented or discarded with the two cohorts; the texts of the reflection tasks can be found also in Appendix A.

**Table 7.5: A list of reflective tasks devised and used in different cycles**

Focus	2003-2004		2004-2005	
		1	What would you like? A self addressed letter	
<i>Personal Reading History</i>	Reading History I – Early Memories	2	Reading History I – Early Memories	
	Reading History II – Your literary preferences	3	Reading History II – Your literary preferences	
	Reading History III – What type of reader are you?	4	Reading History III – What type of reader are you?	
	Reasons for teaching literature at secondary school – A questionnaire	5	Reasons for teaching literature at secondary school – A questionnaire	
		6	A description of a traditional literature lesson	
		7	My first literature lesson	
<i>Literature Syllabus</i>	Designing a literature syllabus	8	Designing a literature syllabus	
	Choosing a literary text(book)	9	Choosing a literary text(book)	
<i>The Literature Teacher</i>	Why did you want to become a teacher?	10	Why did you want to become a teacher?	
	The influence of a teacher	11	The influence of a literature teacher	
		12	Metaphorical images of a teacher of literature	
	Looking at yourself as a teacher of literature	13	Looking at yourself as a teacher of literature	
<i>Literary Theory and Literature</i>	The anxiety of theory	14		
	Does theory liberate or stifle teaching Maltese literature?	15		
	The (ir)relevance of literature	16		
	Towards a personal definition of literature	17	Towards a personal definition of literature	

These reflective tasks were designed and aimed at stimulating reflective learning and guiding reflection, for as Jennifer Moon (1999: 171) concludes: “if reflection is to be guided, the structure of a task provides the best guide for reflection.” The major difference between journal writing and reflective tasks is the degree of guidance set to the writing. A reflective task is guided in both structure and parameters. The aim of the reflective tasks was to encourage student-teachers to reflect on an issue beyond the time limit or constraints of a lecture. The student-teacher might experiment with different genres and writing styles. An overview of the different reflective tasks demonstrates that students were asked to answer in a traditional essay form in nearly half of them (RT 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15). But there was also a conscious effort to experiment in writing different genres, mainly: a memoir (RT 2, 3, 4, 7); a report (RT 8, 9); fill in a questionnaire (RT 5); a definition (RT 17); a defence or apologia (RT 17); and letter writing (RT 1). Moreover, student teachers were asked and encouraged to complement their writing with different artefacts like book cover scans, photographs, etc. Student-teachers were encouraged to produce material that moved beyond mere recollections or opinions, like conducting research to substantiate their point of view and challenge existing beliefs. One issue that always cropped up was assessment matters concerning reflective tasks, such as whether these should be assessed and possibly how and by whom they would be assessed; two issues which are very much an open debate among researchers.

Another ‘reflective task’ even if not under considered as one in Table 7.4, was written comments on selected articles from their reading pack. The second cohort student-teachers were provided at the start of the study-unit with a two-page template that guided their reflections when writing a comment on a text from their pack, consisting of:

- Their selected quote from the text.
- Any questions raised during or after you read this book / chapter / article;
- What do you feel you understood very well?
- What did you not understand?

- A specific experience from your past as student of Maltese literature or during your teaching practice that sheds particular light on insights gained reading this text.

The aim behind such a task was not to obtain a disjointed summary or to uncritically embrace *in toto* the read texts, what Michael Apple (1993: 61) names as ‘dominant’ reading of a text. The main aim was to have student-teachers respond to the texts in either: ‘a negotiated’ manner, that is, “dispute a particular claim, but accept the overall tendencies or interpretations of a text”; or read and respond to the texts in ‘an oppositional’ way, that is rejecting the dominant ideologies and orientations (Apple, 1993: 61). On a practical level, student-teachers were encouraged to bring along the completed sheets and have a short discussion around them every month or so, in a small group. As I read through the first examples, I noticed that their major difficulty was the new terminology they encountered, later confirmed by student-teachers. From then onwards, this lack of knowledge instigated a sort of impromptu mini-lecture (5 to 10 minutes) on one or two key-words.

### **7.3.3 Documents**

My research considered a number of documents where generated throughout this study-unit. Documents can be considered as original and authentic material, having a direct bearing on a research problem, especially in the reconstruction process of an event or particular historical context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Drawing on historical research, documents might be divided into two categories: primary sources (documents that pertain to an era or event, or those items that had a direct relationship with an event); and secondary sources (which do not have a direct relationship with an event).

The following are a few examples of pertinent documents: emails sent to student-teachers; the test paper set for the first cohort; study-unit description; *The Portfolio Guidebook for Student-Teachers Teaching Maltese Literature During their First Teaching Practice at Secondary School* (Portelli, 2004); result sheet; programmes set for the literary morning event; charts with different themes; photographs taken

during the various events; drawing/painting; teaching practice report books; university official code/policy; seminar programme; films and videos watched during the different lectures.

#### **7.3.4 Individual interviews and focus group conferences**

The oral text data generating experiences were the most time consuming and with hindsight, the least used and the least I drew upon in my analysis. Oral texts were the result of my effort to have a kind of joint data gathering experience: the individual pre- and post- study-unit interviews, and focus group interviewing or possibly better described as conferences since most of the time they rotated around portfolio construction. On the other hand, they provided me with the necessary feel of what had happened, what were the hot issues, and the student-teachers' perception of things at the start and end of study-unit. Thus, I used the oral texts rather sparingly, and usually as a living source of inspiration of what happened years back.

#### **7.3.5 The process of data reduction**

One of the many problems any action research project faces is to estimate which data would be valuable at a later stage when analysing it. Theoretically, methods and techniques are to be adopted according to one's research questions (*vide* Chapter 1). However, working in the field tends to be very unpredictable. Therefore, since I did not know the quality of student-teachers' responses to the designed Reflective Tasks (*vide* Appendix A) and other activities, initially I decided to cast as wide a net as possible, with the adoption of a battery of data generating experiences. Indeed, two strong proponents of action research, McNiff and Whitehead (2002: 94; my emphasis), contend that: "you [the researcher] will gather quantities of data, much of which will later be *discarded*". Indeed, in the beginning "it is important not to reject anything that might count later as valuable data" (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002: 94). The size and range of qualitative data at times can make the analysis "daunting" (Namey, Guest, Thairu and Johnson, 2007: 173).

On the other hand, only during the research process I became aware of and made my own, David Silverman's (2005: 123) advice to the novice-researcher, to choose "simplicity and rigour rather than the often illusory search for the 'full picture'".

Hence, only in retrospect, when I had all the "promising data" (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006: 64) in my hand, did I undergo what might be called, to borrow and adapt a term for computer technology, 'data reduction'. Indeed, analysis of large qualitative data rarely involves *all* the data that had been collected; without any doubt, "researchers need to delineate the boundaries of a given analysis" (Namey, Guest, Thairu and Johnson, 2007: 139). According to Miles and Huberman (1994: 10) data reduction can be defined as: "the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions." Furthermore, data reduction "is not something separate from analysis. It is *part* of analysis" (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 10). Indeed, it is the very first step of the analysis process in qualitative research (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 10-11). The elimination of irrelevant data or the extraction of relevant data is "arguably the simplest form of data reduction" (Namey, Guest, Thairu and Johnson, 2007: 173). The aim behind such preliminary data reduction process was "a form of analysis that sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that "final" conclusions can be drawn and verified" (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 11).

One recommended form of data reduction is "selection" (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 11), a process whereby after pondering on the research questions and quality of information at hand, the researcher makes the conscious and responsible decision to minimise information. In doing so, the researcher is actually increasing efficiency of his/her data by setting aside any redundant information. This is a crucial first step in a qualitative analysis process, especially when the information from different sources is highly correlated, or in other words, practically saying the same things but in different formats, oral and written (*vide* Table 7.3).

Within my research design, the information gathered through pre- and post-interviews, as well as the few recordings from focus groups during conferences on teaching practice, after careful thought were considered as not contributing anything significantly relevant or new, when compared to personal and student-teachers' written form of data. During and after interviews, not once did student-teachers complain about the perceived duplication of work. Probably, the designed interview schedules or goals for adopting this method, did not help in yielding a different picture than the ones already recorded from other sources. This was further substantiated by the personal sensation while conducting the interviews and more significantly so, when transcribing and rereading the interviews. I felt an ever growing sense of *déjà vu*... undeniably, the same information was also present and in greater detail in some of student-teachers' responses to specific reflective tasks.

With regards to data from focus groups, student-teachers were rather stressed and complained about having each and every single intervention recorded; thus the intrusiveness of the conferences recordings played a decisive role in actions that followed. One must also bare in mind the fact that teaching practice experience was being documented by a number of Reflective Tasks in relation to their portfolio, lesson evaluations and my research diary of events.

When I considered all these issues and arguments, especially the degree of overlap between the data from different sources and student-teachers reasonable complaints, it became quite straightforward to opt to analyse exclusively written data. This decision was further substantiated by the realisation that the sources that were ultimately considered, when taken together were well 'articulated' (Silverman, 2005: 153). In addition, the selected sources strongly corroborated each other, thus they potentially could be considered as a valid form of 'triangulation' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007: 141-144). Furthermore, after the data reduction process, I still envisioned the remaining data to extensively contribute to what Laura Ellingson (2008) theorised as 'crystallisation', a methodological feature which agrees very much with my exploration of a multi-genre approach to writing research (*vide* Chapter 2).

### **7.3.6 Dead ends, false starts and cul-de-sacs**

Action Research tends to be neatly conceived as a spiral involving planning, enactment, reflection and re-planning (eg. Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). A neat schematisation of my research project can be found in Table 7.2 summarising the key data generating experiences and in Tables 8.4 and 8.5 where the content of the study-unit is outlined and categorised. On the other hand, research tends to be rather ‘messy’ and unpredictable, features that rarely if ever find place in models. Armed to their teeth as they may be, researchers know very well that a number of problems will inexorably crop along the way or they will unwittingly enter cul-de-sacs. My research project too had its fair share of false starts and dead ends.

#### **7.3.6.1 Topics, discussions and issues**

The list of topics evolved in relation not just of what I considered as minimum knowledge and skills to familiarise and attain, but also student-teachers’ reactions to the topics. There were times when what I found engaging, was practically boring or irrelevant to them. One such example was the topic on the (ir)relevance of literary theory to teaching of literature at secondary school. A lot of preparation went into these lectures, only to later find student-teachers lacking the necessary theoretical baggage. It was a disappointment that taught me the lesson that what I love I must not necessarily teach! The following year, other more practical topics and activities were identified and enacted.

On a more practical side, certain activities took longer to complete than I had originally planned. Thus, content that was planned for one lecture had to shift for the following week. This problem was most acute during particular lively discussions on censorship and the school canon. I would have missed a great opportunity had I brought to an end these discussions, consciously sacrificing certain content. I realised not too late the importance of being flexible and open to what might emerge rather than scrupulously designed.



### **7.3.6.2 Reading list and lack of academic reading**

While a basic reading pack was provided at the start, student-teachers did not feel motivated enough or consider it part of their duties to browse and possibly read through the assigned chapters. Consequently, the level of participation in my view, suffered a lot; many a times was reduced to just gut feelings and personal experiences. I wanted my student-teachers to first feel responsible for their own learning and second, find joy in reading academic writing pertinent to what we discuss or I exposed during a sessions together... after all they were becoming professionals.

The reading list for the study-unit was completely overhauled and updated from one cycle to another, as a result of my burgeoning interest in reader-response theories and research on teaching literature at secondary level (*vide* Chapter 8). Furthermore, I had to think about a way of getting student-teachers to read the key texts. Hence I developed a template where they could list particular details and personal reflections. Even these two modifications were not devoid of problems. Though I negotiated and reached an agreement with student-teachers to read at least one chapter every fortnight, some of them simply procrastinated this task, and left the filling in of the form to the very end... thus defeating (my?) purpose. Getting student-teachers to read has remained a problem to this day.

### **7.3.6.3 Reflective Tasks , deadlines and feedback**

Coupled with the reading template, I devised a number of Reflective Tasks to accompany my lectures. In retrospect some were basically too difficult or abstract, remote from the student-teachers' immediate preoccupations. The level of guidance of reflective tasks was difficult to predict in advance. As a result, the quality and length of student-teachers' response varied a lot. Even if I experimented with various activities (*vide* Appendix A), I seem rarely to have hit the mark.

Agreed deadlines were not always met by my student-teachers. The process of negotiation, while in place, did not always yield the desired effect. Some student-

teachers always seem to fall behind others. At least they did not bother to find creative excuses, they were sincere enough to share with me their other just as important commitments... but definitely something had to give. While encouraging student-teachers to be responsible, some interpreted and translated this constant flow of work as living in a perennial state of examination stress.

While it was common practice to gather, read and report back with detailed feedback within a week or two, it became really taxing on me to read through all student-teachers' writing. Coupled with the amount of work, there were also those student-teachers who used to hand in their work late. As much as I tried to negotiate the time limits, certain deadlines were not met by everyone. In this case, I found it even more difficult to provide feedback when reading and tackling a number of issues rather than focus on one at the same time. Inadvertently I was running behind schedule, and initially I felt I could do little about it. Later, a compromise was found after asking student-teachers to select their best work from the previous three to four weeks to be read and commented upon. If student-teachers co-operated a little bit more, my work would have been more systematic and efficient.

#### **7.3.6.4 Recording interviews and conferences**

The tape-recordings of interviews and conferences was very time consuming, and took even more time to transcribe. I had a feeling that the presence of the recording device was influencing their response. How could I know if they were talking their mind or if they were trying to please me? In particular, were the conferences meant for student-teachers to share their feelings or to talk through my agenda? I think there were times that my research agenda clashed with their priorities. Only when my anxiety with my own research alleviated, did I feel relaxed and listened attentively to what they were actually experiencing in schools and classrooms. Thus, I let the student-teachers set their own agenda, and explore those areas they deemed as a priority. But it took me months to reach there.

Since the quality of the tape-recordings was not optimal, the interview with the second group was held at the University Radio. Hence I achieved a clearer and sharper noiseless digital recording that facilitated immensely the listening and transcription process. However, this new environment meant that some student-teachers felt really awkward in front of the microphone. I could do little about this, except providing a supportive environment and reassuring them about the purpose of the interview.

One other way of reading this aspect is by trying to strike a balance between the need to embrace what naturally emerges, and the careful selection of apposite method/s related to clear and defined set of research questions. This alignment or balance would have saved me and student-teachers a lot of time, undue stress and unyielding effort. Moreover, had this process been done in advance, it would have saved the time spent on data reduction due to unnecessary overlap with other data (*vide* Chapter 7).

#### **7.3.6.5 Teaching practice and my role crises**

While negotiating access to schools was never an issue, I immediately felt this was creating a tension between my role at university and that as an examiner in schools. When I was observing a literature lesson, what exactly was my role? Student-teachers felt this tension, and pointed out during conferences, that I was ‘different’ during teaching practice visits. While initially I was thinking on capitalising on the data from teaching practice reports, subsequently I rethought my role and decided not even to consider them as possible data for my research. By eliminating them rather early on in the first cycle, I thought I had solved a real problem with a number of ethical issues around it (*vide* Section 7.4.6) .

During teaching practice student-teachers can receive a Pass or a Non-Satisfactory, which is a politically correct way of saying, Fail, upon each visit. While I always felt accepted by all my student-teachers and for the whole duration of the research and beyond, however one particular incident opened my eyes as to how fragile

relationships are. On one occasion, a particular student-teacher was assigned a Non-Satisfactory performance; she then carried on with significant improvements and quality support to pass her teaching practice. However, there was a marked difference in her attitude, before and after teaching practice. While initially she was very enthusiastic, after teaching practice she sort of had cold feet. It took a lot of communication and persuasion as well as listening by my part to finally rope her in again with the whole group. Student-teachers are really sensitive during this period and can create undue barriers when they feel their identity is being threatened. This incident goes on to show how tactful a researcher and lecturer needs to be in these difficult times.

#### **7.3.6.6 To translate from Maltese or to write directly in English?**

Student-teachers know in advance that their assessment language would be the same as the one used during lectures. Frankly, I did not imagine translation would be a difficult and tedious process, as I soon discovered once I started translating parts of the data. Particular expressions, Maltese Semitic based syntax and their idiosyncratic writing style, were not always easy or straightforward to render into English. Once I realised this, one possibility would have been to give them a choice to write in English. That would have solved my problem, but what message would I be sending out? On second-thoughts, this idea was discarded since I truly believe in the categorical imperative in expressing oneself in Maltese. Naturally, I dedicated more time to the translation of relevant sections to be later inserted in my research.

#### **7.3.6.7 No happy endings... just learning**

These problematic sites and events during my research were identified, acknowledged and thoroughly thought over. While instinctively, I initially qualified these situations and events as problematic and not according to plan, through 'reflection-on-action' (Schön, 1983, 1987), these were considered as: opportunities to rethink my way of doing things or conceiving research; sites for self-improvement; and an unrepeatable occasion to experiment with new possibilities. I

fully concur with McNiff and Whitehead (2002: 90) when they state: “Learning from processes where things do not go right is as valuable as when they do.”

### **7.3.7 The role of data and the nature of evidence**

Whilst in this chapter I stressed the role of data generating experiences, I am aware that: “Evidence is not data; it is drawn from the data. Data transforms into evidence when actions show that the criteria we have set ourselves are realised” (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002: 100). The generated data had to be sieved and categorised according to themes and sub-themes, that subsequently were critically read for reader-response’s themes, and reflective and assessment issues (*vide* Part III). The field or context not only determined the methods used, but also the way they were designed to fit the particular exigencies that I encountered with my student-teachers – part of the skill of being a bricoleur (*vide* Chapter 6). There were a series of decisions and deliberations and at times real complex negotiations with my student-teachers, different possibilities were entertained and finally decided upon. Having undergone this process twice, I can understand Hilary Radnor’s (2001: 30) definition of the researcher as “the research instrument who engages in a transactional process, recognizing that the process is ethics-in-action.”

## **7.4 Ethics and my research**

To put it simply, “the question of ethics in research is a highly complex subject” (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 360). Indeed, no research question, method of investigation and/or presentation of research findings, can be considered immune from ethical considerations. Alas “each stage in the research sequence may be a potential source of ethical problems” (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 348). Furthermore, this comment is an eye opener to every researcher: “ethical considerations are inseparable from your everyday interactions with your others and with your data” (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 109). For as every thoughtful researcher who has conducted research at least once can tell: “Ethical concerns encountered in educational research in particular can be extremely complex and subtle and can

frequently place researchers in moral predicaments which appear quite unresolved” (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 347). However, awareness of such predicaments should only motivate the researcher to regulate his/her endeavour by becoming what I call an ‘ethically informed responsible agent’.

#### **7.4.1 Characteristics of an ethically informed responsible agent**

I envision an ethically informed responsible agent as a person that strives to attain those virtues that will enable him/her to perform his/her duty with personal satisfaction. Similar to the Hippocratic Oath, ethically informed responsible agents should first and foremost take heed not to harm others with their actions. Honesty can be another guiding principle, hence s/he should be clear about the motivations of the research, be transparent with his/her subjects of the research’s intentions, and aim at presenting an authentic version and interpretation of the collected data. No research performed by the ethically informed responsible agent can be devoid of respect towards those that participate in the research project, especially those that act as subjects, informants or collaborators. This, in turn, projects an image of a person of great integrity that merits trust. During the planning, actualisation and writing phases, the ethically informed responsible agent should feel responsible towards, demonstrate every care to, feel accountable for, and respect the dignity, of each and every participant. Being true to oneself during the research process may be a very challenging prospect involving personal integrity, consistency in one’s actions and fairness towards others. Even with these virtues and values at hand, the ethically informed responsible agent will still encounter ethical problems or questions along his/her process of improvement. For the learning process of the ethically informed responsible agent is never ending, and with reflection improves over time, generating ever greater sensitivity, empathy and compassion.

#### **7.4.2 Codes of Ethics**

Researchers should be familiar with the relevant code/s of ethics that inform and regulate their specialised field. This is due to the fact that: “Ethical codes are

written to cover the specific problems and issues that scientists frequently encounter in the types of research carried out within a particular profession. [...] These codes therefore reflect the consensus regarding values with a profession (Frankfort-Nachimias and Nachmias, 1996: 90). Further benefits obtained from an adherence to a code of ethics are: the researcher can be easily identified with a wider community with its common set of values and reputation; clarification of the obligations the researcher has towards his/her subjects; an awareness of the distinction between a right way from a wrong way of doing things; and informed in advance how to deal with the unknown or unexpected (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 381).

Apart from the *Data Protection Act* (Malta Laws, 2003) and the Malta Education Division's formal application for those individuals or bodies that wanted to conduct research in schools, there was no local code of ethics I could abide to. Initially, for guidance and counsel I referred to the British Educational Research Association's *BERA Ethical Guidelines* (1992) and the 2004 *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*.

#### **7.4.3 Consent letter: The participants' first safe-guard**

One important principle that guides researchers in their practice is that of obtaining permission from their subjects to research a particular aspect, also known as informed consent. A positive aspect of informed consent is that "it can contribute to the empowering of the researched" (Glesne and Peshkin, 2001: 111). A copy of the consent letter was handed out to each and every student-teacher on the very first encounter. They were expected to signify acceptance or rejection on the allocated space by the following week. This was in accordance with what Homan (1991: 69) rightly qualified as "the essence of the principle of informed consent" that is, that the participants "should be allowed to agree or refuse to participate in the light of comprehensive information concerning the nature and purpose of the research." All student-teachers cordially accepted to participate in my research project.

#### **7.4.4 Confidentiality and anonymity**

When it comes to the rights of the research participants, “privacy is generally the foremost concern” (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 117). Therefore, it was natural as an ethically informed responsible agent to try as much as possible to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere where student-teachers could feel accepted, secure and confident that what they shared would be valued, respected and kept secret. I was aware and confident that everything I listen to or read would be considered strictly as confidential, however I was not alone. I tried as much as possible to emphasise this aspect at the start, during and toward the end of the study-unit. In this regards, sharing this responsibility with my students to a certain extent mitigated the weight of such a crucial aspect. Indeed, confidentiality “operated as a devise to secure cooperation” (Homan, 1991: 150) whilst defending the participants’ basic rights. To date, no one showed any inclination to withdraw, limit or censure parts of his/her contribution, although they were informed they could do so at any time.

I assured the participants that I valued their privacy. Therefore, no participant is identified by his/her name, instead I use pseudonyms. I am aware of institutional giveaways – “unless massively disguised” (Piper and Simons, 2005: 57) – like the year of enrolment in the course or study unit, their subject specialisation and possibly even their gender. About the latter, since there were only two male student-teachers, and it would be a question of either one, I must admit that it was difficult to hide completely. Following Piper and Simons’ (2005: 57) suggestion, a way forward which I adopted in my research was to contact both individuals and ask for clearance at the end.

#### **7.4.5 Moving toward a new way of doing ethics**

Whilst code/s of ethics and consent letters tend to be very informative and explicative, they do not cover all the intricate situations that the researcher ends up with during his/her research period. Moreover: “When researchers investigate their own practice, many of the traditional guidelines collapse” (Zeni, 2001: 153). Ethical questions can never be settled for good, and each day will bring its own set



of new questions. Two possible solutions might be drawn from two adjacent fields of study: “ethics-in-action” (Radnor, 2001: 34-35) and/or “situated ethics” (Simons and Usher, 2000). Within an ethics-in-action framework, Radnor (2001: 35), paraphrasing Pring, explains that the researcher acts respectfully toward his/her participants “through the setting up of feeding back data and sharing findings with them.” Midway through the data collection, just after teaching practice and towards the end of data collection, I tried to share some preliminary results or broad trends or patterns with diligent student-teachers in informal meetings. On the other hand, situated ethics is that field where in a relativistic *milieu*, one of the possible inroads forward in the meandering field of ethics is that of apprehending the situation, framing it with the lived context of those participating in that action or immersed in that dilemma. Thus, according to Simons and Usher (2000: 2) situated ethics “is immune to universalization” since it “is local and specific to particular practices.” This is reiterated by Piper and Simons (2005: 58): situated ethics “encourage participants to develop their own ethical practice in the groups and contexts in which they work and an ethics which takes into account the specific cultural differences between people.” Hence, the trust behind both models derives from the conviction that it is the duty of the ethically informed responsible agent to act consciously within an unpredictable and complex context where one cannot resort to “indubitable foundations and incontrovertible principles” (Simons and Usher, 2000: 3). This is the ethically informed responsible agent’s moral imperative. This embracement of ethics by the ethically informed responsible agent is “the inescapable necessity” (Simons and Usher, 2000: 3) of his/her enterprise. This unending sequence of actions and reflections acts as a laboratory for ethical learning and would enable the ethically informed responsible agent to forge and develop a personal research ethic. Within a relativistic complex context, one’s informed conscious is the sole guarantee for principled practice. The defence of one’s own conscience as a guide in ethical dilemmas, “...to be justifiable as an ethical practice, [would] need to be accompanied by a disciplined self-reflexive approach to one’s behaviour” (Piper and Simons: 2005: 58).

#### **7.4.6 An example of the disciplined self-reflexive approach in practice**

Steiner (1991: 163) defines reflexivity as “a turning back onto a self,” the spiralling in of one’s thoughts and ideas around an issue. I will use the way the relationship between myself and my student-teachers evolved during the months of my research as an example and illustration of a disciplined self-reflexive approach. Within a qualitative research paradigm, relationships are an essential, unavoidable component of the research dynamics. For as Radnor (2001: 34) explains: “The researcher as instrument transecting in the field is qualitatively dependent on the relationships initiated and developed by the researcher with the research participants.”

I arrived at this research with the preconception that where it comes to ethics in research, the sole responsible person would naturally be the researcher. I followed the suggestion of writing a consent letter by the book. And that, I thought, would bring to an end the ethics chapter. I couldn’t be more naïve or short sighted. The real problems started to crop up as the days of my research started to pass by. Little by little, my certitude metamorphosed into a blob of doubt, manifesting itself in an inexplicable sense of uneasiness, a perennial sense of anxiety. As time passed, through regular communication with my student-teachers including group email shots and informal meetings at university, I was becoming more aware that actually I was not on my own in this research project. Rather than a question of an ‘us and them’ (or rather, an ‘I and them’) binary opposite, action research lends itself brilliantly to a new form of ethics, not the canonical one, but still powerful enough to challenge my beliefs and act accordingly. I depended on my students, as much as they depended on me, with one slight difference... a different degree of power! For as much as the researcher tries to mitigate the differences, in a research: “The relationships, however, are generally asymmetrical, with power disproportionately on the side of the researcher” (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 117). I questioned myself about what I could do to try to bridge the unbridgeable, to divest myself from the absolute power that is invested in the lecturer *qua* lecturer. I could be more friendly, dedicate more time for open discussions, participate in informal meetings, joke... all these would not have an affect on the lecturer-student relationship? How would I know? I already did all that in the first cycle. And the results were that after the

close of the academic year I still felt that distance that I had worked so hard to overcome.

During summer of 2004, I matured the conviction that what militated against what I had worked and hoped for, was my role. Instead of one role I was wearing at the same time at least three different, contradictory, roles: lecturer, researcher and above all (at least in my student-teachers' eyes) examiner on teaching practice. Power was exerted and manifested itself in the act of assigning grades at the end of a study-unit. Therefore, summative assessment that assigns the power in the hands of the teacher or lecturer was the great culprit (*vide* Chapter 5). Having identified the cause I could find a remedy. I became more and more aware how my first role not only influenced but determined the type and quality of the relationship with the researcher. And the solution was in the adoption of an assessment for learning approach, where I share the responsibility assigned to grades and assessment with my students through a carefully planned series of activities that would include peer-assessment and self-assessment, apart from a minor component of feedback. Since students were not used to that kind of responsibility, I had to induct them in a different way of learning and assessment. The second cycle was not a rosy experience either; I experienced resistance mainly through a passive-aggressive behaviour which I counteracted with sessions where I had to explain why we were doing things and what they might learn. However, I managed to identify a problem, consider a horizon of possibilities, select with care one or two options, present them to my students, negotiate the requirements or deadlines, make the necessary amendments and finally put everything into practice and move forward. That is what I would regard as taking the role of an ethically responsible informed agent. In other words, I was willing to take on board Zeni's (2001: 164) acute observation: "Collaboration and communication are the best guides to preventing the ethical dilemmas of practitioner research." I could feel a sense of relief knowing that what I had thought to be my sole responsibility I could now share with my students. Homan (1991: 124) declared: "The researcher-subject relationship is not prescribed in the codes as one of authority but one of cooperation in which the rights are accorded to the subject to whom the researcher must be obliged."

## **7.5 Two conclusions**

I have arrived at two major conclusions reflecting and writing about ethics and research. Firstly, more than ever I acknowledge for I have lived the fact that ethically informed research is a balancing act between two rights: “the right of the scientist to conduct research and to acquire knowledge and the right of individual research participants to self-determination, privacy, and dignity” (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996: 80). As I gradually took up the role of an ethically informed responsible agent, having faced a series of small and not so small dilemmas and issues, I have no doubt after this experience I would prefer the latter and sacrifice the right to know.

Secondly, it is interesting to note that two general methodology books position ethics in different places: at the beginning of the book as if to suggest that ethics act as a guiding light (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996) and the final chapter as if ethics is the last consideration of the researcher (Cohen and Manion, 1994). I prefer to believe that ethics was and is the guiding principle of my research, or at the heart of my research process. Thus this section was strategically placed at the centre between methodological and epistemological issues, and the analysis, hence when taken together the ethics section acts as a fulcrum for the other two.

## INTERMEZZO II

### Thirteen ways of looking at 'becoming'

One of my favourite poems is Wallace Stevens' (1923/1984: 92-95) 'Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird.' Immediately I am attracted to its rhythm that seems to imitate the blackbird's flight, going fast or slowing down as it reaches a branch, and becoming motionless as it disappears in the vegetation once at rest. Furthermore, reading this poem brings to mind two poetic genres that in a way Stevens' poem hovers around without actually being exactly either one of them. First, different sections of this poem are very much in line with Imagist poetry aesthetics, with their strong sense of image "which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" and economy of words in such a way as all reveal something about the subject (Pound, in Jones, 1972: 130-131). Similarly, haiku writing, at least in the traditional sense, gives great attention to the image that speaks on its own without any need of anything else to emphasise or mediate our impression (*vide* Yasuda, 1957/2000). This is just one short example to illustrate the above two points: "Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird" (vv. 1-3).

Very much related then, is the idea attributed to traditional Zen philosophy, that of becoming one with things, such as in the teaching of Shunryu Suzuki (1970: 83): "When you are you, you see things as they are, and you become one with your surroundings." This is best exemplified in verses 11-12: "A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one."

The particular title of this poem gave me an inspiration to a reflection on 'becoming.' In doing so, I draw on a variety of experiences and fields which when read together highlight different aspects and attributes of the word that can be

considered as a cornerstone of my argument. Similar to Stevens' poem, the thirteen reflections are listed in roman numbers, and for easy reference are schematised thus:

- I        A dictionary's definition
- II       A man of letters' definition
- III      Contradictory proverbs
- IV-V    Philosophical interpretations
- VI      Lyrics from a TV series
- VII     An unexpected defence of becoming
- VIII-IX Becoming as paradox
- X-XII   Reading as becoming
- XIII    Two variations of a becoming metaphor

## I

Miriam Webster's (n.d.) online dictionary defines 'becoming' as:

**Function:** *adjective*

**Date:** 15th century

: SUITABLE, FITTING; *especially*: attractively suitable <*becoming* modesty>

And 'become':

**Function:** *verb*

**Inflected Form(s):** be·came; be·come; be·com·ing

**Etymology:** Middle English, to come to, become, from Old English *becuman*, from *be-* + *cuman* to come

**Date:** before 12th century

*intransitive verb* **1 a:** to come into existence **b:** to come to be <*become* sick>

**2:** to undergo change or development *transitive verb:* to be suitable to <seriousness *becoming* the occasion>; *especially*: to be becoming to <her clothes *become* her>

— become of: to happen to <wondering whatever *became of* old friends>

## II

Life is a process of becoming, and this is no more evident than in Robert Louis Stevenson's (1917: 164) often quoted sentence: "To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life." Stevenson (1917: 151) is reflecting on Thoreau, claiming that his "true subject was the pursuit of self-improvement combined with an unfriendly criticism as it goes on in our societies." Being true to oneself, and to strive to achieve what best can be achieved, can be considered as an aim in life. Abraham Maslow (1970/1987) termed this higher-order need as "self-actualisation," the state of self-fulfilment when the individual's highest potential is achieved. Maybe I will not walk all the way with Stevenson as to consider it as life's goal, but there is some truth in it. Nothing can be more illuminating than in a training course, or course to become a teacher. Understanding one's potential and striving hard to achieve to maximise one's potential, can be every student-teacher's mission or motto during his/her initial teacher training.

## III

Proverbs have a special place in my consciousness as a Maltese since these are the gems of lore from past generations that have survived the test of time. However, I have always been fascinated by two English proverbs that I had learnt by heart when I still was very young at primary school. The first one is very reassuring: 'Nobody is perfect.' I used to repeat it like a mantra every time I received feedback on my compositions in English rewritten in red by my teacher. According to this proverb, the process of becoming, life's aim for many, does not entail perfection. However, then, another proverb contradicts the former: 'Practice makes perfect.' And indeed educational process is intended to ameliorate oneself perhaps to such a degree as to reach perfection. Then I read Deborah Britzman's (2003) insightful narrative of two teachers learning to teach, *Practice Makes Practice*, and I know where I stand. Better off with believing that humans are fallible beings, prone to mistakes and failures... "Embracing contraries" (Elbow, 1986) rather than living dualism such as what we are accustomed to do in the Western world can be illuminating in more than one sense. Indeed, as Shunryu Suzuki (1970: 103) enigmatically explains:

We should find perfect existence through imperfect existence. We should find perfection in imperfection. For us, complete perfection is not different from imperfection.

#### IV

Hegel's tripartite distinction between Being, Nothing and Becoming is a very useful and powerful one. Being, in Hegel's *The Science of Logic*, refers to the immediateness of things, as opposed to their inner essence. On the other hand, nothing is the negation of being, non-being. Both categories point towards each other: "Being, as Being, is nothing fixed or ultimate: it yields to dialectic and sinks into its opposite, which, also taken immediately, is Nothing" (Hegel, 1812-16/1950: 161). However, it is the third category that receives most interesting attention, since it is the state that mediates between the former two. As Hegel (1812-16/1950: 163) explicates: "The truth of Being and of Nothing is accordingly the unity of the two: and this unity is Becoming." In conclusion, Hegel (1812-16/1950: 167–168) contends that: "Becoming is the only explicit statement of what Being is in its truth" and "Becoming is the first adequate vehicle of truth." As Michael Inwood (1992: 45) explains: "becoming is either the coming to *be* of what was *not*, or the ceasing to be of what was. ...becoming too is unstable, since it contradictorily contains both being and nothing, and it collapses into *Dasein*." This latter point is further elucidated by Gadamer (1976: 89), being and nothing "are more to be treated as analytic moments in the concept of Becoming [...] Coming-into-being and passing-away are thus the self-determining truth of Becoming."

Furthermore, Hegel makes a relationship between becoming and beginning. Since becoming a teacher requires a beginning an induction course, the relationship between the two is enlightening. Hegel (1812-16/1950: 166) contends that: "Beginning is itself a case of Becoming" with a proviso that "the former term is employed with an eye to the further advance."



## V

Philosophising with a hammer – a metaphor that can be understood both as a euphemism for nihilism, as well as the act of the blacksmith that forges and crafts new designs and patterns from hot incandescent iron rods – Friedrich Nietzsche (1968: 310) claims that: “this world is a world of becoming” and “[i]n a world of becoming, “reality” is always only a simplification for practical ends, or a deception through the coarseness of organs or a variation in the tempo of becoming” (Nietzsche, 1968: 312). Nietzsche (1968: 331) bestows upon becoming a regenerating quality: “Becoming as invention, willing, self-denial, overcoming of oneself: no subject but an action, a positing, creative, no “causes and effects.””

At the same time, Nietzsche (1878/1996: 80) makes an interesting comment: “In the case of everything perfect we are accustomed to abstain from asking how it became; we rejoice in the present fact as though it came out of the ground by magic” for “*What is perfect is supposed not to have become.*” He who has the privilege of not becoming, a perfect entity from the very start (if this is not a contradiction), if it exists it has to be only one entity, God.

Furthermore, in *Ecce Homo* (Nietzsche, 1908/2004) not only echoes Pilate’s words when presenting the battered Christ to the infuriating crowd, but interestingly enough chose the following subtitle: *How One Becomes What One Is*. Looking back, as if presenting himself to the mob, Nietzsche acknowledges his accomplishments, and in his virtuoso style comments on Why I am so wise, Why I am so clever, and Why I write such excellent books. Only in understanding folly or grandeur do we better understand ‘normal’ life.

## VI

During the time of my research, one very popular American TV series in Malta shown mainly on Rai Due (Italian television, very much similar to BBC2) or local cable network was *Felicity* (1998–2002). To a certain extent, the series can be compared to a coming of age novel, with Felicity Porter as the main character and

four-year university course as a backdrop for all the amorous adventures and academic hurly-burly. Interestingly enough, the first two series had a soundtrack without any lyrics. Then the third and fourth series were accompanied by a very short set of verses, composed and performed by J. J. Abrams and Andrew Jarecki (in Various Artists, 2002), that present the leitmotiv of the whole series. The title itself ‘New Versions of You’ is indicative of the spirit of the series.

Can you become  
Can you become  
A new version of you

New wallpaper  
New shoe leather  
A new way home  
I don’t remember

New version of you  
I need a new version of me

New version of you  
I need a new version of me

The first part introduces the subject: “can you become / a new version of you?” Then the authors propose three metaphors or symbols: wallpaper, shoe leather and a different path towards home. The last four lines, sort of very rudimentary ritornello, present an enigmatic formulation of what can be the meaning of becoming: “New version of you / I need a new version of me”. The idea of a new version, encapsulates an idea that the process of becoming is very much similar to a new version of a pre-existing idea or identity, very much similar to a new model of a car. This shedding off of an old skin and putting on a new one, presenting oneself as a new individual is a desirable process, highlighted by the verb “need”. It is neither an automatic nor incidental process or event; indeed becoming is a deliberate act sought after and worked at by an individual that understands that becoming is a learning and at times difficult process.

## VII

Let one close one's eyes and imagine one is in AD 1520 in Germany. Let one imagine receiving a bull from the Pope oneself, admonishing one about one's teaching and preaching. Then, days and months later, having gathered one's thoughts, compelled from an inner force, one decides to write one's defence...

This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.

The quote is taken from Martin Luther's (c. 1522) defence of his 95 theses issued in 1517 that shook the Church and created a chiasm never experienced before. One might only imagine the state Luther was in when writing these words; but he who is a believer from his very heart knows that right is on his side! In life one needs to be active. It is not enough to be content with just being; one needs to live life to the full by savouring the becomingness of every moment! Becoming is a process of purification.

Years later, Hegel (1812-16/1950: 168) observed that becoming on its own is a "poor term" that "needs to grow in depth and weight of meaning" when embedded in either life or mind without ever exhausting them. Luther arrived there earlier!

## VIII

Recently rap and hip-hop composer and performer Tupac Amaru Shakur (1998), known by the stage-name 2Pac, in one of his most celebrated songs, 'Changes,' asserts:

That's just the way it is  
Things'll (sic) never be the same  
That's just the way it is

More than two thousand years earlier, Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, expressed the identical reflection epitomised in his famous question that reads like a Buddhist koan: can you jump in the same river twice? It all depends how you look at it and

how one defines river as an entity with its own characteristics. The impermanence of things related thus to the becomingness of things, has entered mainstream discourse in many guises. One of them is story that illustrates a paradox. Plutarch (1970: 15), a Greek historian and famous biographer of a number of Greek and Roman important figures, when telling the many vicissitudes of the Greek Theseus recounts that...

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question as to things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.

This episode, illustrates the paradox one might glimpse when discussing becoming as a process of shedding off the old and replacing it with the new. When does the balance between what one was yesterday topple over to what one becomes today. Becoming is at the very heart of identity and change. Demarcating what constitutes an entity in an ever-evolving situation is a difficult, if not an impossible task. Persistence or what remains unaltered is a fixation with the idea that things have an idea that is unaltered or immutable. It might be related to the concept of time that one holds.

Using Henri Bergson's concept of "duration" – that is the extension and prolongation of the past in the present, and the difficult reconciliation between the special understanding of time and the ineffable qualities of sequences – Paulo Freire (1997: 65) tried to explain the dialectic concept of being and becoming of people who "are aware of their incompleteness" with education serving as an impetus toward the drive to attain progress. Freire (1997: 65) distinguishes between at least two models of education: the "banking method" with its great emphasis on permanence; and championed "problem posing education" that is "constantly remade in the praxis." The process of change that forms part of the affirmation process of individuals, according to Freire (1997: 65) "roots itself in the dynamic present and becomes revolutionary."

## IX

Zen philosophy provides us with a number of koans, stories that while being difficult to understand, shed an authentic light on the importance of being aware, with mind focused on the present, moment after moment. This is a very famous koan reported in Shunryu Suzuki (1970: 81):

Zuikan was a Zen master who always used to address himself. “Zuikan?” he would call. And then he would answer. “Yes!” “Zuikan?” “Yes!” Of course he was living all alone in his small zendo [a place dedicated to meditation], and of course he knew who he was, but sometimes he lost himself. And whenever he lost himself, he would address himself, “Zuikan?” “Yes!”

In the process of becoming, when we lose sight of who we were and cannot exactly grasp who we have become, in a certain way we lose our self. From time to time, maybe we too should remind ourselves who we are. No wonder how when we ask who we are, usually the reply is our profession. Who are we as teachers? How did we become or are we still becoming teachers?

## X

Each year countless books are published on education. But very few leave an indelible mark on many teachers. If, like Peter Smagorinsky (2002: 23), I had to make some space in my library and I had to select which books to set aside and which to keep for future reference, I certainly would definitely consider one book that incidentally contains ‘becoming’ in its title. While innumerable are the books that try to explain how one learns to read, I would consider as truly an eye-opener Marie Clay’s (1991) *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*. Crucial to her argument is part two of her book on transitions and transformations. These two nouns contribute another dimension to becoming. Beginning to read is a time of transition or “translation” (Clay, 1991: 20), from knowing how to do something in one context to using it in another context. Therefore, transitions occur as an elaboration, accommodation, adjustment or extension of existing knowledge. On the other hand, transformation occurs when new theories are developed in the learner; that is when no pre-existing knowledge can act as a springboard to new knowledge. The process of transitions and transformation are not the same for every

child; there are those that move fast, average and take a long time. One might deduce that becoming is not a one size fits all itinerary. Likewise, the process of becoming a teacher is both a transition from being a student with years observing teachers teaching to the forefront of the class as a student-teacher, and at the same time, teacher training involves an encounter with new ideas, novel ways of thinking about practice, insights from theories that are new. From my experience, student-teachers believe that they already know it all and are more transition oriented than open enough to experience epiphanies or transformations.

## XI

The process of becoming a reader is a very complicated journey. While many believe that it is a personal one, others concur that there are discrete patterns of behaviour and reading interests that can be grouped together under specific stages. *Becoming a Reader* (Appleyard, 1990), albeit a reader of fiction, takes a bottom up approach, that is, surveying a multitude of responses to fiction written or expressed by a number of students and adults, one can but notice similarities and discontinuities. Hence, segmenting the process of becoming a reader in the following stages based on the particular role or “stance” (Rosenblatt, 1978) a reader takes:

<i>Early childhood:</i>	The reader as player
<i>Later childhood:</i>	The reader as hero and heroine
<i>Adolescence:</i>	The reader as thinker
<i>College and beyond:</i>	The reader as interpreter
<i>Adulthood:</i>	The pragmatic reader

As a teacher of literature and teacher trainer, such a schematisation is very helpful if one is knowledgeable about what entices most one’s students at a particular age. It then follows that text selection can be more targeted and focused, and the evaluation of the response can be according to what one can expect at a particular age based on the particular transaction with the text rather than a scheme that initially favours one kind or level of response (the critical one) over any other.

## XII

Time and time again I am asked by my student-teachers if after a literature lesson or two on a particular text the teacher will have exhausted *all* that the text had to offer, especially if they go through it in search of every minute figure of speech and commented at length on its style, what is referred to as close reading. Behind this misconception one finds the implied assumption that meaning of a literary text is finite, there inside the text waiting to be unearthed, that the authors and readers are incidental and unimportant beings, and where context is better left at the side. These assumptions are directly related to the formal reading of literature according to the principles and methods of an influential movement called New Criticism (*vide* Abrams, 1993: 246–248; Chapter 3).

Conversely, if one is inspired by reader-oriented theories and beliefs, reading a text can be qualified as a process of becoming. Within such a paradigm, interpretations are only a rendering: that satisfy momentarily our quest for more meaning; where texts are “open” rather than “closed” (Eco, 1962) to multitude of interactions and negotiations with different readers and audiences across cultures and time; where readers define the “transaction” (Rosenblatt, 1978) with texts according to their “identity theme” (Holland, 1980: 121); and texts offer a never-ending “horizon” of possibilities (Gadamer, 1976: 269) or “expectations” (Jauss, 1982). Reading as becoming offers a new way of conceptualising the teaching of literature. Rather than close ended, reading literature in a new manner is an open ended aesthetic event and endeavour. Reading becomes a self-discovery, a never-ending journey of becoming. As Cleo wondered upon the open-endedness of literature in her Reflective Diary (18/12/2003):

When time passes by and I happen to reread a book, I feel different thoughts and emotions than the ones during the first reading. That is why I believe that literature reaches its aim when it leaves you in the middle of the road or rather without a definite conclusion... literature has no end, but rather supplies something new upon every reading.

Without such a concept of reading literature as a becoming, a never ending evolving and unfolding process, literature would soon die a natural death, caused by a malignant virus called: boredom.

### XIII

#### *variation 1*

Be  
coming  
is  
a  
moment  
between  
a mask and a mask

#### *variation 2*

Becoming is a moment between a mask and a mask

In this final reflection I draw on a definition that resembles “lampo” poetry (variation 1) – that kind of poetry that is very short, condensed and at times abstract and obscure similar to some of Giuseppe Ungaretti’s poetry – and a maxim (variation 2). Masks offer protection; they conceal and at the same time offer a way to be read. Both *la commedia dell’arte* and Chinese classical theatre are two genres famous for character-masks. The traditional Venetian masks that adorn so many faces during carnival were profusely used in Stanley Kubrick’s (1999) last film *Eyes Wide Shut*. We all wear masks during our days and months, put on countless masks during our lifetime, maybe even to ourselves. The only true moment of becoming, authentic as one can be, is, in my opinion, that fleeting or transitory brief moment when we are taking off one mask and putting on another. Maybe, life is too much to bear if one is stripped of one’s masks. But then, this final reflection, seductive as it may seem, might be yet another mask or travesty of what is actually becoming. In the end, to quote from Stevens’ (1923/1984: 92–95) aforementioned poem: “The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying” (vv. 48–49).



## **PART III**

### **BECOMING TEACHERS OF LITERATURE: A LECTURER AND STUDENT-TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE**

## OVERVIEW

The data gathered during the two years yielded a number of themes. However, bearing in mind the three essential research areas for my thesis (Chapters 3, 4 and 5), I had to strike a balance between the data I generated as a lecturer researching my own practice, and the trajectories taken by my student-teachers in their journey from readers to teachers of literature. In a way I wanted to give a dialectical perspective between my intentions, aims and reflections, and the perceived curriculum from the receiving end, the student-teachers' point of view.

In Chapter 9 I theorise parts of my practice in constructing, implementing and reviewing the study-unit 'The Literary Experience in the Secondary School.' Then, in Chapters 9 and 10, I present a lived experience of the study-unit by focusing on six themes. Finally, in Chapter 11, I present some end-pieces that bracket or bring to a closure a long journey of which my research documented only the first but crucial steps...

## CHAPTER 8

### Becoming teachers of literature: A lecturer's experience

#### 8.1 Is there a lecturer in this class?

A reformulation of Stanley Fish's (1980) title draws attention to the question of who exactly is a lecturer, what is a class, and what kind of relationship exists between the two. In this chapter I want to unpack and elaborate some of the different roles and responsibilities of a lecturer in designing, delivering and reviewing a methodology study-unit within my local context. Knowledge production within a 'dialogical classroom' (Wells, 1999: 335-336) is explained throughout. Finally, the concept of tools or pedagogical resources is taken as another example whereby the lecturer exerts his/her "pedagogical authority" (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1990).

##### 8.1.1 Vignettes, or the importance of lived experience and its reconstruction

Along this chapter I present a number of vignettes to illustrate the lived experience during the study-unit. I consider these vignettes as crucial since they are both a "description of the lived-through quality of lived experience" and "a description of meaning of *the expressions* of the lived experience," a type of phenomenological description that is more interpretative (van Manen, 1997: 25). My reconstruction draws on narrative inquiry that "is concerned with the production, interpretation and representation of storied accounts of lived experience" (Shacklock and Thorp, 2005: 156). Through the process of writing and rewriting these few vignettes I attempted at "construct[ing] a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience" (van Manen, 1997: 41). Following van Manen's (1997: 64-65) suggestions, in this reconstruction I try to: describe things from the inside with multiple perspectives in sequence and collage-like form; attend to feelings rather than abstract conceptualisations or rereading of events; focus on each session as a

particular event that can be bracketed and analysed; and select a particular experience for its clarity in transmitting sensations and moods.

Lived experience can never be totally translated and encapsulated in words. To achieve as vivid description as possible, I draw on two main sources: the student-teachers' reflective journals, and my own reflections based mainly on my own research diary. This is in line with the authority attested to diaries, journals, autobiographies and the like, as prime documents in the historical reconstruction or rereading of the reading event. Furthermore, it was only recently that student voice gained momentum in educational evaluation, innovation and change (Fletcher, 2004).

To use Victor Shklovsky's (1917/1988) terminology, by making it "strange," by not trying to fully systematise or logically order events, one becomes presented with a new experience that challenges the reader to discover new modes of reading and understanding.

## **8.2 Vignette I: Pedagogy as a search of perfect method?**

I truly wish that during this study-unit I will be given a number of different examples of how to teach literature effectively, creatively... not how I was taught literature in the secondary school. It would be really good if we were given examples of resource that we can use during the literature lesson to motivate the students and make them see that it is something alive.

*(Kim, Reflective Task 1: What would you like? A self addressed letter)*

With this kind of aspiration from a methods study-unit, student-teachers are easily disappointed when their expectations are not exactly met. Actually, hidden behind this desire is an even greater wish, that someone finally tells them the 'right' or 'best' way to teach literature. The 'what works syndrome' is easily encountered early on in an education course. Some come to methodology study-units as if expecting 'recipe book' knowledge.

When I heard that the lesson's introduction may have different durations, I saw it as strange at first since I was expecting a sort of system or sequence that one needs to follow and that is why I thought it would always be the same preparation time.

*(Cloe, Reflective Diary, 11/12/2003)*

### 8.3 The identity of a lecturer in relation to that of a teacher

Within the University of Malta, the lecturer's job description is divided into three related areas: teaching, research and administrative duties (Quality Assurance Committee, 2001). More specifically, since I am an Assistant Lecturer, I am required to contribute to undergraduate teaching, devote substantial time to read for a higher degree, without spending too much time on the co-ordination of courses or on administrative responsibilities (Quality Assurance Committee, 2001). Having walked for some years in the shoes of both teacher and lecturer, I have come to believe that an effective and innovative lecturer performs similar actions, but differs from a teacher on these five accounts, as gathered in Table 8.1.

**Table 8.1: Different distinctive characteristics of a lecturer when compared to a teacher**

1.	<i>A greater consciousness</i> of the decision processes that have to take place before and during teaching.
2.	The <i>broader repertoire</i> of possibilities that are available to him/her to choose from.
3.	The <i>heightened intensity</i> with which those decisions are translated into actions.
4.	The <i>awareness</i> of the intimate relationship between teaching, learning and assessment ( <i>vide</i> Chapter 5); and
5.	The <i>more felt responsibility</i> of the outcomes of the whole process both for him/herself as a lecturer and on the students as prospective professionals in their area, epitomised in the engaging reflective act that sieves through the whole sequence of events ( <i>vide</i> Chapter 4).

### 8.4 Vignette II: Films on teachers

Student-teachers were simply mesmerised by the film *Dead Poets Society* (Weir, 1994) with actor Robin Williams playing Mr Keating. The notion of gendered reading, proved itself to evidence yet another dimension to the interpretation of the film themes and subplots. Anne was attracted to the love sub-plot of the film...

There was also a small love story that made the film more interesting since it was not always a film on a school and we saw another dimension to the student's life.

When I see a film with a love story embedded in it, I watch it with more interest and enthusiasm, because I would want to know if the two lovers will finally end up together.

(Anne, *Reflective Diary*, 6/5/2005)

Anne singles out this sub-plot and reflects about it at the very beginning of her reflection. This pressing attention is very much in line with the importance of romance novels in constructing feminine identity: "...the female reader is offered romance as the most important experience in shaping her femininity" (Christian-Smith, 1988: 96). But the film was important for another main reason: the portrayal of an inspirational teacher, Mr Keating, working within a conservative institution but with his own particular methods of teaching literature. With his charisma he manages to make a difference in his students' lives. Could he become my student-teachers' model of a teacher of literature?

### **8.5 Planning for a study-unit**

Metaphors creatively place next to each other two unrelated ideas or concepts, and in their juxtaposition "make a connection between the two things" (Knowles and Moon, 2006: 3). In a way, they illuminate each other from a vintage and never explored before point of view. I believe that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980: 3) are right when suggesting "that our [human] conceptual system is largely metaphorical" and therefore it follows that "the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor."

David Berliner (1990) embraces the metaphor of 'teacher as executive.' Berliner (1990: 87) identifies ten contact points between the teacher and executive when they are fulfilling their duties. Strategically, he places 'planning' as the most important characteristic. This prime importance to planning is corroborated in the special place assigned to it in different instructional design models (*vide*, Kemp, Morrison and Ross, 1988: 9). Indeed, in these models, planning is bestowed with an overarching function of cementing together different stages of an instructional process.

Planning involves an awareness of different variables that impinge on the teaching and learning process, such as: the identification of the topic or knowledge within a spectrum of individual or group interests, sequencing of knowledge; identification of aims for the teaching component; a learner profile; the selection of teaching style; the mode of student assessment and evaluation of the study-unit. These are just a few of the most basic variables that the planner has to take into consideration, that

together add up to the conclusion that the methods course (with field experience) is considered a “complex phenomena” (Cliff and Brady, 2006: 309).

### **8.5.1 Planning and knowledge**

A distinctive characteristic of a lecturer is that s/he must have a sound knowledge of subject matter. Lee Shulman (1986: 9) emphasises three conceptions of knowledge essential to any teacher (and lecturer): subject matter content knowledge; pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), and curricular knowledge. The interesting concept in the tri-partite categorisation is the second concept. This category bridges what for ages seemed to be unbridgeable, that is, forging a relationship between content and pedagogy, or what Shulman (1986: 7-9) himself identifies as ‘the missing paradigm.’ For Shulman (1986: 9), PCK refers to that “particular form of content knowledge that embodies the aspects of content most germane to its teachability” (sic), in other words, that content knowledge “which goes beyond knowledge of subject matter per se to the dimension of subject matter knowledge *for teaching*.” PCK comprises not only those frequently taught topics in a subject but also familiarity with the most tried and tested methods to teach those topics, and an understanding of what makes that content and selected methods more conducive or difficult to learn. In this transformative process, I find a resemblance with what Basil Bernstein (2000: 115) called, ‘recontextualisation,’ that process through which discourses from other fields of production are ‘appropriated’ and ‘subordinated’ to a different organisational principle and relationship, thus becoming “pedagogical discourse,” for example when writing textbooks or syllabi.

### **8.5.2 The teaching and learning environment and climate**

One distinctive classroom characteristic I envisioned was that of a ‘dialogic classroom’ (Wells, 1999: 335-336) or ‘inquiry-based classroom’ (Beach and Mayers, 2001), based on social constructivist principles, such as: the value of collaboration; acting responsibly; having a practice-based curriculum organised around themes; negotiation of goals; understanding demonstrated by different

modes of representation; opportunities for constructive feedback leading to improvement; and metacognitive awareness so that learning occurs smoothly and effectively.

One may distinguish between two related concepts: teaching and learning. Following Carl Rogers' (1989) humanistic psychology, my idea of an environment conducive to learning embraces three basic characteristics: respect for the students; empathy with students; and most importantly, the teacher must transmit an authentic picture of him/herself.

### **8.5.3 Lecture room environment**

Entering the lecture room one feels a sense of cleanliness since the room is painted in white and just at the front one finds a white board and a small television set to which either a video or DVD could be plugged-in. The chairs, in bright blue are all placed in two rows of three chairs with a small two feet wide corridor in the middle. A large white table is placed just in front of the main whiteboard and next to it, an Overhead Projector. Opposite the door, one finds a rather large window partially covered with semi-torn cream vertical blinds. This window overlooks a car park. Nothing fancy about the environment, a rather functional building which, to a certain extent, has a clinical look to it.

### **8.5.4 Lecture room climate**

While I had no say about the lecture room, I felt responsible for creating a positive teaching and learning climate. John Biggs (1999: 62) explains that: "This climate is about how we [lecturers] and they [students] feel about things, and that normally has positive or negative effects on students' learning." I feel I have developed and improved myself in this respect. My greater awareness of this basic ingredient was achieved by personal reflection, open dialogue with past student-teachers who had institutionally resolved their power relation with me, and some advice from other well-intentioned critical colleagues.



Conveying a positive climate was a complex task I had to work hard and improve upon during the first cycle, and even more so, during the second cycle. One major difficulty in getting to grips with classroom climate was its elusiveness. I agree with Chris Kyriacou (1986: 143) when he states that: “Without doubt the most important aspect of classroom climate is the hidden curriculum: the ways in which the teacher’s [lecturer’s] actions convey information concerning his or her perceptions, expectations, attitudes and feelings about the teacher’s role, the pupil’s role, and the learning activities at hand.” It was difficult to try to control those hidden messages, or try to figure out or predict how students were going to interpret my actions and words.

The different points in Table 8.2 are some actions that I tried to take, and beliefs, values and characteristics that I tried to embrace in order to tackle in a serious and systematic manner, my contribution to the hidden curriculum:

**Table 8.2: Changes I implemented to create a more democratic lecture room**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increased the level of trust that as a lecturer I have in my student-teachers’ potential.</li> <li>▪ Trying to explain at length decisions, workload and their responsibilities.</li> <li>▪ Have and share high and realistic expectations for all.</li> <li>▪ Share my experience as a student-teacher and teacher with my student-teachers.</li> <li>▪ Try as much as possible to joke about things, defuse particular tension-charged experiences or times with a smile – avoid as much as possible “dark sarcasm in the classroom” (Pink Floyd, 1979).</li> <li>▪ Expect class attendance and participation, without keeping a class attendance list or demand a medical certificate or justification when they miss a lecture; inform them in advance when I could not conduct a lecture.</li> <li>▪ Being present in my office during students’ hours to guide them in their work; talk to them when meeting them in the corridors or other parts of the campus.</li> <li>▪ Answer judiciously their questions and try as much as possible to alleviate their doubts and fears.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Listen to their concerns and work as much as possible towards accommodating their wishes.</li> <li>▪ Initiate an open one-to-one contact through emails to clarify particular problems (this way of communicating with a lecturer was a new experience for most students).</li> <li>▪ Assign mini-assignments or reflective tasks rather than just one-time summative test at the end – negotiate a word limit that could be transgressed by anyone that feels s/he has more to write about a particular theme.</li> <li>▪ Negotiate deadlines by trying to strike a balance between their other commitments and my responsibilities and institutional demands.</li> <li>▪ Provide oral and written feedback and use caring encouraging words when they manage to successfully complete a new task or overcome a particularly challenging activity.</li> <li>▪ Modify assessment from a traditional summative test to a more authentic form of assessment. Since I consider all student-teachers as important agents in their own learning, I gradually introduce peer-assessment and self-assessment (<i>vide</i> Chapter 11).</li> </ul>
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### **8.5.5 Difficulties in achieving a positive climate**

All of the above can be encapsulated in the shift of attention from teaching to learning. On a personal practical level, I had to work longer hours to read, comment and suggest concrete improvements and on a more elaborate manner, I had to rethink and redefine my role as lecturer, change my teaching style or better adapt my teaching to their learning styles, and finally reconceptualise the link between assessment and learning (*vide* Chapters 5 and 10). On the other hand, student-teachers had to: invest a lot more time for the successful completion of this study-unit; work harder to maximise their contribution and participation during the ‘dialogical’ lectures; venture into new territory of self- and peer-assessment; ...to put it in a nut shell, they were encouraged all the time to become ‘autonomous learners’ (Boud, 1988; Wiliam, 2007) in a higher institution.

However, my good intentions were not always perceived as I intended them. For example one slippery area was those few minutes, usually not more than five minutes every two or three lectures, where very informally I would make a sort of advert for the latest printed book or suggest in a creative manner a book that related to that particular time of the year. However, some student-teachers later (after they finished their course) told me that they perceived my initiative as a way of saying, “you don’t read enough or as much as I do!” Others, on the other hand, have made a small collection out of the books I have recommended, and boast that they read all of them too.

In conclusion, improvement in the teaching and learning process requires not just a lecturer that is willing, determined and motivated to change and improve his own practice, but also an audience made of a number of individual student-teachers that is perceptible, resolute and committed to that same change process.

### **8.6 Vignette III: First lecture**

I always envision the first lecture as crucial to set the scene, create and heighten expectations and set a tempo for the rest of the study-unit. And since teaching literature relates amongst other

genres with stories, I always opt for reading and discussing one told by Clare Winnicott (in Britton, 1993: 29-31).

I enter into the lecture room, wait for silence and then I read the story, emphasising particular words or images. I make sure to constantly maintain eye contact with all student-teachers as if I was recounting the story just for them, one by one. I purposely calmly pace my reading and wait for a while before continuing reading the subsequent paragraph. This gives them time to reflect and empathise with the characters, recreate the feelings and emotions, visualise the context, and to identify with the young boy. The discussion that follows focuses on one or more of these broad themes: conformity; children's rights; teachers' role, responsibilities and authority; the evocative meaning of colours; and most important of all, how this account relates to becoming teachers of literature.

Generally speaking, literature motivates students, and stories are a good vehicle to do just that (Meek, 1971: 105-110). In addition, empathy is a necessary skill that helps the reader understand better characters, problems and situations from the point of view of other people (Simmons and Deluzain, 1992: 4-5; 265). Thus, using stories at the very beginning can be considered as an effective introduction:

One other thing that I really appreciated was the fact that our lecturer kicked off the lecture with a powerful introduction that encouraged me to follow and participate during the lesson. The story that we listened to left me speechless, mostly because it struck a chord with what I think. [...] Frequently I found myself identifying and empathising with this character mostly because I saw in him the plight of many Maltese students that unfortunately fall on deaf ears. One of the boy's learned characteristics is that of passivity; conforming rather than having to be the outcast/*I'Etranger*; society does not permit one to be that creative.

(Mary, *Reflective Diary*, 2/10/2003)

Interestingly enough, Mary immediately identifies with the boy, and considers him as a symbol of many Maltese students. The bi-polar 'activity/passivity,' so dear to feminist critics like Hélène Cixous (1975/1988: 287), is contextualised to a more pressing analysis of local educational culture. Within modern teacher education programmes, student-centred pedagogy is the bastion of creativity, individuality, and self-expression.

A student-centred literature class is one which allows *more exploration of the literary text by the learners* and invites learners to develop their own responses and sensitivities. It leads learners to make their own judgements and to refine and develop their techniques for doing so that they can apply them to a wider range of texts for their own benefit.

(Carter and Long, 1991: 24-25)

Rather than accepting reality as is, she identifies her role of "a teacher as an agent of change" (Price and Valli, 2005).

As I am studying to become a teacher, I would like to make every effort not to become like the teacher in the story. I do not want my students to draw boats and planes. I would like to become a teacher that always searches and celebrates the diversity of my students that guides them to become what they really are. I

would like to be that kind of teacher that searches for individual talents and characteristics of each student, so as to celebrate these differences.

(Doriella, Reflective Diary, 4/10/2003)

Indeed, stories speak with greater force than any other language. If not with and through literature, how could one achieve such immediate insight and self-awareness?

## **8.7 Study-unit description**

Equally important as planning of teaching environment and fostering of a positive climate, is the articulation of a study-unit's aims and content. Study-unit descriptions act as a binding written contract between three key participants: the lecturer, the institution (Faculty and University), and the students. I wrote the study-unit's description in great detail, following both my university's requirements: study-unit's title, code, value, aims, essential reading or textbooks, mode of assessment; and supplementing further details: lecturer's contact details, language of instruction, tentative study-unit outline or content to be covered, and further reading or reading pack).

### **8.7.1 Objectives of the study-unit**

Objectives have to be carefully and purposely selected. In addition, pertinent pedagogically relevant material is selected and used to reach those aims. Objectives "tell your learners where they are going and how they are going to get there. They tell you [lecturer] how you will know when the learners have arrived" (Forsyth, Jolliffe and Stevens, 1999: 71). Table 8.3 comprises the objectives that were selected for the methodology study-unit 'The Literary Experience in the Secondary School.' While the study-unit's description remained nearly the same, the aims, the selection of content and sequencing was slightly different.

**Table 8.3: The objectives for the study-unit**

2003-2004	2004-2005
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discuss the objectives for the teaching of literature within a first language framework.</li> <li>2. Familiarise themselves with the organisation of the attainment targets for the literary experience in order to be capable to construct a small syllabus according to specific pupils' needs.</li> <li>3. Choose literary texts according to the abilities and interests of different pupils.</li> <li>4. Select, develop, experiment and evaluate methods, strategies and resources employed in the teaching of literature.</li> <li>5. Create a portfolio that reflects their journey in becoming teachers of literature focusing on their six week teaching practice experience.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Identify and</u> discuss the objectives for the teaching of literature within a first language framework.</li> <li>2. Familiarise themselves with the organisation of the attainment targets for the literary experience in order to be capable to construct a small syllabus according to specific pupils' needs, <u>abilities and literary competence.</u></li> <li>3. <u>Design a literature lesson for a mixed ability classroom in a secondary school.</u></li> <li>4. Choose literary texts according to the abilities and interests of different pupils, <u>and that are representative of the whole spectrum of Maltese literature.</u></li> <li>5. Select, develop, experiment and evaluate <u>different</u> methods, strategies and resources employed in the teaching of literature.</li> <li>6. Create a portfolio that reflects their journey in becoming teachers of literature focusing on their six week teaching practice experience.</li> <li>7. <u>Participate in the creation of rubrics (criteria and description) that would be used in the assessment of this study-unit.</u></li> </ol> <p>(underlined words indicate new ideas or elaboration upon the previous year)</p>

### 8.7.2 Reading for... The supplementary reading list or Reading Pack

One distinctive feature of my study-unit description was the list of selected texts for further reading. There was a marked difference in quality and quantity of these texts intended to offer a variety of perspectives and complement what was discussed during the lectures. Furthermore, the wider reading list is a mirror of my own enthusiasm and passion in the field. From ten chapters or articles with the first cycle the number increased to thirty articles and chapters, mainly from recent books on teaching literature with a reader-response approach as their general philosophy. The list featured key figures like Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, Judith Langer and John Willinsky all American pedagogues, and British authors such as Michael Benton, Ronald Carter, Michael Long, Mike Hayhoe, and Mark Pike. I took particular care to include women writers. The only 'missing' component in the reading list was and still is published research on teaching literature in Maltese. I

tried to compensate for this evident gap by giving free access to dissertations written during the last five years under my supervision. In hindsight, I must acknowledge that the second longer list is too wide in scope and detail; and the following year a more focused reading pack was assigned.

## **8.8 Vignette IV: Reading has a history too**

Reading too has a history (*vide* Manguel, 1997). And learning to read forms an integral part of that history. During this lecture the student-teachers work through three reflective tasks (*vide* Appendix A) specifically tailor-made to tease out any “critical incidents” (Tripp, 1993) in their early and not so early experiences of learning to read. As Meek (1988: 4) suggests: “The only necessary condition for this exercise is that you should tell yourself what you already know you know, as if you were thinking of it for the first time.” In addition, the student-teachers are encouraged to share their literary preferences that include not only selected texts they consider worth reading, but also their own rituals when reading.

The first year experience was rather difficult, even if with the detailed prompts. However, life was much easier second time round. I observed and noted in my research journal, a more pronounced and enthusiastic involvement from nearly all student-teachers in the second cycle. At that time, I could only attribute this amelioration to one thing:

Last year I noticed that they [student-teachers] could not conceptualise or found it difficult to imagine what I was asking them to do. Explaining without showing was rather tricky. I could have produced a ‘fake’ example myself, just to set the ball rolling, but at that time having read Bloom’s (1997) famous essay “anxiety of influence” I was set in my belief that it would have been better not to share models of good practice convinced that later on the students would only replicate them. Notwithstanding such a conviction, with the new group I introduced the lecture with just two selections from last year’s reflective writing: one very descriptive and the other evidencing critical thinking. After reading and discussing the two examples, they immediately could envision what they may be able to produce. Actually I need not stress the importance of artefacts, since they all brought along a number of battered books, school and extra-curricular certificates, old sepia Polaroid photographs, worn out bookmarks... I was simply impressed with how an example could produce such a good quality reflection. I must use the same spring-board technique often.

*(My Research Journal, 11/11/2004)*

## 8.9 Knowledge: Between tradition and innovation

Biggs (1999: 73-76) positions ‘A well structured knowledge base’ or ‘A base of interconnected knowledge’, as the first and most important element of good teaching at higher education. As Berliner (1990: 87-88) explains: “The choice of content is a crucial planning decision because it influences one of the most important characteristics of the schooling process – provision of an opportunity to learn.” The quality of learning is intimately linked to the breath and depth of knowledge a lecturer has mastered during years of reading. Knowledge needs to be transformed or translated in a pedagogically relevant form. For lecturers, the intersection between knowledge and pedagogy is crucial. Knowledge *per se* is hollow, for even the scantiest of textbooks or any encyclopaedia can contain more knowledge and information than it is humanly ever possible to remember. Therefore, lecturers require a different kind of ‘knowledge.’

Teachers must not only be capable of defining for students the accepted truths in a domain. They must also be able to explain why a particular proposition is deemed warranted, why it is worth knowing, and how it relates to other propositions, both within the discipline and without, both in theory and in practice.

(Shulman, 1986: 9)

Knowledge is a contested ground for a number of interested groups: politicians, parents, students, religious authorities, people working in the industry, to name just a few. Currently, heated debates abound on what should be taught, by whom, to whom and when. “Education itself is an arena in which these ideological conflicts work themselves out...” where different interested groups “attempt to define what the socially legitimate means and ends of a society are to be” (Apple, 1993: 17). Knowledge is related in more than one way to power (Foucault, 1980; Apple, 1995). And within university, a lecturer’s declared role is to ‘officialise knowledge’ in a regulatory act.

Within the field of teaching literature there are no hard and fast rules, especially so in Malta, where the local context, and teaching traditions and subject philosophy are different from those of the United States or United Kingdom, even if the educational structure borrows a lot from the latter. In the absence of any guidelines, I had to

synthesise and elaborate knowledge considered essential in my own interpretation of the local context's tradition and with an eye on the future developments in the light of the sign of the times. Furthermore, I consulted a number of textbooks on the same topic (Probst, 1987; Beach and Marshall, 1990; Simmons and Deluzain, 1992; Showalter 2003; Carter and Long, 1991; Benton and Fox 1985) and at least one useful survey of the research conducted on the teaching of literature (Andrews, 2001). These were valuable in the process of identifying particular themes that later were developed into lectures that tackled local issues, examples and concerns (*vide* Table 9.3). They provided the necessary theoretical framework to couch my prime preference: a reader-response approach to teaching literature.

A list of topics covered during the eight month duration of the study units, is represented in Table 8.4.

**Table 8.4: Topics covered in the study-unit**

Topic	Lecture Title/Description
1	Why teach literature? Three paradigms and their influence in the teaching of Maltese literature throughout the short history of teaching Maltese
2	Imagination and the secondary world: What happens when we read a story? What happens when we read a poem?
3	Images of a literature teacher – the literature teacher's role
4	What does literary theory have to do with the teaching of literature?
5	The attainment targets for literature component in Maltese
6	A critique of the syllabus mandated by the State for Form 1 to Form 4, and the compulsory Secondary Education Certificate syllabus for Form 5
7	Principles in the selection of texts and censorship issues
8	Different structures of a literature lesson
9	Reading (Voicing / Performing ) a literary text in class: From principles to practices
10	The evaluation and effective use of compulsory textbooks
11	What is a reader-response approach to teaching literature?
12	How to conduct a discussion in class around a text or more texts
13	Questioning technique in the literature classroom
14	Response through art and drama
15	The paraphrase and literary essay in examinations
16	The evaluation of a literature lesson

These topics are an amalgam of traditional and new. The reason behind both selection and development of a topic was grounded in my conviction that student-teachers are to become professional reflective literature teachers, working within but



not totally absorbed or subservient to the local context, with an aspiration for innovation. The different topics can be categorised or collapsed in the following six sections as figured in Table 8.5.

**Table 8.5: The different topics covered during the study-unit categorised under topics**

Category	Topic/s
1. An overview of different theoretical orientations of teaching of literature	1, 2, 4, 11
2. Identity of a literature teacher at secondary school	3
3. Familiarisation with local official documents related to teaching literature	5, 6, 10
4. Designing and evaluating a literature lesson	8, 9, 16
5. Simulation in selecting literary texts for secondary school classroom	7
6. Experimentation with different teaching literature techniques	12, 13, 14, 15

First of all: tradition. Even if Malta is a small island, it developed its own particular traditions of doing things and particular ways of how to think about them. The first step, in trying to circumscribe a field that little attention was paid to, was by scrutinising the present way of teaching literature and trying to find historical reasons for such practice. In this process I consulted two types of documents: official national syllabi, and textbooks used during the past seventy years to teach literature (an overview of these documents can be found in Table 9.7). I found particularly useful local textbooks since they were (and still are) the tools whereby what is considered important is transmitted to future generations.

Particular to the local context is a conservative ideology. Textbooks rarely change. This is particularly so, since the State distributes the textbooks at the start of the scholastic year and collects them back, at the end of year. Investment in new textbooks is very rare, rather than considered as an opportunity for renovation and a sense of amelioration and rejuvenation of the tradition in a particular subject. Textbooks set and embody a particular way of thinking about a subject that is generally representative of a ‘common-sense’ world view. For example, whilst Carter and Long (1991) distinguish between two traditions in teaching literature: text-centred and student-centred, with the latter being the most progressive, in Malta there is still great emphasis laid on the author and his (very scantily, her)

contribution to the great tradition of Maltese literature (*vide* Chapter 9). Therefore, textbooks conserve the ‘great tradition’ and the different texts considered by many as ‘touchstones’ of where quality resides. But the tool is in the hands of a teacher that makes use according to his/her philosophy. This is easier said than done, for as John Bencini (2008) who is also the current President of the Malta Union of Teachers, rightly points out:

At times, teachers feel they are not trusted and teaching methods are imposed on them, and they feel their professional expertise is undermined. [...] The professional freedom of the teacher is of crucial importance in developing quality in education. Yet *some teachers complain that they are being told what to teach, how to teach, when to teach* and so on. Teachers, at times, feel they are being treated like robots and all they get is orders from above and that their professional autonomy is next to nil. Teachers feel that teaching has become the most scrutinized profession and they are being reduced to working mechanically and heartlessly.

### **8.10 Vignette V: Text(book) selection**

Having the freedom and responsibility to select what one is going to teach is a manifestation of high degree of “pedagogical authority” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/1990). It would be a living proof that school authorities believe in teachers as professionals. However, in Malta, texts and textbook, especially in State schools, are regulated from above and not left in the hands of teachers. At the same time, little if no effort is invested in the pedagogical quality of the literary experience in the classroom. This topic lends itself brilliantly to an opportunity to explore practical ideas such as length, book availability, and language use, with other theoretical ones such as canon, censorship, and ideology. Teachers rarely realise that their selection and engagement with a particular text reflects, consciously or unconsciously, a theoretical position, a set of values of what it means to teach literature. Their everyday practice is theoretical even when they don’t admit or name it as such; to quote Terry Eagleton (1996: x): “Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people’s theories and an oblivion of one’s own.”

While many student-teachers were aware of the canon, little were they conscious of the hidden meaning of such a selection, especially in imparting values and marginalising others. Literature is profuse with values, such as the portrayal of a Maltese family. Reflecting on the kind of family she portrays in the texts she selects (or others have selected) Julie, for her very first time, becomes aware of the implications such a decision has on her pupils.

If in class I introduce a story about Paul, a boy from a traditional family, with the father as bread-winner and mother as a housewife... the kind where his father

arrives home and finds his wife waiting for him with supper already on the dining table... What kind of message on reality am I transmitting?

Things have changed, and we as teachers should know better. I ask myself: Are we doing right when we select one kind of family-story and shun all other horizons? Are we transmitting a mono-culture that does not value diversity? Is it the right thing to do, not to venture afar from the traditional? There are those that are of the opinion that reality is too ugly and cruel to bear, so better leave literature as a dream. [...] As a prospective teacher I will think twice before selecting a literary text to use in class. Is it unfair and unjust towards those pupils who come from a different kind of family not to be portrayed? When I am selecting one kind of culture, I am closing my pupils in a cage that has one small opening that is common to all, thus hindering their wondering view point. Therefore, it would be best if I select different kinds of texts with different kinds of life representations.

(Julie, *Reflective Diary*, 22/11/2004)

In her deliberation she is exerting pedagogical authority and defending diversity (rather than integration) as a value. She is becoming "a reflective educator" (Reagen, Case and Brubacher, 2000) and an "ethical teacher" (Campbell, 2003), committed to her consciousness, and committed to resolve tensions within society. Furthermore, Julie's actions and deliberations are in accordance with Malta's Teachers' Code of Ethics (Ministry of Education, 1988): "The teacher shall act, and shall be seen to act, with justice" and "The teacher shall exercise authority in accordance with the law of the land and with evolving concepts of the pupil's needs and rights."

### **8.11 The seeds of innovation are to be found in the tradition**

Reflecting on discussions on curriculum in American schools and colleges, Arthur Applebee (1996: 3), reinterprets the role of tradition within the whole debate of conservatism and progressive education:

Traditions can transform the individual, providing powerful tools for understanding experience; individuals also transform traditions, through the ways in which they make use of and move beyond the tools they inherit; and to ensure that this continues to occur, our traditions of teaching and learning must be transformed so that students learn to enter into the ongoing conversations that incorporate our past and shape our future.

Viewed in such a way, tradition is an asset rather than a convict's stone or simply a relic of the past. Tradition becomes the locus of change since from those roots change can happen. However, awareness of local tradition alone does not automatically bring about change. The act of 'moving beyond the inherited tools'

needs some direction. This can only be achieved if one examines other traditions. The key to innovation is in traditions in contact. And the concept of praxis, reflection that leads to action, is important for the dynamics of change in respect of tradition.

To this end, rather than curriculum as a mass or body of immutable decontextualised facts, Applebee (1996: 36) suggests two important metaphors: 'curriculum as conversation', coupled with the idea of 'knowledge-in-action.' I find them both intriguing. On one hand curriculum is a site of dialogue where different voices may propose different ways of thinking about issues. Knowledge becomes a contested ground rather than a fortified city. This very much agrees with an idea of knowledge in a state of becoming within the community of the dialogical classroom. Students are asked to enter a domain. The question, then, should be how best students can enter into the domain?

## **8.12 Vignette VI: Going to a bookstore... abroad**

The phenomenon of reading literature forms an integral part of Western culture. Anthropologists and ethnographers caution novice practitioners about the difficulty to read one's culture; one's culture is used as an interpretative lens when trying to understand events (*vide* Mifsud-Chircop, 2000: 564). Thus, one becomes accustomed or so to say 'habitualised' (Shklovsky, 1917/1988: 20) to one's culture, without noticing its particularities and peculiarities. One becomes aware of one's culture, in this context the culture of reading and imagination, when one distances oneself from it. This happened to Julie when she travelled to New York and Florida for Christmas recess:

Undoubtedly American culture is very different from European culture. While I tend to like European architecture, I cannot but admire the tall high rises. As for literature, American literature has a lot to offer, and with a vengeance.

Due to the very long distances I noticed that American people read a lot. I observed this especially when commuting to Manhattan by public transport. I saw a great majority of them lost in a book. Even at the train station I noticed people reading.

At Manhattan I saw a number of mega-bookstores. One of them is Barnes and Noble, that has a shop around all Manhattan. One can select or buy a book and read it in a cafeteria within the same premises. This is an American tradition since all cafeterias were jam-packed with people reading all the time.

Another mega-bookstore is Strand, with over eight kilometres of book shelves. Something really exceptional. I found a section on teaching and education in general, and I was impressed how huge it was!

(Julie, *Reflective Diary*, 3/1/2005)

While Julie stops from reflecting on the local situation, she is amazed by the sheer quantity of books and the reading style of Americans. She was still at the beginning of her course but she is left to wonder why in Malta reading is mainly a school activity and how little reading forms part of Maltese culture in general.

### **8.13 Tools for reflection and assessment**

Instructional design puts a lot of emphasis on the selection and/or production of resources to complement the teaching process. Indeed, it is with the aid of carefully selected or designed resources that the teaching and learning process can effectively take place.

Trying to find resources suitable to the teaching of literature to prospective teachers is like trying to find a drop of water in the desert. To my knowledge, on the subject of how to teach literature to student-teachers, little has been written and presented in a textbook fashion in English (*vide* for example Lazar, 1993), and definitely none in Maltese. Notwithstanding Gillian Lazar's (1993) effort to present in a systematic way a series of practical tips and techniques that literature teachers can use in their classrooms, all examples, and understandably so, are in English. Hence, I felt it as my imperative to devise my own resources. To suitably cover the areas that most warranted my attention and student-teachers' consideration, I wrote three types of resources:

- A number of Reflective Tasks; or what Moon (1999: 170) calls "reflective exercises" (Appendix A).
- A handbook for the development of a portfolio on the student-teacher's first experience in teaching literature (for an index of contents *vide* Table 9.4).
- Two rubrics for the assessment of the different components of the study-unit (Appendix B).

I will analyse the resources' characteristics and use according to two theoretical frameworks. One is resource design, also known as the production of "self-

instructional material” (Lockwood, 1998). The other analysis focuses on how these resources were used to mediate learning, borrowing concepts from an activity theory framework.

### **8.13.1 Resource design: Reflective tasks**

Throughout the duration of my research, I found it particularly useful and effective to design a number of reflective tasks. While it is difficult to distinguish between “reflective and non reflective tasks” in so far as it is not possible to predetermine “how the internal experience of another operates or the nature of the other’s prior experience or her intentions” (Moon 2004: 92) are, I tried to follow as much as possible insights developed from “self-instructional material” especially those aimed at online courses or take-home exercises (Lockwood, 1998).

At the core of every reflective task were written questions. Each reflective task consisted of a main question that was subsequently divided into smaller more manageable ones. Usually these sub-questions were grouped according to broad but sequential categories that, when taken together, move forward the argument or reflection. Following Moon’s (1999: 175-176) advice, I tried my best to: devise activities that simulate corresponding possibilities in teaching, posing open ended questions, encouraging student-teachers to relate past experience to new theoretical insights, devising tasks requiring them to reflect on their own judgements.

I experienced what Moon (1999: 172) warns about, that is that the more guided a task, the more students will start to feel they are filling a questionnaire, without actually developing their own thought. When I evaluated my reflective tasks, the results sometimes indicated that student-teachers found it convenient to follow directions rather than explore ideas on their own; but as students progressed and felt more confident in their reflective writing, less structure was needed and provided (Moon, 1999: 171).

**Table 8.6: Some advantages of using reflective tasks**

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ They extend the learning time by a couple of minutes, if not hours.</li><li>▪ Working on the reflective tasks can be considered as an autonomous learning experience.</li><li>▪ Provide space for self-expression even to those student-teachers that are normally shy during lectures.</li><li>▪ They can meet different aims and touch upon a wide range of topics, possibly reflecting local contexts' needs.</li><li>▪ They do not take a lot of time to construct, thus they can emanate from a theme, issue or a dilemma explored during a lecture.</li><li>▪ Can be administered or worked upon at a convenient time for student-teachers – in other words, this material was specifically written to cater for their needs and to reflect local context.</li><li>▪ Once finished and read/corrected, they can serve as a source for frank, individualised and extended feedback to student-teachers.</li></ul> |
|--|

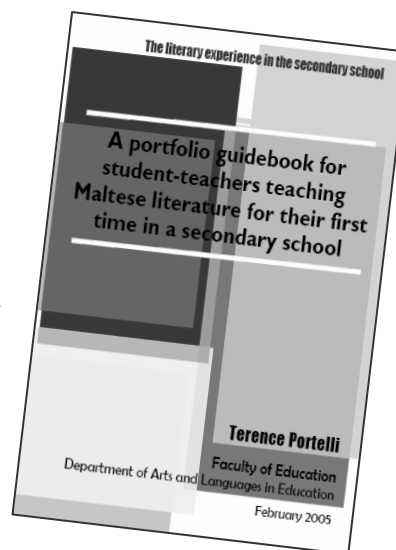
### **8.13.2 Resource design: The portfolio guidebook**

The second type of resource that I felt necessary to develop was a lengthy guidebook on portfolio use during student-teachers' first experience as teachers of literature in a secondary school. One major difficulty was the conceptualisation of this guidebook with particular reference to the teaching experience. While there are countless books on portfolios (*vide* Shores and Grace, 1998; Paris and Ayres, 1994; Shaklee, Barbour, Ambrose, Hansford, 1997), none of them explains what this could mean for the teaching of literature in a pedagogy course. I can safely say that I clarified the scope, and relevance of the guidebook especially after the first group of student-teachers submitted their first portfolio. I could better understand their preoccupations, their doubts and fears. Finally, based on the lessons learnt from the first experience, I settled for a shorter guidebook written more concisely, tackling issues that were deemed important by student-teachers themselves. Table 8.7 illustrates the different sections and explanations of the guidebook.

**Table 8.7: Contents of the portfolio guidebook**

- |   |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Introduction</li><li>2. What is a portfolio?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>Etymology and use</i></li><li><i>Portfolio and authentic assessment</i></li><li><i>The difference between a collection and a portfolio</i></li></ul></li><li>3. The process (time-line)<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>Introductory meeting</i></li><li><i>The choice of content</i></li><li><i>The first evaluation</i></li></ul></li></ol> |
|---|

	<i>The conference</i>
	<i>Final evaluation</i>
	<i>Before presenting your final content</i>
	<i>The presentation date</i>
	<i>Assessment and evaluation</i>
	<i>Exhibition</i>
4.	Portfolio's content
	<i>Common content</i>
	<i>Individual content</i>
5.	On the road of Reflection
	<i>Descriptive / Narrative Writing - Critical / Reflective Writing</i>
	<i>Exemplars</i>
6.	F.A.Q.
7.	Past student-teachers' comments on the portfolio
8.	Conclusion
9.	Glossary
10.	Appendix
	<i>A sample of a typical portfolio</i>
	<i>The school where you first taught literature</i>
	<i>Your co-operating teacher</i>
	<i>Your students</i>
	<i>Your best resource used during literature lessons</i>
	<i>Your best literature lesson</i>
	<i>The reading act: performance and interpretation</i>
	<i>Question to aid reflection before and after a conference</i>
	<i>Reflection on the individual section of your portfolio</i>
	<i>Final reflection on your portfolio 1</i>
	<i>Final reflection on your portfolio 2</i>



## 8.14 Vignette VII: Different models of a literature lesson

The scope of this lecture was to present different literature lesson sequences as developed by different pedagogues, mainly a four stages model (Benton and Fox, 1997: 110); and a more elaborate model (Benton, 1988: 205) that respects the complexity of response in the reading act within the four walls of a classroom. All models assign the reading act prime importance. These models are based on a reader-response approach to literature and post-reading activities usually try to encourage a mature and shared response. Indeed, finally, every text has its own particular point of departure and suggests particular activities.

Anne is struggling to make informed decisions based on the new insights gained during lecturing and much deeper insights when reading the selected textbooks for this study-unit. However, she is much aware of the contextual constraints that might inhibit her attempts to adopt a reader-response approach to her literature lessons:

In [Maltese] schools, New Criticism is widely used and things change really slowly. I was taught with the same method that is still used by most teachers today. I think this happens because teachers end up teaching the way they were taught, and therefore change never 'actually' takes place. I think that once I finish University and I start working in a school, it is not always that easy not to be influenced by



others that may be set in their own traditional ways. However, if you strongly believe in what you learned about, you can be innovative... routine annoys everybody! I was so accustomed with this method that I didn't think of any other alternative method. I was under the assumption that poetry and notes go hand in hand, because that was what I had to write in exams.

(Anne, *Reflective Diary*, 14/1/2005)

Now I am more convinced that becoming teachers of literature is not a transformation in a few seconds, or an epiphany, but rather an engaged dialogue between at least these forces: the student-teacher's prior held experiences and beliefs; the potential and motivation of each student-teacher to conceptualise a new way of structuring a literature lesson; and a thorough analyses of the contextual forces that mould in more than one way the final version of a literature lesson in a secondary school...

### 8.15 A question of reappropriating my language

The importance of developing resources in Maltese stems from a duty to develop the native language. In my case I had to gather the most frequently used words in education, and critically evaluate each one. This small endeavour of strengthening the basic pedagogical terminology followed three avenues: delve deep into old pedagogical writings and dictionaries to collect as many words already in use as possible; critically examine each word; and finally, decide if (a) a particular forgotten word still had the potential to effectively and unambiguously serve its speakers or writer, or (b) a never-used word that has to be introduced in Maltese, follows as much as possible the basic and natural consuetude of developing neologisms. In Table 8.8 I selected a few examples.

**Table 8.8: Some examples of basic terminology in English and Maltese**

English	Maltese	English	Maltese
▪ study-unit	'it-taqsimta ta' studju'	▪ stance	'qaghda'
▪ time-table	'l-orarju'	▪ scheme of work	'il-pjan ta' hidma'
▪ reading history	'l-istorja tal-qari tiegħek'	▪ aesthetic and efferent reading	'il-qari estetiku u għal informazzjoni'
▪ literary competence	'il-kompetenza letterarja'	▪ reader-response criticism	'il-kritika b'orjentament lejn il-qarrej'

While these few examples seem to be very simple and straightforward, a lot of thinking took place. I experimented with my student-teachers the different

variations, and finally opted for one that I considered to have the most promising future. This terminology generating experience made me more aware how important such a task is, and how later on, if followed by other speakers, it can make life easier when talking and especially in writing since standardisation helps to improve communication.

Therefore, writing my own resources meant that I was involved in a delicate but fundamental process of reappropriating my native tongue and extending its limits in a natural way so as to serve a new group of speakers and writers describing an old and at the same time new reality without sounding strange or esoteric.

### **8.16 Vignette VIII: The teaching and lecturing continuum or tension**

“I hate it when I stick to my plans without scanning and interpreting the student-teacher’s moods. The writing is on the wall and yet with my lecturer’s eyes I simply do not read it!” I wrote these two sentences in my Research Journal 25/4/2005 just a few days after the lecture. When I deliver a newly prepared lecture, I know my weakness and shortcomings: I tend to be so entangled and engulfed in the content that I miss completely the process. Actually underneath this self-reprimand I find an unresolved tension I carry within me to this day. I believe I hold at least two conceptions of a good lecture: the first is a traditional formal presentation of a body of knowledge attained after reading numerous books on a specific topic to an audience; and the other, an entertaining and if possible dialogical presentation of a synthesis of different positions attained after reading countless books on a particular topic, that takes into account an audience’s needs and abilities. Maybe they are not that diametrically opposite as one, including myself, might think. To a certain measure, Louise Rosenblatt’s (1978/1994) distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading offers a clue to how I might rethink this apparent bi-polarity, that is to consider these orientations or conceptions as on a continuum rather than an either/or. Teaching and lecturing could live together.

### **8.17 Resources as tools**

The teaching activity lends itself to a description based on Activity Theory. Yrjö Engeström (1987) considers school or school-going as “an obvious candidate for the birthplace of learning activity.” While this may be the case, according to Gordon Wells (2002: 43): “Activity Theory has not been used to any great extent to address

issues of classroom learning and teaching...” Notwithstanding such a situation, I find it rather useful to interpret the resource’s functions according to Activity Theory, since at the heart of the teaching and learning act there is an ever evolving interaction, or one might say, ‘activity.’ The concept of ‘activity’ was described by Kari Kuutti (1996: 26), as a process that is “not static or rigid” and “under continuous change and development”; characteristics that can be said also of the teaching and learning process. However, it must be made clear that “Activity theory is a powerful and clarifying descriptive tool rather than a strongly predictive theory” (Nardi, 1996, p. 7); and that is what I consider the strong point of such a model.

Some basic tenets of Activity Theory (*vide* Nardi, 1996: 11-14) that can be transposed to the teaching activity, are: consciousness and intentionality of the act; the collaboration between different members of a community; the asymmetrical relationship between people and things; the mediating role tools or artefacts have in an activity; and an importance laid on the understanding of the artefacts’ role in everyday existence, especially how they are integrated into social life.

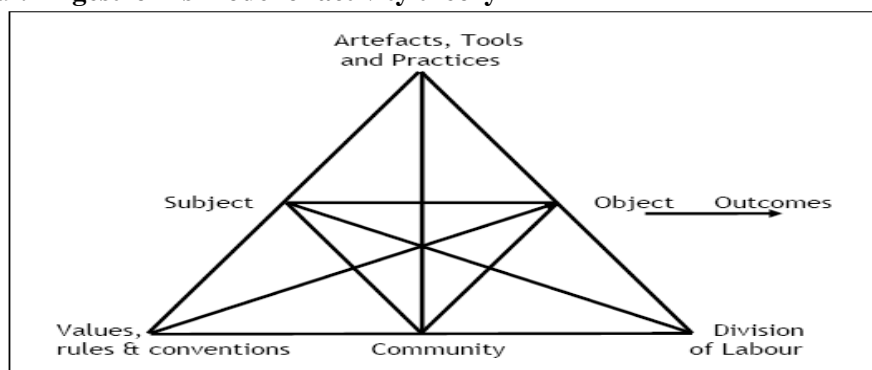
The basic model explained by Engeström (1987) – object-artefact-subject – clarifies learning as mediated activity through an artefact. The subject refers to the individual student, whose point of view is chosen for analysis. An object, in Engeström’s sense, may be defined as: “the ‘raw material’ or ‘problem space’ at which the activity is directed and which is molded (sic) and transformed into outcomes with the help of physical and symbolic, external and internal mediating instruments, including tools and signs” (Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research, n.d. The activity system). One important component of any activity is that it always contains various artefacts that have a mediating role (Kuutti, 1996: 26). Interestingly enough, these artefacts develop within a cultural milieu, and contain “a historical residue of that development” (Kuutti, 1996: 26. Based on the work of Gelperin, Anna P. Stetsenko (1999: 241) defined “efficient cultural tools” as learning materials that:

- (a) embody and reify the most efficient cultural practices of the previous generations, in that (b) they express, in a condensed,

generalised form, the essence of certain classes of problems or phenomena by (c) representing the genesis of these problems or phenomena and hence the logic – the templates of action and the contexts where these actions can be applied – necessary for dealing with them.

Figure 8.9 reproduces the often quoted model developed by Yrjö Engeström himself, that schematically illustrates the relationships between the different components.

**Table 8.9: Engeström’s model of activity theory**



While most interaction between members of the classroom community occurred orally, both Reflective Tasks as well as the Guidebook made use of written language. This might be a simple change of medium, however “writing restructures consciousness”, “has been detached from its author”, and thus lives an autonomous existence independent from its originator (Ong, 1982: 78). This argument is taken forward by Engeström (1987) when he states that the written language tends to be “decontextualised”, “definite” and “explicit.” With these attributes, written language “acquires an autonomous, self-sufficient mode of existence – it becomes a text,” thus creating a possibility for reflection and a greater awareness of what constitutes that language (Engeström, 1987). It is important to stress that while, Engeström (1987) states that “it would also be incorrect to blame the inherent properties of text for the quality of schooling,” at the same time...

My contention is that the object of learning activity cannot be reduced to text. Such a reduction normally leads to the minimization of the productivity of learning (text as a dead object), and even in the best case to the narrowing down of productivity into intellectualism (production of text only).

When devising my reflective tasks, I intentionally chose to put emphasis on those experiences I considered as illuminating or problematic. I was very much aware of the ‘enabling’ and ‘limiting’ factors attributed to tools and artefacts. For as Kari Kuutti (1996: 27) has rightly described:

...it [the tool] empowers the subject in the transformation process with the historically collected experience and skill “crystallized” to it, but it also restricts the interaction to be from the perspective of that particular tool or instrument only; other potential features of an object remain “invisible” to the subject.

I was aware that by the way I framed attention, by selecting some issues rather than others, I knew that I was opening doors while closing others. What right did I have to use my pedagogical authority and impose my way of seeing and interpreting the local context? First of all, I was dealing with adults, tried as much as possible to foster dialogue rather than lecture, suggest multiple sources or multiple references to back my ideas, encourage self-reflection and dissent, especially when I shared the role of assessor with the student-teachers themselves. Issues of power are always at the forefront, but while I cannot level the differences between myself and my student-teachers, I can always explain and negotiate my power.

### **8.18 Vignette IX: Why teach literature?**

In a small state like Malta, the teaching of literature forms a central part of the teaching of the Maltese language at both primary and secondary schools. Maltese literature finds justification within the Maltese language syllabus, in one of the following or a confluence of these three paradigms: the cultural/heritage model, the language/linguistic model, and the personal growth/development model (*vide* Carter and Long, 1991: 8-10); also known as the heritage, the linguistic and the personal development models. These broad reasons are very much similar to the much criticised three of the five “views” proposed by Brian Cox during the late 80s where the teaching of English is concerned (*vide* Davies, 1996: 38-43). These paradigms are not mutually exclusive, but rather particular orientations to a field of study with its own particular knowledge, skills, and values. Their influence spreads also to textbook selection, particular role that a teacher takes in class, the type of exercises that are presented and form of assessment.

After filling a Reflective Task on the different models, the following week student-teachers were handed out a legend with the tripartite categories corresponding to them: cultural, personal and linguistic. Nearly all students were in great trepidation. The questionnaire gave the session a sort

of jovial atmosphere, and suspense was in the air like when waiting for the Oscars or Champions League results to be announced.

Initially I could not understand why we were adding numbers, but then all of a sudden the score we attained made sense and gained significance in the sense that it was made clear that it pointed towards special factors.

I was the only one from my class to obtain the least marks for the third category [personal growth]. Truly, I felt frightened and I did not feel enthusiastic about the whole matter. I said to myself: "How come I always need to be different! What did I do wrong?" But then I discovered that the third category was going to be the fulcrum of this study-unit!

*(Anne, Reflective Diary, 15/11/2004)*

### **8.19 Vignette X: Durable belief in change**

Towards the end of the study-unit, I feel exhausted and exhilarated at the same time, and probably my student-teachers feel the same way. Reading through my Research Journal, I came across this piece that explicates the dilemmas I felt after conducting one-to-one interviews with some student-teachers:

Today's recording of interviews was a very tiring experience. I could notice beyond any doubt how much they changed during the last eight months. They learnt a new language with which to express themselves, and to struggle with when they find that things are not as ideal as described during my lectures. I feel that insights on teaching literature brought in them an uneasiness they did not have before when things were apparently simple - I took away their innocence about the whole matter of teaching literature. Did I do right or wrong when I presented them with a reader-response model of teaching literature? I may never know the hardships I have brought them in self-analysing their past, and forcefully embracing a new paradigm that is not at all accepted with the majority of teachers in the system. Was I exerting too much pressure on them when I 'politely demanded' (ah what a contradiction!) from them to teach in a particular fashion? Ah 'pedagogical authority' how demanding can you be! And were they only pleasing me in doing so, and then change their belief system to the old or other way of thinking once they become teachers and have an Educational Officer to please? I know that they understood most that I preached, but do they really believe in what they listened to? Have they really become response-based teachers of Maltese literature? Tonight I have more questions than answers...

*(My Research Diary, June 2004)*

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **Four perspectives:**

#### **Reading history, beliefs in teaching literature, subject's identity, and images of a teacher of literature**

### **9.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, student-teachers' perspectives on four key themes are explored. I start off with a look at their reading biographies, then scrutinise their beliefs in teaching literature, followed by an analysis of reflections on how they conceptualise their subject, Maltese literature, and finally, discuss their images of a teacher of literature. Each major theme is framed and introduced by a discussion of what research has demonstrated or contributed to that particular perspective. This chapter draws heavily on the student-teachers' writings in response to a number of reflective tasks (*vide* Appendix A), with extensive quotations marked by inverted commas and the reference to the pertinent task name.

### **9.2 Premise for histories of reading: The roots of an identity**

This section, 'Histories of reading,' rests on the premise which I consider finds best expression in two fragments by Theodore Roethke (2005: 140): "My memory, my prison" and "I am nothing but what I remember." I can understand those for whom their past is a prison from where they can never escape. Who can truly say that s/he has no regrets or is pleased with all his/her past experiences? While working with elderly people suffering from dementia I started to appreciate more the empowering effect personal history has on the individual. Entering the world of shadows prematurely and sliding into forgetfulness, makes one lose identity and dignity. The struggle against forgetting or falling in the oblivion is in fact the fight in favour of memory and the future. The roots of an identity find fertile ground in the past. To

remember is not just a duty, but also a way of keeping in touch with our humanity. As Harold Bloom (1993: 17-18) put it: “Forgetting, in an aesthetic context, is ruinous, for cognition, in criticism, always relies on memory.”

### **9.2.1 Language teachers’ beliefs**

It has been contended that initial teacher training is most effective when reflection is embedded in the programme (*vide* Chapter 4), both when conceived as a sub-skill of writing (*vide* Bolton, 2001; Hillocks, 1995), but also, and possibly more rewarding than that, when it becomes the overarching ‘philosophy’ of the whole course (Zeichner and Liston, 1996). One way of initiating the reflective process within a teacher training course is by adopting various techniques and methods to make explicit and scrutinise past experiences and beliefs (*vide* Griffiths and Tann, 1992). I agree with Jan Nesper’s (1987: 326) conclusion: “The development of beliefs over time, as a product of teachers’ long-term comprehension of different contexts for teaching would appear to be similarly difficult to predict, control, or influence.” This is further reinforced by Michael Fullan’s (1991: 296) contention that: “The relationship between prior beliefs and program experiences is crucial, complex, and not straightforward.”

Beliefs differ in strength “depending on just how sure the person is that a particular object does indeed possess a certain attribute” (Block and Hazelip, 1996: 25). Some are more malleable, others more difficult to change – even if the difference between the two is not always clear-cut. Language teachers belief systems can be subdivided into these four sections: beliefs about the subject; beliefs about learning and teaching; beliefs about the curriculum and programme of study; and lastly, beliefs about the profession of language teaching (Richards and Lockhart, 1996: 32-41).

Student-teachers’ present day practices, knowledge, beliefs, principles and values, find their justification in past experiences and memories (for a summary of research on teacher beliefs, *vide* Nesper, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). Indeed, as stressed by Nesper (1987: 323): “*to understand teaching from teachers’ perspective*



*we have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work.”* The intimate relationship between actions, beliefs and change, can be summarised thus: “Beliefs are thought to drive actions; however, experiences and reflection on action may lead to changes in and/or additions to beliefs” (Richardson, 1996: 104). There are three main sources for the “formation of strong and enduring beliefs about teaching and learning”: personal experience; experience related to schooling and instruction; and experience with formal knowledge, including school subjects and pedagogical knowledge (Richardson, 1996: 105-106). Belief systems “rely more heavily on affective and evaluative components” (Nespor, 1987: 319) and “frequently involve moods, feelings, emotions, and subjective evaluations” (Nespor, 1987: 323). Different groups of student-teachers, depending also on their gender, share different beliefs and attitudes (Richardson, 1996: 113).

If these prior experiences remain unexamined during an initial teacher training course, their lasting, maybe stifling and perhaps debilitating effect might temper with the desired outcome, that of producing “change agents” (Stuart and Thurlow, 2000: 113). Consequently, I strongly believe that in teacher training courses, it is of paramount importance that “teacher candidates’ prior experiences and beliefs be carefully addressed as part of their teacher preparation” (Long and Stuart, 2004: 289) and how crucial “understanding preservice teachers’ prior beliefs to inform supervision and university course design” (Hollingsworth, 1989: 160) is. Raising hidden beliefs and tacit values to consciousness should be a constant feature in teacher education courses that aim at reflection as a key feature of its philosophy. Change in the “complex, subtle, and multifaceted” realm of beliefs and attitudes, requires at least “an intervention process of similar order of complexity” if it is likely to succeed at all (Hill, 2000: 61).

Intellectual growth in the form of increasing awareness, understanding, and ability to deal with complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity is more likely to occur, and to occur rapidly, in contexts that allow students to experience powerful emotional and intellectual challenges within a supportive context, and to engage in a continuing cycle in which meaningful practice is built upon theory and is reflected upon with peers and university tutor within a critical framework.

(Hill, 2000: 61)

Change in beliefs, can be interpreted in different ways. There are those that concur that it rarely occurs at all as planned. For example Harm Tillema (1998: 217) argues that change in beliefs doesn't happen as intended or desired, indeed it is most probably "a conceptual change which is modified by escape routes and alternative conceptions to which the student teacher can revert in order not to have to change or assimilate new or disconcerting information." Then, there are those that argue that change "results are complex" (Richardson, 1996: 111), and difficult to attribute the effects of programme structure to change in preservice teachers' beliefs. This is more so when one accepts the notion that the beliefs do not share equal strength. Belief-change, as well as values-change brings to the foreground issues of ethics and power: Who is the teacher to enforce a belief examination? How are belief systems and values evaluated? By whom? By what criteria? With what authority does belief change come about?

### **9.2.2 A short note on methodology of autobiography or personal literary history**

Writing an autobiography is one effective way of exploring prior experiences and how they form and transform current beliefs and practices. A reading history also known as a 'literacy history' (McLaughlin and Vogt, 1996: 34) or its counterpart "writing autobiography" (Richardson and Adams St. Pierre, 2005: 974) may be an effective and productive way of getting to know oneself. A reading autobiography demystifies, cultivating the subject's voice, enhancing the process of self and World exploration (Richardson and Adams St. Pierre, 2005: 973). It cannot be stressed enough that "the affective and emotional components of beliefs can influence the ways events and elements in memory are indexed and retrieved and how they are reconstructed during recall" (Nespor, 1987: 324). Furthermore, "[s]tudent teachers are also very capable of constructing their own anecdotes about their experiences as learners, and ... I do see many possibilities in this approach for helping teacher educators to see their practice differently" (Loughran, 2002: 36).

At the same time, I am very much aware about student-teachers' idea of assignment, that construes response in a codified form not easily forgotten. Furthermore, I am aware that to a certain extent I conditioned their narrative, since initially I was to be their sole reader and even if I stressed that this was not the normal assignment with grades, I cannot exclude that some perceived it to be just another assignment. At a later stage, when they felt confident enough, they chose which parts to share with peers during discussions, but by then, the reflective task was ready made with the latter constraints. For a further elaboration of utilising this kind of data, *vide* Chapter 8.

Working on identity and language, some researchers strongly advocate the use of first person narrative since, "in the human sciences first-person accounts in the form of personal narratives provide a much richer source of data than do third-person distal observations" (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000: 157). I shared Maureen McLaughlin and Maryellen Vogt's (1996: 34) aim for this task: to help student teachers relate prior experiences with current ones. Therefore, it is not just narrating one's past, but trying to identify current beliefs and practices in the past. In doing so, the learning experience is personalised, since each literacy history emerges "as a unique record of a particular individual's development" (McLaughlin and Vogt, 1996: 36) and the bridges with the present are distinctive as well.

Student-teachers were given frequent feedback consisting of probing questions to broaden their reflection and analysis. One of my aims was to improve their work by highlighting and delineating better the contours of a critical incident, suggesting possible interpretations for the event or different points of view of how to read the repercussions of what had happened. I also recommended linkages with 'theory' and theoretical insights to ground better their reflections, hopefully making it easier to integrate their knowledge from different spheres more efficiently. In doing so, I was not only practicing what I preach about assessment for learning and constructivist classrooms (*vide* Chapter 5), but also acting as model for their practice with a new generation of pupils. Moreover

...encouraging the episode to be reconsidered, developed, and articulated through writing an anecdote enhances the meaning-making from the action in the practice setting and can unsettle some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching that student teachers have developed (are developing) and increase the likelihood that new ways of seeing might emerge.

(Loughran, 2002: 37)

While being a unique story, the personal literary history written by student-teachers, provided some individual differences of “well-remembered events” (Carter, 1994), that contribute to my contention that their literary education shares common threads with all the group since they have the same age, are nearly all female (except for two males in the first group), come from a working class background, possibly the first in their family to enter university, and with a keen interest in teaching.

#### **9.2.2.1 Images and artefacts of early experiences**

Once they presented their reading history, they were encouraged to add photographs, artefacts or other pertinent documentation to supplement, explicate and substantiate their memories. They did so diligently. The two male students included book covers mentioned in their reflections. But the female repertoire is more diverse and interesting. Many female student-teachers included: book covers, demonstrating that they really kept the books they mentioned when still learning to read; others went into a little bit more detail, and included a page or two from the book; others included a selection of photos of school rituals like the class photo, a prize day photo, or a play; some typed their favourite nursery rhyme or photocopied an illustration from their favourite book; some, less in number, included home photos such as themselves when young reading or holding a book, or dressed for carnival as their most loved character; one student-teacher included a copy of one of her compositions. Many of these school-related photos “provide perspectives on who we have become” (Mitchell and Weber, 1999: 75) and in a sense “these photographs take on a life of their own, a life that we can no longer control” (Mitchell and Weber, 1999: 79). Their story is left unsaid until someone explains the context, identifies the persons and breathes life into the emotional value of that

photo. The meaning of a photo can be divided into two: the personal meaning which can remain hidden to the persons not involved and possibly with time becomes forgotten too; and the social, a codified representation of a frequently ‘idealised and staged’ event or situation. Photographs and other artefacts provide a vantage point to explore the past and its relation to the present (*vide* Peim, 2005a).

### 9.2.3 Early contact with the reading world

Student-teachers enter into the teaching profession course for a variety of reasons. Most students in language teaching enrol because they ‘love the subject’ (Goodwyn, 2002) and possibly due to ‘love of literature’ (Ellis, 2003). This ‘love,’ if it is not just a late infatuation, has developed rather gradually from other sources and experiences going back as early as their infancy. According to Alberto Manguel (1997: 71):

In every literate society, learning to read is something of an initiation, a ritualized passage out of a state of dependency and rudimentary communication. The child learning to read is admitted into the communal memory by way of books, and thereby becomes acquainted with a common past which he or she renews, to a greater or lesser degree, in every reading.

Early experiences imprint on the student-teacher’s *forma mentis* a disposition and set an attitude towards reading and all that is or may be literary.

“Books always had an important role in my life, and to this I have to thank a lot my family and relatives since they were the first people that instilled in me a love for reading.”

(Suzanne, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

A number of student-teachers did not relate well with reading. Secondary school seems to be the main culprit. Coaching for examinations ruins the joy student-teachers have experienced in primary school. The devastating effects of formal high-stakes examinations has been discussed earlier (*vide* Chapters 1 and 5), but this is an authentic example of just one, major negative effect. However, not all may be attributed to examinations. The innate and inconsumable passion for other subjects or activities plays a decisive role too.

“Unfortunately, once I entered secondary school, the main aim of reading was not joy anymore but superseded by the pressure to pass examinations and to improve my English. Up to this day, I do not turn to reading in my free time. Instead, I prefer to watch television or paint. Even at University, when the major part of studies is related in one way or another to reading, once I have some spare time to relax, I do not look out for books.”

(Belinda, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

#### 9.2.4 Gendered reading habits

Gender, while not a major feature of my study, seems to be a factor in the development of a healthy attitude towards reading, or lack of it. While from the cohorts I had only two male out of nineteen participants, their narrative of early experiences of reading seems to be rather different than their female peers. This is in line with what Andrew Goodwyn (2002: 69) noticed in his cohort: male writers do not form a divergent group, the only noticeable difference from their female counterparts occurs during mid to late adolescence. Their early memories are rather faint – “I would like to state that my early memories related to reading are rather few...” (Luigi, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*) – and they don’t feel guilty about it; their interest in reading developed rather late when compared to their female peers attending the same school; and their book selection was more of non-fiction type, with biographies of football players top. These gendered traits have been found in reading interests research both locally (Mifsud, 2005) and abroad (*vide* Millard, 1997; Hall and Coles, 1999). This is a brief selection from James’s early thin memories...

“‘James, how come I never see you reading a book?!’ I’ve been listening to these words probably from when I was born! I do not have any memories related to reading. My mother recently told me that I never liked reading, very unlike my sister who used to devour one book after another. On the other hand, I was always thinking on how to run, play with friends and eager learning to play a musical instrument. As I got older, my parents used to buy me the *National Geographic World Series* for the young, but I never particularly warmed up to them. My personal library was inaugurated with the first ever book I bought from my own pocket money: *Eric Cantona: The Red and the Black*. It was a biography of the famous football

player that I used to admire a lot. To this day I like reading the sports section of local newspapers.”

(James, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

### 9.2.5 Reading in English and Maltese

The dated ‘language question’ in Malta (Hull, 1993), or its contemporary counterpart, bilingualism in Malta (for an educational context interpretation *vide* Camilleri, 1995), is contentious with longstanding and unresolved local solutions. Another interesting feature, especially at the very start of learning to read and the first few years of reading, is the strong all pervasive reliance on books in English. Parents, teachers and relatives put great importance on English:

“Literature in both Maltese and English was always an important aspects of my education. However, I had to put aside Maltese literature due to extreme pressure exerted on me by my parents and some of my family members, especially one aunt, and also by my teachers at school, especially those teaching English, that always preached *ad nauseam* the importance of reading in English. I ended up believing that reading in Maltese was a waste of time, since we speak Maltese all the time, while English can be improved by reading and watching TV only, and if I don’t perform well in English there is the risk of not being able to follow other subjects that are taught exclusively in English. Therefore, for a long time I set aside Maltese literature, and on those few occasions that I read in Maltese, I felt guilty, as if I was doing something wrong when not reading in English. My enthusiasm to read in Maltese faded gradually, till I hardly if ever opened a book in Maltese.”

(Gianna, *Reflective Task 11: The influence of a literature teacher*)

One major influence was Ladybird books, especially the famous *Peter and Jane* reading scheme. These were mentioned nearly by all student-teachers.

“I still remember reading close to my mother Ladybird books. [...] Peter and Jane’s characters in Ladybird books are two characters that I will never forget. I still remember with joy their adventures. Then, when I started attending secondary school, I used to buy ‘Readers’ Digest.’ Up to this day I enjoy reading stories from this magazine.”

(Priscilla, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

Children's literature in Maltese is a relatively recent phenomenon. The three bibliographies of children's literature in Maltese clearly demonstrate that this genre was sporadic during the beginning of the twentieth century – with twenty or so books between 1934 and 1970 (*vide* Żahra, 2002) – and even more so earlier (*vide* Bonavia, 1979; Fenech, 1976; Żahra, 2002). One might say that the birth of modern children's literature in Maltese was exactly 1971 with the publication of two classic books for children. From then on the industry flourished, with an average of more than 15 books per year, and it is on the increase (*vide* Żahra, 2002: 43-54).

However, I am amazed that nursery rhymes taught to infants are only in English, when the oral tradition in Maltese of these ingenious songs is as long and wide as any other nation (*vide* Cassar Pullicino and Camilleri, 1998). There seems to be a subtle colonisation of Maltese minds. As a native speaker of Maltese and a citizen of Malta, I am infuriated about the process of identity loss. Parents and grandparents can be considered as contributing factors; they felt shy of their patrimony and favoured what could be considered colonial values and culture. Yet not everyone succumbs to colonial pressures, preferring foreign culture to one's own. For example, Northrop Frye (1964: 15) argues that: "The native language takes precedence over every other subject of study: nothing else can compare with it in usefulness." This position is shared by others. A pragmatic comment from a Maltese patriot of the eighteenth century, Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1796: XXVII), reads:

Più che sarà il numero delle persone che *leggeranno* ed intenderanno le leggi, minor sarà quello degli uomini che le violano. Perciò bisogna ordinar nelle scuole d'impiegare per apprendere a leggere a' fanciulli, ora i libri di religione, ed ora quelli della legge.

[The more people who know how to *read* and understand the laws, the less would be the number of people who would break them. Therefore, schools should emphasise the teaching of reading to young children, be it religious books and/or those of laws.]



### 9.2.6 Role models at an early age

Family literacy has a lot of importance in Malta. It is within the reassuring walls of home that children start to read or encounter the literary world. Therefore, it stands to reason that nuclear family members carry a lot of responsibility. A caring and supportive mother frequently figures:

“As from when I was very young, I was fascinated by my mother. On her bedside table I always used to notice a thick book, and after not so many days, it used to change.”

(Suzanne, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

Acting literate from an early age has its importance as an early first step. Make-belief is vital to the development of a positive attitude towards reading:

“Since my mother had to take care of my younger brother, she could not find the time to read me books. Instead of crying, I used to select a book and feigned to read them. Some books were too difficulty for my age and therefore I used to look at the pictures and create a personal story around them.”

(Suzanne, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

At the same time it is interesting to note the nearly absolute absence of the father figure in these early memories.

“I rarely saw my father for he used to spend long hours at work. Reading was not his favourite pastime. Languages were never his strength, and therefore he had some difficulties in reading. But he knew that reading was important and he used to buy me books to read and encouraged me to read more.”

(Suzanne, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

Grandparents take a vital role. They fill in for the lack of attention given by some parents due to their other work-related commitments. Their presence is duly acknowledged by nearly all student-teachers. There were cases when grandparents lived within the same household, making their presence more felt.

“I remember Saturday mornings going to my grandmother’s house. I used to look for stuff in my uncle’s drawers, especially books. It is here that I found *Gabra ta’ Ward* [A Bunch of Flowers], the first textbook reader for primary schools used by my grandmother years earlier! Although in a bad state, in my heart was and still is a gem of a book. In the afternoon, we used to sit together on the sofa, and she would read or better still, recite, selections from this book.”

(Suzanne, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

### 9.2.7 Memories from Primary and Secondary school

Two sources seem to play a distinctive role at this stage. Gradually the home and family background receded, and teachers and other pupils come to the fore. Some encounters with teachers, as much as they were fortuitous, at the same time were unforgettable. Little things, such as, a classroom library, reading in front of the class or school, participating in a play for the Prize Day, external motivation in the form of positive reinforcement by the classroom teacher, listening to a story read on a cassette, going to book fairs, and from time to time a book gift... these seem to be the building blocks of future success and love of reading.

“When I was prompted to year four of primary school I had a particular teacher, Carmel G. Cauchi, who already had made a name for himself as a popular children’s author. During this year I came across many Maltese written books, since earlier I read textbooks mainly in English. Mr Cauchi made a small lending library in our classroom, and every week we used to borrow books to read. To those that read more than one book, he used to affix a star on a chart, and when that pupil filled in the whole row, s/he would win a pen with four colours... something special at that time.”

(Belinda, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

Females seem to conform to schooled literacy quicker than their male counterparts. Their reading skills seem to develop earlier, and they enjoy and feel pride in conforming (at least at primary level) to the system. Actually, there were instances when the student was a step ahead of her teacher, creating undue frustration. This seems to be the case with advanced students, symptomatic of a trend in classrooms aimed to address the average student band, and forget to adequately challenge students at the extremities:

“When still in Primary school, I remember that I did not find reading lessons interesting, since the teacher used to stop to explain and at the same time I was full of curiosity to carry on reading and see what happened next. Quite often I would have already read the book we were going to read in class.”

(Cleo, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

There are exceptions to this rule. For example, Marika greatly admired her teacher and that led her to fall in love with Maltese literature, at secondary school. Special attention by the teacher or assigning a role that gives pride to the student are all

ways and means through which pupils love their subject and then carry on studying it at further and higher education.

“The love of Maltese literature, increased drastically in secondary school. I believe that my teacher influenced me a lot in this. I used to adore the way she read in class. She used to present literature in an interesting way, and she would recommend other books for us to read. Once, after listening to me reading in class, she used to select me to be the class reader. This role granted me the title of ‘the journalist or newscaster of the class.’”

(Marika, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

Reading in class seems to bring pride in many pupils and student-teachers. This activity was even commented upon years earlier by Keenan (1879: 9-10), one of the many Inspectors sent to Malta under the British:

Expressive or logical reading is out of the question. The usual habit of the pupil is to pitch his voice in a loud key, and then, proceeding as rapidly as possible, literally to roar out sentence after sentence until some one brings him to a stop.

While the same situation can be said to learning Italian, Keenan (1879: 10) had no doubts who was to blame for such a practice (present most probably to this day): “The teachers themselves are responsible for it.” Nearly a hundred and twenty five years later, Kim (*Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*) notes that:

“While at school I did a lot of jokes and shenanigans, I still remember that the teachers used to practically always ask me to read in class. I don’t know if he chose me because I knew how to read or just to give me something to be busy at, rather than idling about.”

### **9.2.8 Access to book fairs**

One common motivating experience seems to be the attendance at school book fairs or national book fairs. The book fair gave a sense of ownership to those student-teachers that bought one of their first ever books out of their own pocket money.

“Around March at our school they used to organise a book fair. Everyone was enthusiastic about this event. I used to collect ten cents per week so that in March I could have enough money to buy my teacher’s books. I still remember the first ever book I bought with my own money: *Ramon u Sardinellu* [Ramon and Sardinellu].”

(Belinda, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

Another student-teacher enthusiastically remembers the day when she went to the national book fair. But books bring along another set of memories that do not exactly have anything to do with their aesthetic qualities; student-teachers' memories of certain books relate to memories of situations and occasions when the book was a springboard for a whole ritual or script:

“I remember that as a family we always went to the book fair. That day used to be one of the most beautiful days because we used to go around the different stalls, and check for the latest publications. We always used to buy more than two books, and in my eyes that was a lot of books! I still keep those early books in my library, and when I see them it is as if I can listen again to my mother reading them to me.”

(Carla, *Reflective Task 2: Reading History I – Early Memories*)

### 9.3 Early beliefs in teaching literature

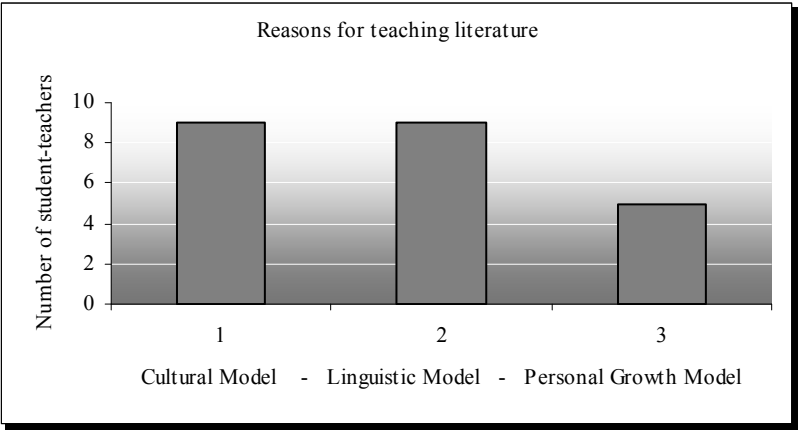
The second theme in relation to the process of becoming teachers of literature is student-teachers' early beliefs on teaching literature. Each subject has its own curriculum history and philosophy. The nature and quality of the teaching/learning experience within the literature classroom relates to the importance assigned to the text, the student-reader, the author and the teacher. There have been longstanding disagreements the value of teaching literature (*vide* Showalter, 2003: 22-24). Brian Cox's (1989) five model of teaching English has been influential and debated at length for its ir/relevance (*vide* Davies, 1989; Goodwyn and Findlay, 2008). Ronald Carter and Michael Long's (1991: 2) three arguments, that “transcend the particular circumstances, places and contexts,” are presented in Table 9.1.

**Table 9.1: Three paradigms of teaching literature**

<i>Perspective</i>	The cultural model	The linguistic model	The personal growth model
<i>Description</i>	Emphasis on a narrowly selected canon conceived as the great heritage, evidencing reverence to the texts and authors. Close reading is the preferred method of reading. Probably segmenting the body of literature in periods is also prevalent.	Emphasises the stuff of literature words, their syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships, analysing deviations from the norm, bring the student-reader close to the best of thinking and expression with a community or nation.	Putting the pupil's exploration and engagement with the text at the fore. Cultivating a response-based classroom, helping pupils read texts autonomously. The reading act considered as an event individual, unrepeatable experience that can be shared within the classroom to improve the literary competence of each individual reader.

I devised a simple questionnaire (*Reflective Task 5*) that was distributed to all students just days into the study-unit. They had to fill in all statements on a liker scale from 1 to 5. Table 9.2 describes the results obtained by the two group of students added together (19 student-teachers in all). One student obtained exactly the same result in all three categories; added because influential in the final result. Two students obtained exactly the same result in two categories (cultural model and personal growth model, and linguistic model and personal growth model); added in both categories thus the total is 23. The results mirror the complex relationship between initial beliefs of teaching literature and a reflection of how students were taught literature.

**Table 9.2: Reasons for teaching literature obtained by student-teachers at the start of the study-unit**



To me, the most interesting result is not so much the fact that the cultural and linguistic models obtained the same results, or that one student obtained the same result in three categories, or the fact that two student-teachers had exactly two categories with the same result. Instead, the most interesting result is the low preference obtained by the personal growth model. When one considers that the study-unit was to promote a reader-response approach to teaching literature – that tallies most with the personal growth model – the difficulty of the task at hand is apparent.

Since “the effects of curriculum should never be considered in isolation from the kind of pedagogy that delivers that curriculum” (Gregory, 2001: 73), one initial task was to identify and draw a web with the salient characteristics of a traditional

literature lesson. This was done as a group activity during a lecture; a discussion ensued focusing mainly on hidden messages about the identity of the subject and how knowledge and learning are constructed, and medium- and long-term effects on pupils in such a system of teaching. One thing seems to be indisputable; “The traditional method of teaching literature in secondary school is widespread, and is practiced in all State, Church and probably in most Private schools too” (Gianna, *Reflective Task 6 – A description of a traditional literature lesson*). For some student-teachers, this was self-evident from even before presenting the information:

“I was and still am sure that the traditional method does not work, especially in the long-term. It may seem to ‘work’ for passing exams, and actually is efficient for the teacher since she does not have much preparation to do, but for the pupils this method is full of drawbacks and in effect is short-changing them in what literature teaching should really be about.”

(Cecilia, *Reflective Task 13: Looking at yourself as a teacher of literature*)

This personal reflection tallies with what Carter and Long (1991: 3) wrote about how to measure success in a literature lesson and curriculum:

...the test of the teacher’s success in teaching literature is the extent to which students carry with them beyond the classroom an enjoyment and love for literature which is renewed as they continue to engage with literature throughout their lives.

Furthermore, following the discussion during the lecture about different paradigms for teaching literature, I presented two seemingly opposite views, that are explained in Table 9.3.

**Table 9.3: Two different views of a literature classroom**

Philosophy/Conception	Traditional	Progressive
Inspired by...	New Criticism, Russian Formalism	Reader-response Criticism
Method of reading	Textual analysis Close Reading	Personal and Community Response
Critical Assumptions	Objective – Scientific Individual practice Methodological or Sequential	Subjective – Impressionistic Negotiated practice An Event and Exploration
Culture	Text-bound	Reader-response
Also known as...	Subject-centred theories (Showalter, 2003: 27-32) Teacher-centred literature classes (Carter and Long, 1991: 23-24)	Student-centred theories (Showalter, 2003: 35-37) Student-centred literature classes (Carter and Long, 1991: 24-25)

Then, in *Reflective Task 6*, students had to describe an exemplary lesson according to the traditional paradigm that they were accustomed to. Indeed, reading through the student-teachers' reflections, I found a number of assertions about the traditional method of teaching literature: "In my five-year experience as a student of literature at secondary school I met exclusively teachers that embraced the traditional method of teaching literature" (Cecilia, *Reflective Task 13: Looking at yourself as a teacher of literature*). The qualities of a traditional literature lesson from the two sources are listed in Table 9.4.

**Table 9.4: Characteristics of a traditional literature lesson**

Traditional literature lesson sequence	Hidden (and not so hidden) messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Scanty resources, usually just the textbook and board</li> <li>▪ Reading the whole text in class</li> <li>▪ Individual work preferred; no group work</li> <li>▪ Explaining a poem verse by verse</li> <li>▪ Emphasis on literary terminology</li> <li>▪ Exercises similar to a comprehension test</li> <li>▪ The teacher dictates a note on the text</li> <li>▪ Pupils listening passively</li> <li>▪ Pupils have to replicate what the teacher says</li> <li>▪ The syllabus is the rationale of everything happening in class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A monotonous method</li> <li>▪ No variety – Passing through a set of routines</li> <li>▪ No friendship but rather a distance between the teacher and the student</li> <li>▪ No personal response</li> <li>▪ No space for personal reactions</li> <li>▪ Pupils are just numbers in a class; impersonal approach</li> <li>▪ The teacher knows everything</li> <li>▪ No space for imagination</li> <li>▪ A singular method that annoys the pupils</li> <li>▪ Teaching geared towards examinations</li> </ul>

The information in Table 9.4 is supplemented by the narrative description of a typical traditional literature lesson by Ella:

"The traditional method of teaching literature has a fixed structure that does not change a lot, leading to a fossilised routine-based practice of teaching. Even the texts tend to stay the same year in year out.

There are a number of steps that are followed in a rigorous religious kind of manner, beginning with the sequence of texts depending if according to the anthology or as they were listed in the syllabus. It is a didactic method of teaching with strong emphasis on rote learning. There is great emphasis on content; what is important is that a poem or any other text is done with, not to engage the students and truly appreciate a text. It is as if literature anthologies are subservient to handouts or books with notes.

I still remember vividly a teacher of Maltese who stressed that if we wanted to pass the imminent exam, we had to buy a copy of the notes on the anthology; we had to study them in detail, parts of which by heart, for they would help us pass the exam. That same teacher would

not even let us ask any questions during the lesson and even reprimanded us when we did so, since in his opinion we were hard-pressed for time. Later that year this teacher went even so far as not read the text in class – with the excuse that we were getting older and therefore we should prepare the poems at home – and he would cover two or three poems in one lesson!

The study focuses on literary criticism rather than the poem or text itself. The poem or text are parsed in their minute parts, and there is not enough importance given to aesthetic reading and what the pupils experience when reading. The poem or text is set on the autopsy table and technique is all that matters. Since the sequence is highly codified and adhered to, there is no space for creativity and pupil's emotions; students are passive recipients. All lived experiences of the students are set aside, so that notes and critical comment are given prominence and considered as holy by the pupils.

In the traditional method the text is just an excuse to teach literary terminology, new vocabulary, and a vehicle of information and facts of sorts. In a few minutes, the time span of a lesson [circa 35-45min] the teacher tries to squeeze in and out everything there is to say about a poem or literary text. All learning is rather superficial, directed towards exams that determine the future of us students.”

(Ella, *Reflective Task 6: Description of a traditional literature lesson*)

It is already apparent that schooling has given the student-teachers a mental template of a traditional literature lesson and they have on their own arrived at a damning judgment on such practice. Their limit, at this stage, tends to be their own experience. As stated by one student-teacher:

“When I was a student in a secondary school, the traditional method of teaching literature was the method embraced and practiced by the majority of my teachers. During my classroom observations during the past two years in girls’ secondary schools, I came to the conclusion that the traditional method *is still* practiced by most teachers, especially those that are not anymore as young. However, I could notice a difference among new teachers that were a little bit more progressive... they involved their students, used background music when reading a poem, utilised a lot of pictures to explain new words, produced charts with students on famous poets, and this innovative and collaborative work was part of the pupil’s assessed work.”

(Ella, *Reflective Task 6: A description of a traditional literature lesson*)

And since they are motivated to teach in a different way, at least initially, they are eager to discover a new way of teaching, very different, if not completely opposite,



to the way they were taught literature. The discussion that followed clearly showed that they were already inclined to reject ‘the apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975) model of teaching, and eager to familiarise themselves with a broad array of other methods. To that end, as a lecturer I was willing and prepared to present “extreme examples of innovative practices,” described by Pamela Grossman (1991: 350-352) as a process of “overcorrection,” a methodological practice that has been proved to work in ITT courses. The student-teachers demonstrate a dissatisfaction with the traditional way of teaching literature, but they know little about what could be a viable, effective and innovative alternative. This desire is representatively expressed in a comment at the very start of the study-unit:

“It has been two years now, listening to lecturers emphasising how important it is to motivate pupils and paramount to engage them during a lesson. As a pupil myself, I was taught literature in the traditional method. I wish that by the end of this study-unit I will be provided with an array of examples how to teach literature in an effective and creative way; not exactly how I was taught literature. I wish to be presented with a number of resources that entice pupils and guide them reading in a pleasant way literature as if it was a vivid lived through experience. I find it important to be presented with different methods I could use to be an innovative teacher, or else pupils might get really bored stiff, like I used to feel.

(Kim, *Reflective Task 1: What would you like? A self addressed letter*)

### **9.3.1 Perceived difficulties to break away from the traditional method**

While conscientious student-teachers like Kim identify the limiting factors of the traditional paradigm of teaching literature, they are very much aware that to change to a more response-based approach is not easy or automatic. There are a number of strongly-felt difficulties that may impede a flow of change, especially during teaching practice (*vide* Chapter 10).

### 9.3.1.1 Training at university

Student-teachers are fully aware of the forces that militate in favour of a *status quo*. One's past success or lack of it, and university training, are identified by Ella as two possible factors leading to paradigm stability.

“One must consider that most teachers find it difficult to move away from the traditional method because they are used to it, and it has become second nature. Most teachers have achieved success and obtained positive results thanks to the traditional way of teaching. The fact that prospective teachers were trained in the traditional way, might kindle a desire to move beyond that.

The teaching of literature at University may have part of the blame and responsibility as well in what happens in secondary schools. At University only traditional methods are used. Even the University's architecture, how rooms and halls are structured and organised looking at the podium, reflect a not so hidden preference towards the traditional method of teaching in general with the lecturer as the head.”  
(Ella, *Reflective Task 6 – A description of a traditional literature lesson*)

### 9.3.1.2 Teachers themselves

One major stumbling block for change within the traditional paradigm of teaching literature is the corpus of teachers that have been teaching in the traditional way for years, especially in grammar-type schools where greater emphasis on examinations is made evidently clear for all from day one. “The great defenders of the traditional way of teaching literature are the teachers themselves” (Gianna, *Reflective Task 7: A description of a traditional literature lesson*).

### 9.3.1.3 Pupils' expectations

Changes in lesson sequence and activities might bring about resistance or disciplinary problems, always high on teachers' priority list. Therefore it stands to reason that one category of difficulties rests with pupils' expectations. Pupils are accustomed to the traditional way of learning literature; they expect to be read to or read in turn the whole text in class; suppose that they would copy or read a note on the text; and anticipate they will have to work a handout with one or two exercises. It is this familiarisation and habituation that then created problems for student-

teachers. On teaching practice, student-teachers met pupils who have already assimilated the traditional way of teaching literature and feel secure enough with it (*vide* Chapter 10). They learnt the rules of the game early, and often know very well what may lead to success. So the first lines of defence of the traditional ways of teaching literature, within certain contexts, are pupils themselves. Having student-teachers believe in response-centred classrooms, does not immediately translate into more reader-response classrooms. Pupils need to be convinced too. For example, Victoria laments that:

“As teachers of literature we are responsible to elicit the pupils’ response. For me this was the most debatable point during all my lessons. Not once was I in the middle of a lesson and I put to them the famous question: ‘Would you have done like the character?’ Some pupils would be ready to answer, ‘*Why should you care how we feel? It is not as if you care!*’ Although the pupils that answered in that rude way were only few, these few crossed my heart. I felt as if cornered, without knowing exactly how to respond.”

(Victoria, *Portfolio – A description of the students I was teaching*)

For me the answer would have been simple enough... ‘Yes, I do care how you feel!’ And then wait for their answer and elicit further response to demonstrate that I was listening. But student-teachers may feel at a loss in front of difficult questions that touch their beliefs or basic principles. The same student-teacher recognised that by the end of the six weeks, “...nearly all pupils became aware of the importance of response during the literature lesson” (Victoria, *Portfolio – A description of the students I was teaching*). Suzanne experienced at least twice a similar situation, one derived from information about pupils’ interests from the co-operating teacher, and a complementary personal critical event:

“One particular teacher shared with me her disappointment about her negative pupils’ reactions when she tried some different methods when teaching poetry. Something along those same lines happened to me too. Although the girls appreciated the resources I used to prepare and the different activities I used to plan, in their eyes, the only relevant aspect of the lesson was the periphrasis, or note. They used to claim, not without some foundation, that in examinations they will be asked to answer questions about meter, figures of speech, and the theme of a text. The personal response is seen as irrelevant, and once, one pupil remarked, ‘*During an examination, we won’t be asked to compare ourselves to a thing!*’ ...with clear reference to an activity we had done previously, when I asked them to compare themselves to something,

like what the poet had done in the poem ‘Arizona,’ when he likened himself to a desert.”

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – The school where I taught literature for the first time*)

Working in a completely different school, Belinda had to endure a barrage of students’ resistance not just about her methods, but probably more worrying than that, about the very existence of her subject. At times, prejudice against Maltese language and literature is difficult to eradicate. It finds its roots in what some Maltese believe in, without foundations. It is a blunt bias against Maltese culture and language.

“While my pupils did not find it difficult to air their views on texts, at times they were rather hesitant and perplexed to accept the idea that the same text can have more than one plausible interpretation. From when they were very young they expected a note that presents what they should think about a text. So they found it rather hard to write their own notes under my guidance, to an extent that the co-operating teacher told me that some pupils complained to her that they were worried since they did not have ‘the notes’ to study for examination purposes.”

(Belinda, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

“My experience teaching literature within this Church school was not at all a straight smooth road. I can frankly say that I had to teach students who loved Maltese as much as those that hated it. Many of the students never touched a book in Maltese other than those that they had to study at school. Furthermore, those students that did not like reading in Maltese considered Maltese as an unnecessary subject in their curriculum. Many of them said that they did not consider Maltese at par with other languages, like English. For them, my literature lessons were just taking valuable time from other subjects they deemed important.”

(Belinda, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

#### **9.3.1.4 Agents of change**

If difficulties moving away from traditional teaching can be categorised as being either intrinsic or extrinsic to the teacher, likewise the agents of change can be found within the hidden powers of teachers’ conviction or exterior to him/her in what might be termed, contextual forces. Some of these factors are schematically

represented in Table 9.5 many of which are based on student-teachers' experiences and reflections, in a number of Reflective Tasks.

**Table 9.5: Agents of change within the traditional system of teaching literature**

Forces of change within the teacher	Agents of change exterior to the teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Self-motivation.</li> <li>▪ Having a reflective attitude to be able to identify shortcomings within current system.</li> <li>▪ Personal conviction and commitment to change.</li> <li>▪ Embracing a calculated risk-taking outlook.</li> <li>▪ A research-based informed conscious and conscientious decision in favour of doing things differently.</li> <li>▪ A shared vision or a kindled dream of a day when things can be different for teachers and pupils alike.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A general strongly expressed dissatisfaction with traditional ways of doing things, especially by parents and civil society.</li> <li>▪ The consensus among similar subject teachers that change needs to take place for the subject to remain relevant to a new generation of pupils.</li> <li>▪ Insights given during in-service training to practicing teachers.</li> <li>▪ A change in the official syllabus.</li> <li>▪ A revision in the type of official literature examination papers and questions.</li> <li>▪ More professional autonomy, authority and responsibility given to teachers.</li> <li>▪ New demands from the work-force as expressed by unions and employers' associations.</li> <li>▪ Media coverage of the issue.</li> </ul>

#### **9.4 Identity of a subject**

The third theme I want to discuss is that of the student-teachers' ideas about the identity of their subject. Mainly for historical reasons, Maltese literature with grammar forms the backbone of Maltese as a subject at secondary school. However, this privileged position is rarely questioned or delved much into, especially among Maltese teachers themselves. This state of affairs is not symptomatic of the Maltese context only.

Ivor Goodson and Colin Marsh (1996: 1) write about the 'historical amnesia' within the English context and the unspeculative mind of teachers and curriculum developers on the provenance of their subjects which are mistakenly "treated as taken-for granted 'givens'." However, different conceptions of a subject exist, and for English the most common are the ones proposed by Brian Cox (1991). The National Curriculum with a narrowing down of what constitutes English, seems to

be crying out for a “discussion and debate within English, among English teachers about the proper provenance, identity and practices of the subject” (Peim, 2003: 34). I consider this uncritical stance towards English literature as a subject in secondary school, as another limit. ‘The rise of English’ (Eagleton, 1996: 15-46) is not a neutral historical account, but rather a struggle between competing beliefs, ideologies, values, and people in power that decide for others what is, is not and can be ‘English language and literature’ (for a critical account of the issue *vide* Peim, 2000, 2003).

Before entering a methodology study-unit, student-teachers consider ‘normal’ this state of affairs of unquestioning the status of literature within the curriculum and syllabus. One aim of my lectures during the study-unit on teaching literature was to trace the roots of current practices of teaching Maltese literature at secondary school, and with my student-teachers critically to examine their provenance and status. School subjects are never neutral or value-free enterprises, but rather they are “the most quintessential of social and political constructions” (Goodson and Marsh, 1996: 1).

The story of literature in the Maltese syllabus concerns “the way in which a subject is defined by one group according to their background and interests, it is likely that it will be less meaningful to other groups” (Gipps and Murphy, 1994: 3). Table 9.6 also corresponds to a detailed index of a thin pack of primary sources from the past and present on the teaching of Maltese literature, that during lectures served both as a genealogy of teaching Maltese literature, and also as an archaeology of sources that can be considered at the very heart of Maltese as a subject. In other words, each entry corresponds to a copy of the pertinent documents, usually spread over one or two pages.

**Table 9.6: A short comment on a selection of documents related to the teaching of Maltese literature**

1795	Mikiel Anton Vassalli, a Maltese patriot and scholar, writes a letter to Grand Master de Rohan to open a school to teach Maltese. Vassalli was the first to recognise the importance of the mother tongue in the education of all Maltese.
1930	A selection from an editorial written by Dun Karm Psaila (Malta's national poet), 'Il-poeżija Maltija l-ahjar minn kull wahda oħra' [In schools, Maltese poetry is the best when compared to the rest] where among other issues, he explained: a) what is a poem, b) the function of poetry in the education of children, and c) how a poem should be read and analysed in schools.
1937	Two pages from <i>Ward ta' Qari Malti</i> [Flowers from a Maltese Reading Garden] the textbook used in secondary schools for over 30 years compiled by Pietru Pawl Saydon (Malta's most eminent Biblical scholar) and Ġużè Aquilina (a linguist and lexicographer). In this textbook the idea of poetic-thought (in Maltese 'hsieb') was first introduced in teacher's discourse; on the other hand, footnotes explained archaic words used in prose.
1948	Two pages from the anthology <i>Il-Muża Maltija</i> [The Maltese Muse] edited by Ġużè Aquilina, and reissued in various editions up until the 1980s. In this anthology the idea of biographical criticism was first introduced, the selection of poems being preceded by a bio-bibliographical note.
1970	The editorial in Malta's foremost modern literary journal focused on 'Maltese literature in schools.' The editor's comment (most probably Victor Fenech, himself a teacher and rebel-poet) focused on the pressing need to have: a) updated textbooks to teach literature especially in the light of Malta's gaining independence six years earlier; b) the new generation of writers to find a place in the textbooks, and c) updated methods of teaching Maltese literature.
1984	An advert published on the back cover of the magazine <i>Mis-Sillabu</i> [From the Syllabus] for note books (a sort of Maltese version of Cliff Notes) on the then selected texts for Ordinary and Advanced Maltese Matriculation Certificate. The publisher's name Publishers Enterprises Group PEG at the time was synonymous with such books that immediately sold thousands of copies. These books were easily identifiable from the small size (2"x5"), and one colour cover with white typescript.
1984	Two selections from the literature section of the Maltese syllabus. The aims of teaching literature were that after reading only the fine authors, students should be able to 'grasp the ethics and cultural values of Maltese literature.' Then, what follows is a list of poems and poets; from a selection of thirteen poems for the first year, only one is written by a female. Interesting enough, the suggested textbooks to teach prose Trevor Żahra's <i>Meta Jaqa' ċ-Ċpar</i> [When Mist Falls] and Ġorġ Borg's <i>Stejjer minn Tarf fir-Rahal</i> [Stories from the Far End of the Village] are still taught in state secondary schools today.
c 1995	The anonymous state school syllabus writer [most probably the newly appointed Educational Officer for Maltese at secondary level Tarcisio Żarb] felt the need to explain and spell out for teachers how a poem should be structurally analysed: summary, style, symbolism, meter, semantic field, sounds, rhetoric, comparison with other poems, general comments and finally, questions and knowledge about what is a poem. The same is one with prose, suggesting a different way of reading prose, summary, style and diction, characters, background, plot, and dialogue.
1995	A page from <i>Il-Miġra</i> [The Waterfall] edited by Tarcisio Żarb used exclusively in Church and Private schools. However, state schools use <i>Nadriet</i> [Gazing] four booklets very similar in content and presentation to the previously mentioned textbook.
1999	The institution of the now defunct Għaqda tal-Għalliema tal-Malti [Maltese Teachers Association] aimed at promoting an update in the syllabi, keep abreast with current research and publish pedagogical material for teachers and pupils.
2001	The publication of attainment targets for reading non-fiction and reading literature (Portelli, 2001a and 2001b) based on a reader-response notion of conceptualising the reading act.

Within this context, I find Basil Bernstein's (2000) insights, amongst many others, on knowledge construction and transformation into education accepted knowledge structures, 'singulars' or commonly known as subjects through a special kind of pedagogical communication language device, illuminating. Subjects are "knowledge structures whose creators have appropriated a space to give themselves a unique name, a specialised discrete discourse with its own intellectual field of texts, practices, rules of entry, examinations, licenses to practice, distribution of rewards and punishments" (Bernstein, 2000: 52). School subjects create "justificatory discourses or 'regimes of truth' for the organization of school knowledge" (Goodson and Marsh, 1996: 3).

Reflective practitioners, as I envision my student-teachers to become, require inspiration from a theory or vertical knowledge that explains how knowledge is selected from other fields of knowledge production and then rearranged and recontextualised to become a specific form of educational knowledge. Bernstein's (2000: 65) definition of curriculum change as "emerging out of a struggle between groups to make their bias (and focus) state policy and practice" is revealing and pertinent to the history of teaching Maltese literature. For example the way the Maltese literature syllabus was revised in circa 1995 to include a detailed structuralist approach to analysing a text clearly demonstrates an attempt to direct instruction in a particular text-bound way, even if the official discourse at that time and even later was all in favour of a child-centred pedagogy. Furthermore, "the bias and focus of this official discourse are expected to construct in teachers and students a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices" (Bernstein, 2000: 65). Subjects, by their very nature "set parameters for practice" (Goodson and Marsh, 1996: 3). The question of transmission of skills and transmission of values as being two discourses is problematised by Bernstein (2000: 32) and he comes out with the strong proposition that unlike what teachers are made to believe, they are actually one discourse. What skills are most valued in the teaching of Maltese literature is indicative of the values teachers and pupils assign to the text and the kind of reading that is used. "Official knowledge," a term used by Bernstein but which is also dear and conceptualised in



its many ramifications by Michael Apple (1993), constructs and construes what is pedagogically acceptable behaviour and output, and more importantly, how it is measured or defines how it is attained when set against critical standards or criteria of attainment.

By politicising the pedagogical discourse around subject formations and curricula, the veil of neutrality is immediately lifted from the struggle, resistance and challenge. The definition of a subject is not easy, and might remain open-ended since it is always in a state of flux. Therefore, for a conscious student-teacher, a starting point might be to recognise the debate, the positions, the interests of particular groups, and reflect on his/her ideological provenance.

A vantage starting point for better understanding one's subject is by trying to define it. In doing so, I knew I was opening Pandora's box, for the idea of a 'subject' "is an elusive and multifaceted phenomenon because it is defined, redefined and negotiated at a number of levels and in a number of arenas" (Goodson and Marsh, 1996: 1-2). This is even more so where literature is concerned. Even Terry Eagleton's (1983: 14) goliardic attempt to define literature ends up in the ironic statement: "literature does not exist in the sense that insects do," and with the relative concluding argument: "the value-judgements by which it is constituted are historically variable." Furthermore, Elaine Showalter (2003) seems to be undecided on the whole matter. At one point she is adamant: there is no need to define literature, for, quoting Barthes, 'what gets taught' in literature classrooms *is* literature, thus avoiding all together getting into the messy and many a times linguistically contrived arguments of what is and is not literature (Showalter, 2003: 21). But then, in her preface to the same book, she seems more convinced than not... "we can improve our students' lives and morale by sharing ideas about how to teach better, and improve our own lives and morale by thinking about why we want to teach literature in the first place" (Showalter, 2003: ix).

### 9.4.1 Student-teachers defining literature

To open a discussion on the embeddedness of the student-teachers' beliefs of what is literature, I proposed to first let them write their own definitions, and later discuss their definitions according to the emphasis they laid on one of Abraham's (1989) four pointed definition of critical discourse. Table 9.7 gathers some of the unanimous definitions given by my student-teacher's before a discussion on the boundaries and contours of the 'subject' literature.

**Table 9.7: Literature is...**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The life of the author viewed from an artistic lens.</li><li>▪ The result of a moment of celebration or exaltation or the opposite, a moment of great despair and grief.</li><li>▪ The personal emotions and experiences of an author transformed into words in a way that is not normally expected to be expressed in, for example a lot of figures of speech and poetic licence.</li><li>▪ Writing that transmits emotions.</li><li>▪ A collection of words that express emotions, experiences or simply a didactic message.</li><li>▪ An art that uses words as building blocks.</li><li>▪ Original writing because every author tackles themes revolving around human life from his/her perspective, which is different from others'.</li><li>▪ Different genres like prose and poetry, and very much different from everyday writing like an article in a magazine or newspaper.</li><li>▪ A different style to that of the daily newspapers.</li><li>▪ A text charged with style and written in a language different from everyday speech.</li><li>▪ A type of artistic writing that tries to impress the reader and transports him/her in an imaginary world.</li><li>▪ A text that embodies a kind of emotion or experiences that the author passed through, infused with a lot of imagination, fantasy, metaphors and style.</li></ul>
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At a first glance, student-teachers emphasise most the idea of style, a heightened use of everyday language, and then, as a second preference consider the relation of the text with the author's life as a source of 'genuine' literature. This emphasis on Russian Formalists' and New Critics' discourse mirrors their education. No wonder the dictionary of literary terminology written by Oliver Friggieri (1996: 377), who is also their main lecturer of literature's content with the Faculty of Arts, defines literature as "l-arti tal-kelma; is-sengħa li biha toħloq biċċa xogħol artistika magħmula mill-kliem imħaddem skond teknika tal-lingwa; il-prodott tekniku tat-tħaddim tal-kelma" [the art of word; the skill by which an artistic work is made from

words used according to a technique of language; the technical product of word use].

I find that there is a “crucial link” (Goodson and Marsh, 1996: 4) between subject knowledge and subject pedagogy, and assessment practices within a particular subject. Elaborating on how literature should be taught, Showalter (2003: 27-38) proposes three orientations:

- *subject-centred approach* where there is great emphasis on the transmission of subject content and related information, very often tending to suggest that there is only one ‘correct’ answer;
- *teacher-centred theories* focusing on what a teacher must do or be to serve as a model for future practice; and thirdly,
- *student-centred approaches* preferring a more dialectic approach to teaching by actively involving students and reflecting on the classroom processes to take full advantage of the learning experience.

Initially, student-teachers come from a subject-centred approach. However, as they move along the study-unit on teaching literature, they are invited to embrace a more student-centred orientation. This move kicks-off with an analysis of current beliefs, many of which are formed and informed by practices of subject taught at university. A transitory phase for some student-teachers can be ‘eclectic theory’ – “probably the most widespread theory of teaching literature is having no theory at all, and trying to make use of whatever will do the job” (Showalter, 2003: 37-38) – but for others, this medial stage, in a way similar to a bricoleur’s experience (*vide* Chapter 7; Kincheloe and Berry, 2004), can become the end of their journey. I do not worry too much if some, or even all student-teachers, end up practicing an eclectic approach, for when describing their classroom their theory will end up being student-centred just the same (Showalter, 2003: 38). For I fully concur with Marshall Gregory (2001: 75), that we cannot “assume that one method or another will solve all problems. [...] ...no one teaching method can meet all the demands of learning. [...] Concern for method should always be a concern for methods.”

The received ideas on subject knowledge need to be scrutinised as well to better understand ideas that are regarded or held as the ‘stable monolithic truths’ uncritically transmitted within the Faculty of Arts (University of Malta), seemingly glossing over the seam or avoiding altogether the cracks and crevices of this privileged position. The University’s conception of Maltese as being just a happy marriage of linguistics and literature, that percolates down to secondary and primary schools’ ideas of Maltese, is bluntly off the mark. In this context, I make mine Nick Peim’s (1993: 7) critique of English in England... Maltese “has saddled itself with ideas and practices that are very strictly limited and limiting.” And the bastions of the *status quo*, are not so much the classroom walls with the teachers as pawns, but rather the offices of 16+ examination boards that carry on perpetuating certain kind of practices, especially restrictive and outdated conceptions of text and textual reading practices, by preferring an outdated marking scheme and propagating a syllabus that does not really do justice to modern exigencies for Maltese. Maltese, albeit a small subject with a recent history, has its share of interesting debates and update of its functions and terrain are simmering even if kept at bay – what Goods and Marsh (1996: 13) call ‘internalization’ – by a strong centralised system of ghost syllabus writers and secretive curriculum revisers within the Education Division.

Since I asked student-teachers to write a short paragraph to define literature, what is interesting for me was that although their first sentence nearly always focused on the internal characteristics of the text (style, language, figures of speech, deviation etc.) their second and third sentences are more revealing, in the sense that then they focused on the effects of the literature on the reader, as shown in Table 9.8. The canonical, textbook, dictionary definition is given first, but probably due to their new awareness of the readers’ contribution, the effects of literature are included. Thus, I might conclude that they are focusing on the reader also, even if as a consequence of the first part of the definition, and most probably due to my insistence on interpretation as a governing act on all texts, including life.

**Table 9.8: The effects of literature...**

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Literature is a kind of writing that invites the reader not to remain passive, to enter in the world of self-reflection.</li><li>▪ The same text can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the reader's personal experiences.</li><li>▪ Literature might be interpreted in different ways.</li><li>▪ Since life's experiences are different from one individual to the other, therefore, the texts are going to be different from one author to the next; depending on how one expresses him/herself.</li><li>▪ Literature is subject to different readers' interpretations.</li><li>▪ I feel everyone can write literature since everyone has his/her particular dose of life's experiences.</li></ul> |
|--|

Their emphasis on the effects of literature on the reader is indicative of their greater awareness with the reader's role in the reading act. However, can this step forward be indicative of a bigger move forward in their becoming student-centred teachers of literature? One other piece of information related to what subject identity has to do with their idea of canon.

#### **9.4.2 Defending literature, or knowing better why teaching literature is important**

From the time Plato shunned poets from his Republic, literature has found all sorts of critics. School staffroom discussions are deemed to one day fall on why teach Maltese literature. Student-teachers, I feel, need to be trained on how to defend from such attacks. *Reflective Task 16* was appropriately titled *The (ir)relevance of literature*, where they had to answer Morgan's attack to literature, or more precisely, charges to fiction, in Aiden Chambers' (1978/1995: 9-10) *Breaktime*. His accusations, which can be considered as a synthesis of similar arguments, are the following: Literature as a form of narration is out of fashion; Plato's accusation: Literature is by definition, a lie; Literature makes "life appear neat and tidy"; Literature is a make-belief game and not life; and rather acerbically, Literature is "crap" (Chambers, 1978/1995: 9-10). The writing of those that defend literature is known as apologetic literature, and theirs was a response letter of kind. I figured it was befitting to end the study-unit (with the first group) with another letter, bringing full circle the genres of the different Reflective Tasks and Portfolio Artefacts. Table

9.9 groups under seven headings the main counter-arguments brought forward by student-teachers and a selection of their own words.

**Table 9.9: Counter arguments to the charge on literature**

Counter arguments	A selection of student-teachers' own words
Literature is an inspiration to other art forms	<p>"Literature is read by millions across the globe, and attracts the attention of film directors (even in Malta) who transform it into films." Luigi</p> <p>"Morgan, do you know from where film directors get their ideas? Literature! A book requires the readers' contribution to imagine the information in words and to fill in the gaps, while a director creates a visual representation that helps the viewer imagine more easily." Ilona</p>
The dubious quality of certain literature	<p>"Certainly there are works that are better than others, granted, but the reader has a supreme right to choose what to read." Luigi</p> <p>"I am convinced that pupils can discern the difference between a good quality piece of writing and mediocre one." Marika</p>
The visceral pleasure of reading	<p>"In the reading process, the reader has an important role to play, even if it is just an imaginary world he is entering in; this gives him pleasure that has no competition. Non-literary writing does not have the same effect on the reader." Luigi</p> <p>"Literature gives me great pleasure like no other art form, not even television nor cinema... nothing is like it! I look forward to reading it and discovering new experiences and feeling new sensations I never dreamed I could feel." Cleo</p>
Personal meaning and growth	<p>"As from when still very young, literature played an important role in my life..." Cleo</p> <p>"One cannot throw away part of him/herself; literature presents your past, your present and possibly, your future." Ilona</p> <p>"Literature presents situations, characters, perceptions, events and issues that civilise readers, and encourage them to be active citizens and keen observers of reality." Marika</p>
What's wrong with pure fantasy?	<p>"Life would be unbearable had there not been literature that is the gateway to fantasy." Cleo</p>
Cultural identity	<p>"Literature forms an essential part of the individual's cultural identity and helps in the psychological and academic development of the person." Marika</p> <p>"Literature reflects a <i>modus vivendi</i> of a whole community, and therefore it is not a lie [...] it can serve as a window on other cultures too. That is why it is imperative that pupils read texts from other cultures apart from their own." Belinda</p>
Literature and life	<p>"I suggest you read some more contemporary literature to start to understand that literature is reflecting a far from perfect life. Literature forms part of life." Cleo</p> <p>"Life itself is not logical or develops according to plans... such is literature. If literature imitates life, it should have no beginning or end, an impossible feat." Ilona</p> <p>"Literature presents a number of perspectives, some ingenious or unthinkable by many, and through empathy manages to view life from a different perspective." Ilona</p>

I selected one to three examples of the student-teachers' own words to illustrate their way of thinking. Student-teachers presented a variety of counter-arguments, and I cannot say that one was more important than the rest. They explored different arguments, and presented a number of pertinent examples from Maltese literature and some even drew on their knowledge of foreign literature. Few of them included a quotation by famous authors towards the end of the letter, as if saying, "if you don't believe me, read what this famous author had to say." What transpired reading the letters to Morgan, was a complete disregard of his position, and a barrage of experiences to prove him wrong.

#### **9.4.3 Reading interests as a mirror of canon formation among prospective teachers**

One salient feature of Maltese literature, like any other literature is the idea of canon. Originally it meant "the choice of books in our teaching institutions," that is the haunting, more pressing, question of "What shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read, this late in history?" (Bloom, 1993: 15) Since there is little time to read all that is published, even within a small literature like Maltese, one is faced with a choice. This decision is further complicated when one bears in mind that the time to read within language subjects in schools is always diminishing given the broadening of the curriculum; the debate on what could be considered as essential minimum requirement of literary competence is always strong even if at times behind closed quarters within cold corridors of language examination boards and syllabus planners; and finally, the hard guessing game of what could be relevant for future generations in view of adult functional needs within a literate open society.

I don't agree with Harold Bloom (1993: 17) when he writes: "We need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers." Such an undemocratic statement, goes against the grain of all I believe in and against teachers of literature's "common cause" and that when performed well, can become the true hallmark of their "professional work"

(Showalter, 2003: 24). While I conceded that Bloom's (1993: 17) major interest is higher education, however I strongly disagree with the assertion that "aesthetic value can be recognized or experienced, but it cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions" – for I believe actually this is every literature teacher's mission. At least at secondary level, each teacher of literature should help pupils to make contact with the aesthetic value of texts that, in turn, with his/her guidance become meaningful.

Drawing my arguments and conclusions on two different reflective tasks, there seems to be lack of consensus on one position. Some student-teachers have a clear idea about the matter; they concede that the definition of literature in general or at university is completely different from what might be considered suitable as literature to be read and taught at secondary school.

"I believe that the literature good for a classroom should be different from that read by everyone (adults). I reckon that good literature for the classroom is more effective when it matches the pupil's experiences or those that are to be experienced in the near future."

(Cleo, *Reflective Task 17: Towards a personal definition of literature*)

A completely different view is expressed by another student-teacher:

"I think there is no difference between the definition of literature in general and that for literature used in a secondary school, with one proviso: at secondary level the chosen literary themes need to fit or match pupils' age and interests. If one is hard-headed enough to pursue teaching off-putting themes, then pupils will lose all interest. I don't think there is anything wrong having negative aspects, so long as they are in balance with positive ones."

(Luigi, *Reflective Task 17: Towards a personal definition of literature*)

When it comes to selecting authors suitable for secondary school, they end mentioning current authors and texts, with some minor changes. This insight can be divided into two: what they consider as canonical authors or "imaginary canon," and secondly, what they consider as suitable for "pedagogical canons," what actually gets taught in classrooms or is considered a suitable form of reading within classroom or school boundaries (Gallagher, 2001). "The wider pedagogical canon is



made up of the most frequently taught texts, a list that is empirically verifiable” (Gallagher, 2001: 54). The three factors that influence a text being considered part of pedagogical canon are: accidental encounters; pragmatic needs and ethical commitments. “Better understanding the complex dynamics of pedagogical canons will provide new ways of thinking about the construction of our own classroom canons that move beyond simplistic appeals either to tradition or to innovation” (Gallagher, 2001: 54). Still, the process of canon formation while it “emerges by way of gradual and unofficial consensus,” remains “very loose-boundaried (sic), and subject to changes in its inclusions” and without any doubt, a “complex and disputed” formative process (Abrams, 1993: 20).

Interestingly enough, the student-teachers’ choice of literature suitable for secondary school pupils overrides aesthetic considerations. Some of the criteria mentioned by student-teachers as suitable literature for secondary students include: pupils’ interests; suitability of themes according to age; a healthy balance between positive and negative themes; a variety of themes that catch and steer pupils’ imagination; subjects and mode of expression that are not too abstract; pupils’ level of maturity; and pupils’ reading interests. Student-teachers pressed with an immediate choice opt for what they take to be in agreement with their pupils’ desires and interests.

Student-teachers had to apply what they learnt about canon, pedagogical canon, text selection and syllabus design, in a practical group work activity. To successfully complete this task, they had to: come up with a creative name for their literature syllabus; relate it to attainment targets for literary experience; identify aims for their topic; select a number of texts, one of which had to be a book they would recommend their pupils to buy; create teaching resources and develop a scheme of work spread over a few weeks to guide the implementation of the syllabus. From this small scale project, I was not just testing their content knowledge, but also how they were putting into practice their awareness of issues concerned with text selection, and finally come up with a feasible justification or defence for their choice. Table 9.10 takes a snap-shot of the topics chosen by the different groups and their relation to the attainment target’s focus for that particular level.

**Table 9.10: The distribution of syllabi according to academic year and relation to the focus of the attainment targets**

Relation to the focus of the attainment targets	Title 2003-2004	Title 2004-2005
<i>Level I: Themes</i>	Family life during the day and relationships with the extended family	Diversity: A rainbow without its colour blue! We all need each other to be who we are
<i>Level II: Author study</i>	Trevor Żahra: A children's author	Maria Grech Ganado: A contemporary female rebel-poet
<i>Level III: Genre</i>	From oral to written tradition: Maltese legends	A look at the historical novel in Maltese

The choice of topics for their literature syllabus already demonstrates that they did not venture far from what they learnt either at school or at university. The 'Family' theme is not at all original, and even in their description of treatment of the theme, they stuck with relationships within the traditional nuclear family and extended family. While like all themes 'Family' could have been tackled more adventurously, like touching upon new forms of families, and family representations from different cultures, I found the second theme to be a step in the right direction, with diversity being a generative theme, which, however, they did not exploit to the full. Trevor Żahra is the most famous Maltese children's author, has been writing for decades and certainly is the most read author during childhood and adolescence: in other words, a safe bet. Out of so many authors they resorted to the known and widely read. A little more adventurous were those that chose poet Maria Grech Ganado, who, while she is anthologised by major editors, is less known. Historical novel and legends are two genres that feature in past or current syllabi. What I find most illuminating though is their choice of books to be bought by pupils, as listed in Table 9.11 with their own reasons in the third column.

**Table 9.11: The topics with the suggested book and reasons for that choice**

Topic	Suggested books	Reasons given by student-teachers
Family life and relationships with extended family	<i>Żveljarin</i> [Alarm Clock] written by Trevor Żahra	A collection of humorous poems idea with Form 1 pupils. A variety of genres from the classical to the modern free form free verse style. Has a complimentary work-book.
Diversity: A rainbow without its colour blue	<i>Tużżana</i> [A Dozen] edited by Ġorg Mallia and Trevor Żahra	Reasonably priced; can be bought by all. A collection of twelve short stories from as many Maltese children's authors, and illustrated in black and white by twelve contemporary children's book illustrators.

Trevor Żahra: A children's author	<i>Tużżana</i> [A Dozen] edited by Ġorg Mallia and Trevor Żahra	A short story anthology of a dozen contemporary children's authors and as many illustrators, one of which is Trevor Żahra's.
Maria Grech Ganado: A contemporary female rebel	<i>Iżda Mhux Biss</i> [But Not Only] written by Maria Grech Ganado	A powerful poetry book, documenting emotions everyone feels from time to time. Reflects also the idea of a love that ends in separation. The few black line illustrations transmit an idea of solitude and vulnerability that compliment well the whole emotional experience of the book.
From oral to written tradition: Maltese legends	<i>L-Gharusa tal-Mosta</i> [A Bride from Mosta], rewritten by Paul Mizzi <i>Il-Madonna tal-Isperanza</i> [Holy Mary of Hope] rewritten by Paul Mizzi <i>L-Eremita ta' Wied il-Għasel</i> [The Hermit from Honey's Valley] rewritten by Paul Mizzi <i>It-Tfajla tal-Kastell Żammitellu</i> [The Girl of Żammitellu Castle] rewritten by Paul Mizzi	Four booklets with a retelling in simple enough Maltese of four traditional Maltese legends. Compared to other books, these booklets have a near large-print like setting, with etching like illustrations on each spread. The few new words used in each legend are explained at the back of the book. They are small books, therefore light to carry, and are saddle stitched.
A look at the historical novel in Maltese	<i>San Ġwann</i> [Saint John] written by Ġużè Galea	Ideal for secondary school students. It is not so long a novel and therefore the likelihood is that pupils will read the whole book. The book is divided into a number of short chapters – some of which no longer than a page – making it an easy read. The theme of the book is the Knights of Malta, and the fight between good and evil.

Perplexing is the fact that student-teachers, while having liberty, resorted to books well within the canon or pedagogical canon. The books mentioned in Table 9.11 were never specifically written to be school textbooks; they 'somehow' found their place in the pedagogical canon, because 'someone' saw a potential in them to teach literature at secondary school. This follows Peim's (1993: 74-75) conclusion on some texts in English curriculum in England, that there has been no debate on what texts are taught at secondary school; they sort of 'found their place' without proper consultation and worst of all, no one has ever tried to justify their presence on reading lists or syllabi.

While virtually unknown to non-Maltese readers, these books were and are used in non-State secondary schools, with the exception of *San Ġwann* which used to be a textbook in State secondary schools when I was a student, nearly over twenty years ago and *Iżda Mhux Biss* which as far as I know never made it on the list of any

syllabus. The other books – *Tużżana*, *Żveljarin* and the four legends – have all featured as textbooks, and thus form part of the Maltese pedagogical canon. Furthermore, *Tużżana* and *Żveljarin* were two books I used with my student-teachers in a prior study-unit on Maltese Children’s Literature. Therefore, even if nearly all student-teachers attended a state secondary school, they got to know about these two books. In their choice, the majority of student-teachers were replicating what others at one time or another had decided, without trying to experiment. This lack of faith in one’s judgement greatly impedes innovation in the pedagogical canon in Malta.

As a teacher trainer I am preoccupied with this state of affairs. When student-teachers and teachers are leaving this important pedagogical decision to others, they are refusing to exert their pedagogical authority in a crucial aspect of literature teaching. Consequently, the natural healthy process of teachers experimenting with different books with different audiences, and then sharing their valuable experience with others is short circuited, and instead others make all the choices.

## **9.5 Images of teachers of literature**

The fifth and final theme focuses on the images and characteristics of teachers of literature. Student-teachers, like many other people, have a special place for that teacher that made a significant difference in their life. Indeed, one major source of impact on student-teachers’ beliefs of a ‘good’ literature teacher is their image of that special teacher that left an indelible mark on them as a pupil. As Cecilia contends: “In my decision to become a teacher I believe that there were teachers that influenced my decision” (*Reflective Task 11: The influence of a literature teacher*). This image is a powerful source of meaning making that surface more as they progress in their initial teacher training course. In fact, one model of teaching literature puts great emphasis on the teacher’s charisma, competence (both content and pedagogical), talent, inventiveness and verve, what Showalter (2003: 32-35) calls “teacher-centred theories.” The first dimension to teacher-centred theories is the teacher as performer, “a one-man or one-woman show” (Showalter, 2003: 32).

A second facet to teacher-centred theories is teaching as a spiritual journey, where self-knowledge, trust in students, character integrity, tact in dealing with emotions, and acceptance of students' values, are the most powerful tools in a teacher's hands. This is one definition of such a teacher with the charismatic effects that s/he brings along to the classroom:

If the teacher exhibits an ethos of passion, commitment, deep interest, involvement, honesty, curiosity, excitement, and so on, then what students are moved to imitate is not the skill or the idea directly, but the passion, commitment, excitement, and interest that clearly vivifies the life of the teacher.

(Gregory, 2001: 77)

One version I touched upon of the spiritual dimension to teaching is Stephen Brookfield's (1990) "skilful teacher." This idealistic perspective of a teacher is perpetuated by films on teachers, like *Mona Lisa Smile* (Newell, 2003) and *Dead Poets Society* (Weir, 1989). Given the importance I ascribe to images of 'The Literature Teacher,' student-teachers were assigned a number of Reflective Tasks that tease out any experiences and images they might have of teachers of literature.

### **9.5.1 Student-teachers describing a teacher of literature**

Bearing in mind Showalter's (2003) distinction between a performer and a charismatic person, I can safely say that what attracts most if not all student-teachers towards a particular teacher is not so much his/her knowledge of the subject, as much as those other complementary skills and values that make a person unique and interesting to remember.

"The teacher that left her mark in my mind is without any doubt my third year secondary school Maltese teacher. She was a person that truly cared and loved her pupils. Maltese was always one of my favourite subjects, but this teacher increased the love I had and still have towards this subject. I always wanted to become like her. She was still young compared to my other teachers, and she knew her subject really well. During her lessons time used to fly, and we never got bored. It was with her aid that we learned to appreciate better literature, especially because she did not make us learn by heart poems we did in class. She used to understand us students. We used to talk to her about many issues, and when we used to have a problem, we used to confide in her, and she used to try to help us out. She used to

pass our recommendations to the school administration. She used to identify problems we used to have about the subject and explain them to us in a simple way. She used to organise very effective and interesting lessons, and we used to participate wholeheartedly. She used to accept all sorts of opinions, and never mocked us in front of the classroom. When she used to rebuke someone, she always did so in a gentle way. And when she praised someone, she did so judiciously, like when she showed to everyone my project on the book we were reading, it was one of those days when I felt important; she went so far as to ask me my permission to photocopy the project so she could use it as an exemplar with other students once I finish the scholastic year. She knew how to keep us active and interested in the lesson. We used to design charts with her on a theme we were covering and went so far as to allow us to work in groups. She was a jolly person and used to tell jokes from time to time. If I had to use an adjective to describe her, I would say she was highly organised, generous, enthusiastic, having a positive outlook, motivated and confident in the classroom. Without actually being aware at that time, with her we were learning more than we used to before.”

(James, *Reflective Task 11: The influence of a literature teacher*)

James’s description is typical of other descriptions by student-teachers of their favourite literature teacher. Her gentle and approachable character, the age factor, competence in her subject, and an array of other positive characteristics, contributed to a long lasting image. Her pedagogy was student-centred. The result: learning becomes a pleasurable experience.

Cecilia chose to reflect on a teacher that left a negative impact on her.

“He used to teach me English during my third year at secondary school. I used to fear this teacher from the moment he set foot in class. The fact that I used to fear this teacher contributed to my low mark in his subject. The literature lesson never was delivered in an interesting way. He was the sole reader of the poems. Then he used to explicate them for us, verse by verse. He did not care about our opinions. I forgot what play we were doing, but I still remember vividly, what happened as if it is happening to me today. He used to make sure that we read the play before coming to class, and insisted that we look-up in a dictionary each difficult word in the text and write it down in the margin next to it. I always used to do so rather diligently, but on that day I was not at all fortunate. He asked me to explain the word ‘hazard.’ I did not know the meaning of that word, and I was given a copy. I had to copy for four times a section from the play, and since he insisted that he wanted the copy on that day, I had to write a big chunk of it during the long break. I learnt the hard way the

meaning of ‘hazard.’ [...] Therefore, as a teacher I wish to work hard so that another incident like the one I suffered never repeats itself again. I can consider the fact that I don’t want to become like this teacher and most probably other teachers teaching me literature at secondary school, as my first personal commandment of teaching literature.”

(Cecilia, *Reflective Task 11: The influence of a literature teacher*)

### 9.5.2 The teacher of literature I want to become

Another source of images of teachers of literature is through projection, what one wants to become. Reading through all the student-teachers’ reflections on the kind of teachers they want to become, a number of characteristics consistently seem to crop up, and are presented in Table 9.12.

**Table 9.12: Characteristics of a teacher of literature that student-teachers want to emulate and embrace as their own**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Distinguish between two types of reading lessons: non-fiction and fiction; a distinction that corresponds to Rosenblatt’s efferent and aesthetic reading.</li> <li>▪ Listen to pupils’ opinions and responses.</li> <li>▪ Have active discussions that pupils can truly participate in.</li> <li>▪ Put pupils’ interests first before the teacher’s.</li> <li>▪ Develop a positive friendly attitude with my pupils.</li> <li>▪ Make literature lesson an enjoyable experience relevant to the pupils’ needs.</li> <li>▪ Foster autonomous learning and reading.</li> <li>▪ Using activities to bridge the text with the pupils’ experiences.</li> <li>▪ Always remain up to date with the latest Maltese literature publications, especially books for adolescent readers.</li> <li>▪ Let the imagination run wild when it comes to teaching methods to use in class, let the text inspire you.</li> <li>▪ Prepare a number of open-ended questions for discussion.</li> <li>▪ Avoid unnecessary use of literary terminology, especially with the lower forms.</li> <li>▪ Use a variety of resources to complement the lesson, according to the pupils’ age, interests and ability.</li> <li>▪ Encourage reading at home of selected texts.</li> <li>▪ Modulate one’s voice to impersonate different characters within a text.</li> <li>▪ Aim at a change in examination culture, moving towards an assessment for learning conceptualisation with greater importance assigned to the interaction between teaching and learning.</li> <li>▪ Pass the love of literature in all I do.</li> </ul>
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Reading the list in Table 9.12 clearly shows that student-teachers, in the middle of their academic year, are already describing a constructivist classroom, and moving away from aspects related to the traditional way of teaching literature, mainly due to a personal dissatisfaction with their own learning experience at secondary school. Some of the characteristics they identified to be avoided are: repeating the same lesson's sequence day in day out; believing that there is only one interpretation to a text; expecting their pupils to regurgitate what was presented during the lesson in notes, closed-exercises and examination questions; assigning close-ended comprehension-style questions and exercises; reading all of a text in class in a routine manner; emphasising the biography of an author; and introducing them to literary terminology as early as possible, and making them learn lists and definitions by heart.

### **9.5.3 Why become teachers of literature**

The reasons why one chooses one profession over another can be very different from one person to another. It has been contended (*vide* Ellis 2003; Goodwyn, 2002) that the main reason for selecting a profession is for the love of the subject, in this case: literature. This pattern, according to Goodwyn (2002: 66), has remained “reasonably consistent” for over 13 years, in England, after interviewing 700 candidates. However, my small cohort provided a number of other reasons, apart from the stated love for literature or reading.

#### **9.5.3.1 Love for children**

If love for the subject features quite frequently, there seems to be a strong contender to this first post, the love for children. “I always liked social contact, the human touch to things and relationships – that’s the reason why I detest work with a desk and computer in front of you for a whole day. And above all: children are the love of my life” (Samantha, *Reflective Task 10: Why did you want to become a teacher?*). Samantha concludes, “Since I was brought up to believe that a book is my best friend, I always had the desire to pass on to my students that same love, and who



knows, possibly convey that same love to my own children” (*Reflective Task 10: Why did you want to become a teacher?*).

### 9.5.3.2 A special teacher

That special teacher usually made student-teachers fall for the teaching profession. Anecdotes of special teachers are countless. Films such as *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995 – for a critical reading of the teacher represented in this film *vide* Peim, 2005b), *Mona Lisa Smile* (Newell, 2003), *Dead Poets Society* (Weir, 1989), *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) promote an ideal of teacher that succeeds within difficult contexts against many adversities, after creating a special rapport with his/her initially suspicious students. Teaching becomes possible since pupils start to accept their teacher’s quasi heroic image, coupled with his/her new methods – be it writing, drawing or reading literature – that are more attuned to the popular culture of their students’ background. Usually it was not just the subject, but the way this teacher taught the subject and the special care she took in the particular student.

“I had a young teacher that was the light of my eyes. She knew how to teach, patient, assign group work, give us brownie points, give us small presents, but above all she used to love us and take personal interest in us as young pupils, as if we were her children. During break time she would approach us to talk about our hobbies and I would show her my dolls. I used to show her my drawings, the ones I was shy to share with everyone else, and that is how our friendship grew stronger. I used to admire her a lot, and at home I started imitating her when playing with my dolls and soft-toys. I even went so far as to reproduce similar handouts to use in my simulated teaching sessions.”

(Suzanne, *Reflective Task 10: Why did you want to become a teacher?*)

Then, as time went by, Suzanne, started to realise that she “had a number of qualities consonant to those of a teacher: responsibility, patience to explain new things to others” (Suzanne, *Reflective Task 10: Why did you want to become a teacher?*).

### 9.5.3.3 Playing: Simulated teaching

One interesting case comes from Victoria, a student-teacher who never had anyone in her family as a teacher or related to education. Her choice seems to have roots in her early age when...

“Most of the time I used to play with dolls and my imagination ran wild: I would be the teacher and the dolls my students. I always wanted to be in a similar situation, that is teaching others within *my* classroom. [...] I always used to say to myself that if I passed exams, I would carry on studying Maltese. I had the desire that all I learnt and had still to learn, be passed on to those that were not yet aware of Maltese language’s beauty. I feel that I have to share with others what I know.”

(Victoria, *Reflective Task 12: Why did you want to become a teacher?*)

The idea that the classroom is my territory is very strong in Victoria, especially her emphasis on ‘my classroom.’ Those four walls give a sense of security not easily attained within other professions. Perhaps, actors feel the same feeling when they are on stage (*vide* Showalter, 2003: 32-34). Furthermore, success in examinations seems to lead Victoria to her choice which actually was a childhood desire.

### 9.5.3.4 A deliberate decision

Since, like Victoria, Kim did not have any relative employed as a teacher, her decision was a deliberate one, a sort of elimination process:

“I never had the guts to look at blood or stick the smell at hospitals, so out the window went becoming a doctor or a nurse. I did not particularly like a job related to money or as an architect either, since I am not good at mathematical calculations. Lawyers and barristers have higher status when compared to teachers, and the noble fight for a client was attractive as was the fight for justice, but not enough to make me change my mind. Those that used to ask me what I wanted to become when I get older, my immediate enthusiastic reply would be “A teacher!””

(Kim, *Reflective Task 10: Why did you want to become a teacher?*)

#### 9.5.3.5 Success in examinations

Success in examinations seems to be another motivator. Studying A-Level Maltese on her own, Marika obtained a grade D. Then she attended private lessons, where for the first time she realised that authors were making the same kind of question as she was at this stage of her life.

“Rather than reading texts as being just creative mode of expression and with a fatalistic aura around them, I started to look at them as an experience I was passing through and therefore I could empathise with them more, and understand their points of view even better. I was grabbing with a paradox: No teacher I ever had was capable of transmitting those same sentiments during his/her lesson! And then I started asking: Why had I to discover on my own how literature talks directly to the reader? Why do teachers, rather than bring us close to the texts, take us many a times in the opposite direction?”

(Marika, *Reflective Task 10: Why did you want to become a teacher?*)

Sitting for the following examination session, she felt as if she was not answering an examination question.

“It felt as if I was not doing an examination paper. It was a paper I liked working and answering, because I knew what I was writing, and every word came out from my heart. I found no problem remembering those details related to poems, since I remembered those that I could understand and relate to. Therefore it was easier to retain all this information, for this time they were my own emotions too, not just the poets’ feelings. This time round I got a ‘B.’ And the decision to become a Maltese teacher was taken irrespective of the results I obtained in other close at heart subjects. [...]

It is due and through Maltese literature that I initiated my personal growth. I would like my pupils to enjoy what I love, to undergo a personal change, like I did. As a teacher at secondary school I have the responsibility to bridge the authors’ experiences with the children’s experiences. If this ‘magic’ does not occur in my class, most probably it will never happen. If someone asks, why Maltese literature and not any other language, my simple answer would be, ‘Maltese, why not?!’”

(Marika, *Reflective Task 10: Why did you want to become a teacher?*)

#### 9.5.3.6 Emotional Intelligence

Self-awareness seems to be shared by other student-teachers. “The literature lesson did not mean a boring and depressing experience, but a precious time when I could

concretely reflect on different aspects of my own life, something I was not encouraged or able to do in other subjects” (Samantha, *Reflective Task 10: Why did you want to become a teacher?*). Samantha is convinced that literature is different from other subjects, and adds another valuable dimension to one’s personality. ‘Emotional intelligence’ (Goleman, 1996) has become one significant justification for literature lessons and it is clear that from classical times literature was considered as a spiritual educative experience (Gribble, 1983).

### **9.6 The literature teacher... metaphorically speaking**

One effective way of talking about a new kind of teacher is by drawing inferences with other professions or trades. The multi-task role of a teacher of literature can be described in relation to what other professions do. Metaphors may clarify student-teachers’ thoughts. As Fairclough (2001: 99-100) contends: “...any aspect of experience can be represented in terms of any number of metaphors, and it is the relationship between alternative metaphors that is of particular interest.” *Reflective Task 14: Metaphorical images of a teacher of literature* presents eight common professions or trades to choose from: the matchmaker or go-between; the general; the missionary; the model; the guardian; the psychologist; and the tourist guide. The student-teachers had to pick one, or suggest a different profession or trade, and explain the relationships and possibly some differences between the two. While this task was done orally as part of concluding the in-depth interview with the first group, I included it as a Reflective Task with the second cohort. What the chosen metaphor reveals may have implications for the person involved, as well as the wider debate, or discourse, from which it originated (MacLure 2003). “To study metaphor is to be confronted with hidden aspects of one’s own mind and one’s own culture” (Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 214). The creation and understanding of metaphors relies on “situates meanings” (Gee, 2005: 53-70), the shared meaning of context as perceived by a specific sociocultural group of people. The following list gathers the information obtained by the different professions when one considers the two cohorts together:

**Table 9.13: A distribution of professions and trades vis-à-vis teaching**

Profession/Trade	1	2	3	4	5	5	6	Comments
<i>Matchmaker</i>								6 all female student-teachers out of 19
<i>Model</i>								5 all female student-teachers out of 19
<i>Psychologist</i>								3 all female student-teachers out of 19
<i>Band conductor*</i>								1 male
<i>Mechanic*</i>								1 male
<i>Missionary</i>								1 female
<i>Shop vendor*</i>								1 female
<i>Tourist guide</i>								1 female
<i>Guardian</i>								No response
<i>General</i>								No response

\* A profession or trade not in the list but suggested by the student-teachers themselves.

Two student-teachers remarked that they did not choose the general since “he orders and pretends that no one contradicts his word” (Kim, *Reflective Task 10: Metaphorical images of a teacher of literature*) and “as the general trains his soldiers to win the war, and picks out a strategy that should lead to success – the battle ground is the classroom, in class the war is the exam, strategy is coaching for examinations, and the soldiers are the regimented students in class ... what a gross misinterpretation of what should happen in class! (Mia, *Reflective Task 10: Metaphorical images of a teacher of literature*). Interesting to read was the answer given to the missionary, from a student-teacher who is, amongst other qualities, a fervent Catholic, for “different metaphors have different ideological attachments” (Fairclough, 2001: 100):

“Similar to the missionary, teaching is a vocation, a decision made out of love for others, probably enacted in a hostile environment not of her choice, courageously facing unforeseen problems... [...] She is not afraid of challenges, is not forced to do anything except from the internal commitment to share with others what she believes in, works not out of thirst for monetary gains, everything else in her life becomes second to her mission. I am thinking of a missionary in the style of Mother Theresa, humble yet strong, with inner peace she could conquer the most robust criticisms and prejudices.  
(Julie, *Reflective Task 10: Metaphorical images of a teacher of literature*)

Table 9.14 presents the three most chosen professions, with a brief explanation and in the third column, the student-teachers' own words substantiating their choice.

**Table 9.14: The literature teacher is like...**

Profession and possible key	Student-teacher's own words substantiating their choice
<p>1. <i>The matchmaker</i></p> <p>The matchmaker helps two people who previously did not know each other get to know each other. Likewise, the teacher of literature acts as intermediary between the students and literary texts so that they may fall in love together and live happily ever after.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ "The idea of love immediately brings to mind the profession of a matchmaker or go-between. I am going to teach literature with the hope that students will love it too. However, I am aware that the contact should be direct, the third person has done his/her job once the to be spouses meet. Therefore, maybe I see my role a little bit wider than the matchmaker." Anne</li> <li>▪ "A matchmaker does not give up easily, so must a teacher of literature. Students might not particularly like a text, but with the intervention of the matchmaker-teacher, students might appreciate the positive sides of the text, it might not have been a love at first reading-sight, but they may feel attracted." Ella</li> </ul>
<p>2. <i>The model</i></p> <p>A model is a person who can be considered as an ideal example of perfect and unique beauty. In the same way, the teacher of literature can be considered as an ideal example to his/her students of a true reader of literature, that if they work hard enough can imitate and become one like him/her.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ "The teacher as model helps students love her beauty and they work hard to imitate her so as to become as beautiful as her." Priscilla</li> <li>▪ "The choice was not at all difficult for me: a model. Models above all are the most beautiful persons, with a perfect body, to which instinctively you are attracted. However, I picked a model not just for beauty but also in relation to the concept of 'role-model', a type of person we all should aspire to and emulate. Victoria</li> </ul>
<p>3. <i>The psychologist</i></p> <p>The psychologist tries to understand a person's unconscious through the text that is recounted by the patient. Similarly, the teacher of literature can (i) consider all authors as patients that recount their unconscious in their texts, (ii) uncover the deep feelings of his/her students through the myriad of interpretations that presented as a reaction to the first text.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ "The psychologist tries to predict what is going on in his patient's head. The teacher in a similar manner tries to understand what is going on in his pupils' heads." Mia</li> <li>▪ "Probably I am biased due to my second subject, Personal and Social Education, but I truly believe that a teacher is very much like a psychologist. The classroom dynamics and the emphasis on the individual response, the listening and feedback that are involved in classroom discussions, the care for emotions and feelings, all these make me believe that the psychologist is the best match to describe a teacher of literature job." Luigi</li> </ul>

The student-teachers' comments refine and at times reinterpret their sense of the role. Julie remarks, that while she picked a model as her choice, even if she had picked other professions or trades, they would "all be lacking when compared to the teaching profession" (Julie, *Reflective Task 10: Metaphorical images of a teacher of literature*). Along the same lines, Ella (*Reflective Task 10: Metaphorical images of a teacher of literature*) argues, "I find a match between a teacher and a matchmaker,

however, while they might have similar roles, their responsibilities are completely different.” Metaphors work on compromises, not exactitude of similarity.

### **9.7 Only connect...**

Having explored at length four distinct but related themes in the identity of a teacher of literature, ranging from one’s biography, to beliefs, conceptualising of the subject and finally powerful images of teachers of literature, in the next chapter I pass on to discuss teaching practice and issues related to assessment of the study-unit.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **Two perspectives:**

### **Teaching practice and assessment**

#### **10.1 Teaching practice and assessment of study-unit**

In this chapter I will document the experiences of four student-teachers on a six-week practicum, with special reference to their first attempts at a reader-response-based Maltese literature teaching at a secondary school. I will then critically present information in relation to assessment of the study-unit ‘The literary experience in the secondary school,’ both as a personal journey from summative evaluation to an assessment for learning modality, but especially student-teachers’ perspective of the particular mode of assessment.

#### **10.2 Teaching practice**

Every student-teachers’ baptism of fire takes place during teaching practice, which in Malta lasts around six weeks. The “quality of student teachers’ learning experiences in the field is a major concern for initial teacher education” (Tang, 2003: 483). I agree with Grossman’s (1990: 143) conclusion, that “while prospective teachers can learn much from their field experiences, they do not seem to develop new conceptions of teaching their subject matter from classroom experience alone.” In teacher training there will always be room for classroom practice as well as space for guided meaningful reflection during a focused tutorial with a lecturer.

This period may engender an identity crisis. They are not yet teachers and yet they are expected to act as such; they are based in schools and treated as full-time staff, but then they are expected to come to university for conferences and tutorials as



university students. Within the same day they can pass from being regarded as teachers and as students at university. As expressed by one student-teacher:

“During my last week of teaching practice I felt rather down and depressed; I became accustomed to the routines of the school and rhythm of classroom practice, and I had no desire to leave my co-operating teacher and fellow teachers who by then became my friends, and neither let go the students since I really developed a very positive rapport. On the other hand I miss my friends and peers at university.”

(Luigi, *Portfolio – Your relationship with the co-operating teacher*).

All student-teachers have to come to terms with the inherent tension of being inside/outside at the same time. Another tension is evidenced in Lily Allen’s (2009) words from her pop-single ‘The Fear,’ where the chorus reads:

I don’t know what’s right and what’s real anymore.  
I don’t know how I’m meant to feel anymore.  
When we think it will all become clear?  
’Cuz I’m being taken over by The Fear.

I am sure that student-teachers on teaching practice think as Allen does, that what is right becomes blurred; what they are living is too deep and touching that seems to be as if unreal, feelings are at a frenzy ending up not knowing how one should feel. ‘The Fear’ may be very real to them and, from my experience, this can be an intensely stressful period.

The data for this section regarding teaching practice comes mainly from the portfolio, details of which are given in Chapter 5. Their portfolio was divided into two broad sections: a compulsory component, or common core consisting of artefacts such as an abstract, description of their teaching context, a selection of positive practice, reflections and lesson evaluations; and section two, was a free-for-all section based on a self-selected theme so long that it was in one way or another related to literature. The portfolio process was further enhanced by a fortnightly conference at University. For most part of this section on teaching practice, I chose to illustrate my suppositions and conclusions by analysing in detail four student-teachers’ portfolios. The student-teachers were identified according to the following four criteria:

- to have at least one student-teacher from each cohort to reflect the quality of the portfolio experience which was slightly different from the first year to the next;

- to have a broad spectrum of teaching contexts: a Junior Lyceum [Grammar school], an Area Secondary [a sort of local comprehensive school], and a Church School [Elite grammar school]);
- to ascertain a gender mix – having at least one male out of the two student-teachers enrolled in the first cohort, which meant having at least one male out of the eighteen student-teachers participating in this research; and since in Malta we rarely have a co-education system at secondary level, a blend of schools for boys and girls; and
- their commitment towards the portfolio process and level of participation during conferences.

Due to their different characteristics, these four student-teachers' work can be considered as representative of the whole group experience. The analysis touches on a number of issues related to the experimentation with a reader-response approach to teaching Maltese literature.

### 10.2.1 Notice boards, mobiles, SMSs and emails

If the teaching practice file is the emblem of the practicum experience, I am positive that the second place goes to notice boards. Information about teaching practice is affixed on the teaching practice notice board.

“God only knows how many times I passed the teaching practice board to check if the secretary put on the list of schools we were going to be assigned in for teaching practice. I remember it was Saturday evening, just after mass, during which I prayed to be assigned in a not so difficult school and to be able to adapt to the new environment, that I received an SMS from a friend of mine saying that I was sent to a Girls' Area Secondary School, towards the south of the island. I started crying, not out of joy, but tears of pain and despair, for I had heard a lot of bad stories about students attending this school.”

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – The School I taught literature in for the first time*)

Luigi got to know about his school via email... “Joanne wrote in all excitement that we were going to teach in the same Girls' Junior Lyceum, towards the south” (Luigi, *Portfolio – The School I taught literature in for the first time*). While Luigi and Suzanne's schools have approximately the same catchment area, the quality and

cultural background (especially family background) is completely the opposite. On the other hand, Kim, who was brought up attending state schools, had the impression that her Church's School environment would be rather "rigid" (Kim, *Portfolio – The School I taught literature in for the first time*). Having taught for a short period of time, just six consecutive Wednesdays, as part of her School Experience, Allison felt a great relief after receiving an SMS from her friend announcing she was assigned to another Boys' Junior Lyceum, this at the middle of the island, "imagining that it was going to be a little bit easier than the previous year" (Allison, *Portfolio – The School I taught literature in for the first time*).

### **10.2.2 The four student-teachers' teaching context**

Kim soon found out that the "rigid" environment was completely different, for once she set foot in the school she immediately changed her mind: "a disciplined school, but at the same time calm, serene, impeccably clean, and full of love and care" (Kim, *Portfolio – The School I taught literature in for the first time*). Her co-operating teachers used to give a lot of importance to literature, with one particular teacher making an extra effort "so that pupils at her school develop a love for literature" (Kim, *Portfolio – The School I taught literature in for the first time*). To present literature vividly, the school was equipped with a number of resources, organised a number of extra-curricular activities like Language Day or Favourite Book Day, and amongst the most well received activities there were the use of puppets with characters from the novels or stories and school outings related to the texts they were reading in class. This goes to substantiate what Carter and Long (1991: 3) have rightly argued: "The test of the teacher's success in teaching literature is the extent to which students carry beyond the classroom an enjoyment and love for literature which is renewed as they continue to engage with literature throughout their lives." Furthermore, on their very first meeting with the proud co-operating teacher, Kim was shown a selection of students' work related to literature and taken around the classrooms which had a number of charts related to literature on display. Kim concludes: "The fact that the classroom walls were all covered with pupils' work makes the classroom feel lived, more positive and beautiful, a

celebration room of pupils' successes in learning literature" (*Portfolio – The School I taught literature in for the first time*). The co-operating teacher informed Kim that she had great leeway in textbook selection, with the school librarian stocking the latest publications in Maltese throughout the year, and that she shared her experiences and work with her colleagues, a functional example of a community of practitioners striving to excel for their pupils. Kim couldn't ask for more. She was going to work within a very receptive environment, within a school community that embraces most of the precepts and principles of progressive education.

But not all experiences are as positive as Kim's. A week before the school list was published, Suzanne had a conversation with an ex-student-teacher about her assigned school.

"I was shocked and scandalised to say the least with the stories she was telling me: girls that rebel and start dancing during the lesson; girls shouting at their teachers and head of school; drug addicts; tattoos and body piercing; underage girls supposedly at school already in the prostitution circles; girls who want to get pregnant and leave school and live on social service. In just a few words: girls coming from a cultural environment completely different from mine.

I was brought up in a good family, with sound values, where I respected those older than myself, with a strong sense of inner discipline that guides all my actions, within a family where love and traditional values come first."

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – The School I taught literature in for the first time*)

Luigi was very positive knowing he was going to teach at a Girls' Junior Lyceum. He visited the school library, only to notice the poor quantity and quality of the Melitensia section. On the other hand, pupils reading for Maltese were encouraged to carry out research on various topics related to the Maltese language. He was impressed with the dedication shown by Maltese language teachers in organising the Maltese Day, an event aimed at promoting everything Maltese, culture and literature, to which even parents were invited.

Allison was impressed with the quiet atmosphere conducive to concentration and learning. From all the activities related to Maltese, during the six weeks, she

remembered mostly an author's visit to the school. The pupils were reading *Meta Jaqa' ċ-Ċpar* [When Mist Falls], and the Maltese teachers invited Trevor Żahra to deliver a talk to the Form 1 pupils. On the down side, Allison noticed that the classrooms were rather bare, with no charts or presentations of students' work. Then, towards the end of the six weeks, the co-operating teacher set up two boards with charts and information on Maltese folklore with special reference on Rites of Passage.

Part of the student-teacher's success rests in the match or mismatch between the school's and pupils' culture and the student-teacher's particular socio-cultural background and personality, amongst other aspects, or as Tang (2003: 495) put it, "different student teaching contexts offer varied opportunities of growth for student teachers."

### **10.2.3 The influence of their co-operating teacher**

Coupled with the school environment and ethos, one influential factor during teaching practice is the co-operating teacher. Suzanne and Kim were fortunate enough to be attached to newly qualified teachers, themselves knowledgeable about a reader-response approach to literature and keen experimenters with a certain degree of success. They were interested in the latest methods that the student-teachers heard about at University or from time to time read in a publication, be it a book or website, on the subject. From the start they were very supportive. For example, after a difficult lesson, Suzanne, "discussed the issues with the co-operating teacher, and she encouraged me to carry on with the good stuff I was trying to do, and suggested that I should interpret this 'mini-failure' (her words) as an opportunity to build a stronger character, believe more in myself and acknowledge my talents" (Suzanne, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*). Based on this evidence, these two examples seem to validate Borko and Mayfield's (1995) finding, that is, where co-operating teachers believe in their educative role, they tend to organise longer meetings and provide valuable feedback.

Luigi and Allison were assigned to teachers with little or possibly no knowledge of a response-based approach to teaching literature. They expected the student-teachers to teach according to ‘their’ method, as if only that existed.

Notwithstanding personal limitations, the co-operating teacher remains a valuable figure during teaching practice. Allison describes the co-operating teacher’s “moral support” as “necessary and crucial” since previously he already had valuable experience with other student-teachers (Allison, *Portfolio – Your relationship with the co-operating teacher*). On more than one occasion, she asked for his opinion on a previously planned lesson, especially the introduction, activities and handouts with exercises. When she did so, “I used to feel more secure about my preparation” (Allison, *Portfolio – Your relationship with the co-operating teacher*).

Luigi’s relationship with the co-operating teacher matured with time. He could notice that keeping regular contact with the co-operating teacher gave him the security he needed. Luigi used to discuss with his co-operating teacher nearly all his literature lessons, at times asking for methodological help. In fact, I believe that Luigi held a narrow vision of pedagogical content knowledge. His insistence on tips and hints suggests that he was still grappling with the idea of carefully selecting a technique out of a number of possibilities, contextualising the chosen method to the students’ needs, weighing a number of factors and keeping in mind a number of principles. He was still, even at the end, believing that pedagogy means formula methods or things that work, thus, in my opinion, increasing his insecurities by depending always on the co-operating teacher’s advice. Thus Luigi never got to feel secure about his decisions, and till the end found difficulty in appreciating a wider perspective of methodological insights from reader-response. It stands to the co-operating teacher’s credit that Luigi “identified clearly the strengths and weaknesses” (Luigi, *Portfolio – Your relationship with the co-operating teacher*).

Thus, in their relationship with the co-operating teacher, the student-teachers evidenced a sense of adaptability and found a *modus vivendi* resonant with their personal traits. Luigi is the dependent type, constantly seeking direction, and is

willing to accommodate, albeit to base all his practice, according to the co-operating teacher's dictate. Allison is dependent on her co-operating teacher, but at least she puts forward her ideas first; she still needs the teacher's approval, but at least they are her plans. Kim befriends her co-operating teacher who, in turn, is willing to share all her ideas, resources and experiences. It is a friendship among equals, since both respect each other's views, always willing to learn from each other. Suzanne is the most independent of the four, a keen observer, listener and learner, but at the same time is confident enough in her own 'experimental' ways. She is not discouraged by other teachers' negative experiences and is willing to give it a try even if she is aware she might fail. Her prime motor is her dedication to her forty-seven students, on whose reactions she seems to depend more than those of the co-operating teacher; indeed, her reflection on her students is one of the longest she wrote for her portfolio, identifying a series of critical incidents that she experienced during teaching practice. However, she is also willing to work hand-in-hand with the co-operating teacher.

#### **10.2.4 A work in progress in a reader-response approach to teaching literature**

The student-teachers' daily progress and events were recorded in their lesson evaluations, and with the first cohort, in the Reflective Diary too. In their diary or lesson evaluations they listed all their experiences with a reader-response approach to teaching literature, as promulgated at University during my study-unit. Reading through the different evaluations and diary entries, it becomes evident that student-teachers initially (and for some it means for the whole duration of teaching practice) are interested in the nuts and bolts of things. They are more keen on discipline and relationship with pupils rather than issues related to the reading act. This agrees with what Moore (2003: 37-38) found on preservice teachers whilst on teaching practice – "Attention to procedural or management issues emerged as a defining characteristic" – with more than 95% of his cohort identifying it as their prime concern. For example, Luigi, in his second week wrote: "The only thing I am worried about is that I waste too much time to settle all my students to commence

the lesson” (Luigi, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*). More specifically Suzanne (*Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*), reflected on her first lesson thus:

“This was the worst lesson I ever did. I had a big problem with my class discipline. I could not control four students and they ruined the whole lesson. They were arrogant, and started undermining my authority with jokes and laughing at my face rather hysterically. One student turned her chair to face the opposite side where I was, and carried on eating her lolly-pop even if I said to her to throw it away. I lost all patience and started to halt the lesson to stop them from being rude. I lost my concentration and instead of writing legibly, my handwriting was illegible even to me. I was not sure of what I was saying. [...] The rest of the class tried to join in the carnival, for they sensed that I was losing control. The students’ behaviour broke all my self-confidence, and I started seriously to think that I was not cut out for the teaching profession.”

Maybe not all first encounters are like Suzanne’s, but it is an eye opener for an examiner or tutor to get an idea of the emotional turbulence and great stress certain student-teachers endure away from university having to teach for the first time for six weeks. They are planning a number of activities – catchy introductions; open-ended questions to lead the various discussions; trying to identify creative ways of reading a text; writing tasks in inventive non-standard ways; and follow-up exercises supposedly to be done at home – all of which are performed for the first time. Therefore, for the first few weeks they are concerned with the relative success of each segment of the lesson.

On the other hand, one initial failure or a number of failures, so long as identified, reflected upon, shared with someone like a colleague, co-operating teacher, friend or examiner, can indeed be a learning experience. Suzanne, just a few lessons and days later, changed her attitude, and although still focusing on the nuts and bolts, she was more proactive and positive in her approach, focusing away from discipline issues. There are those student-teachers that seem to learn rather quickly from experience. Time for many is a great teacher, especially when they have reflective skills sharpened to learn on their own; at least this was Hascher, Cocard and Moser’s findings (2004), as well as Aschroft and Griffiths (1989). These are a number of examples taken from just one lesson evaluation...



“In my opinion the flashcards were the right resource for the brainstorming activity in the introduction of the lesson on the story. I know that the brainstorming activity with this class works well, for they can come up with all sorts of responses to work on later on...”

“The selected reading read and recorded by my brother was an excellent idea because it helped the students to enter into the atmosphere of the story.”

“The questions I prepared were interesting and motivated the students to participate in the discussion that in my opinion was balanced, and I enjoyed it too.”

“The students did not find the diary writing activity difficult. It is true that there were those that did not start writing immediately when I said so, but on the whole it worked well, especially my feedback and further suggestions as they were working.”

“Students suggested a number of possible endings to the story, and I was amazed with their ideas. Their endings reflect their character: those that are more pessimistic suggested a negative ending, while those that are more positive recommended a more positive ending.”

“On a more negative note, I prepared too many questions for the discussion in relation to the time I had to actually discuss the text and theme. I felt that I was milking a dead cow, for the discussion was unnecessarily prolonged and students were even bored. It would have been much better to just have two powerful questions, and leave it at that.”

“I should have given them more time to write their diary page. With more time, their writing would greatly improve. I felt I was not going to have enough time for the conclusion and asked to hurry up. However, next time, conclusions do not have to be so long and dragging.”

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*)

The length, level of detail and attention to particular aspects of a lesson is not at all homogeneous. Reflective writing can reach different levels by different students (*vide* Chapter 4). For example Luigi and Allison always seem to grapple with the basics of writing reflectively. They are rather superficial in their selection of topics, and cannot seem to identify the aspects of their teaching that really warrant attention. They often blame others, usually the school and pupils, for their misgivings and faults. For example, in the fifth week, Luigi in his ‘What worked less well’ wrote only:

“Like I already noted in previous lesson evaluations, I find few aspects that went not as well as I had planned. I repeat, that the only thing that went wrong was the use of two pictures that actually were not that

clear, and I couldn't do anything about them since at school they don't have internet connection and a colour printer! Next time I need better quality pictures.

I need to check that during the lesson conclusion I revise the texts' main points, even though during this lesson it wasn't my fault at all that I did not finish to do so by the end of the lesson; the lesson had to be halted three times since different people knocked at the door three times, with people having to talk to pupils about this and that all the time."

(Luigi, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*)

Luigi washes his hands from the responsibility to plan in advance and review all resources prior to the particular lesson, and instead blames the school for not being properly equipped. On another occasion, he blames the lesson interruptions, while actually he failed to think on how to modify his plans there and then (reflection-in action) to finish on time without unnecessarily leaving out the conclusion. In his last literature lesson evaluation he wrote: "When I look back and revise what went less according to expectations, I hardly find anything that did not function or was not received well" (Luigi, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*), then carrying on how the pictures he used could have been of a better size... after six weeks he is still ignoring other important features. In effect, when the examiner visited Luigi, he listed a number of important aspects that were missing or not functioning well. Therefore, Luigi was guided to focus on other aspects but he seems to ignore all suggestions to consider other aspects/competencies. On the positive side, Luigi seems to reflect in action rather quickly: "When I realised that the students at the back were not seeing the pictures, I made them go round the class rather than sticking them to the board at the front" (Luigi, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*). The same quick modification and alertness could have saved him not being able to finish the lesson in time and according to plan.

Looking at all the lesson evaluations, it seems evident that Schön's reflection-on-action (*vide* Chapter 4) seems to be the rule. For example, Suzanne is continuously reflecting on what went wrong, and is rather harsh on herself for not anticipating the result during her planning stage:

"Since these students are a little bit more advanced than the rest, next time I will not make the same step of verse by verse analysis of the

poem. Today it was a monotonous and boring step, and I am now confident they can participate in something more engaging, like a drawing, a day in the diary of a poet, write a monologue... But sometimes it is not just a question of coming up with a bright idea, because you think it is excellent, and then things crop up during the lesson, and you start to realise that it wasn't as excellent as initially thought."

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*)

This feature of reflection is inbuilt in the three category template used by all student-teachers: What went well? What went less well than expected? Targets for improvement or what I could do better for next time? As already remarked, the length and depth of the reflections vary greatly from one student to the next.

While this was their first attempt at a reader-response approach to teaching literature, from the lesson evaluations it comes out rather clear that they were trying their best to implement in their classrooms this kind of teaching. I find that rather courageous for they were making a big leap of faith in promoting this kind of teaching approach. They were taking my word for it, and possibly believing some of the main pedagogues. Furthermore, they had to mentally visualise what their classes would look like if they employed, as they did, a reader-response approach to teaching literature. And more daring than that, to envision their pupils' reactions to not so common methods. Considering all these premises, they set on the journey of becoming reader-response teachers of literature.

One key feature that emerged is their emphasis on experimentation with 'new' imaginative approaches and activities. They knew that the more interactive their lessons the more probable they are in eliciting a response, a response that they can later build on and explore further. Their efforts can be said to have been on two interrelated fronts: different activities that distance themselves from the traditional approach to teaching literature (Table 10.1), and a selection of resources to animate the response-based classroom (Table 10.2). I selected their own words where they describe their reactions or pupils' positive reactions to an activity or resource.

**Table 10.1: A selection of activities conducive to a reader-response approach to teaching literature**

Techniques	Student-teachers' own words
<i>Role-plays</i>	"The introduction of the lesson with a role-play was an effective one with both the two participating students and myself, and the remaining students listening attentively to the play. Through the role-play the bull-fighting theme of the selected text was more than evident to the whole class." Luigi
<i>Close exercises</i>	"An exercise that really worked was handing out a copy of the text with some missing words, and they had to fill with suitable ones according to the context. This helped them to focus on the very basic stuff of literature." Kim
<i>Fantasy trip</i>	"As part of the introduction I took my pupils on a fantasy trip, and it was easier for them to visualise the scenery in the poem." Allison
<i>Background music</i>	"During reading the text I used background music to relax the students and help them listen more attentively to the text." Allison
<i>End prediction</i>	"I involved the students as much as I could: I asked them to come out and write on the board, encouraged them to read the text in front of their class, discuss parts of the text without losing control or having to shout, they truly were the centre of my attention and the centre of the lesson." Kim "I left them all opportunity to work in groups on how the story ends... for predicting or anticipating the ending is an essential part of becoming a competent reader." Kim "Even the reading of the text was a success, with everyone listening quietly and eagerly waiting the end of the story." Luigi
<i>Note writing in groups</i>	"I reckon that the note writing in groups worked rather well today." Suzanne

**Table 10.2: A selection of resources used in the implantation of a reader-response approach to literature**

Resources	Student-teachers' own words
<i>Video</i>	"I am sure that the factor that stirred most interest was those few minutes from the film 'About a Boy.' They told me they never saw a video or parts of it during a Maltese lesson. The short piece related to bull-fighting, and introduced the lesson's topic really effectively." Suzanne
<i>An ad hoc exercise booklet</i>	"The students were impressed with the small booklet with the story and exercises I prepared for them with ribbons, bows and colourful paper. They tried to write better than usual, more of them preferring to write in pencil and copy everything at home when they had more time." Suzanne
<i>Jigsaw puzzle</i>	"The jigsaw puzzle in the introduction really worked well, and the two groups entered into a competition to finish first. It wasn't an easy task, but with staunch collaboration, communication and negotiation they reached to the most important part, that the old man was standing alone. This helped them understand better the poem." Suzanne
<i>Pictures</i>	"I showed the students a picture of a lonely man and asked them to describe what they are seeing and how does he feel, in order to help them empathise better with the main character of the novel." Kim
<i>Flashcards</i>	"In my opinion, the flashcards are great for introducing a brainstorming session to relate to the story. I am confident to carry out such a task with this class because in one way or another the students immediately give their response." Suzanne
<i>Bookmarks</i>	"I gave the students a piece of cardboard the size of a bookmark. They were asked to write a slogan about youth and on the backside a slogan on old age. They loved drawing a picture to compliment their words." Kim

<i>Changing the venue of the lesson</i>	“Since today only a small number of students attended school, I wanted to go against the norm and delivered a successful lesson in the school’s courtyard. They were enthusiastic to go out of the classroom for a breath of fresh air and enjoy the sun. The major theme of today’s lesson was nature, and the trees, plants and flowers were so befitting. By the end of the lesson they had to sow a seedling in a plastic planter, and one of them said, ‘Miss, you don’t have to buy us all this stuff.’ I felt so proud, since I felt and knew that it was a sign that they were noticing that I am different from other teachers... that I care for them.” Suzanne
<i>Reading a text differently</i>	“The text read by a male actor really moved the students. They really got into the atmosphere of the whole text, and one asked if we could listen to the story once more.” Suzanne “I used reading in a circle for the first time, and it worked. I broke off with the monotony of the standard class layout, and pupils that usually shy back from reading in class, today felt confident enough to try to read.” Suzanne

### 10.2.5 Difficulties in implementing response-based literature lessons during teaching practice

The journey towards a response-based literature classroom was not without its difficulties. Student-teachers reported in the lesson evaluations a number of incidents that evidenced either one of the following three main reasons:

- pupils’ lack of training in certain methods and techniques, resulting in over excitement or pure resistance thus alienating them from the real aim of the lesson – Table 10.3;
- poor implementation techniques from the student-teacher’s side, mainly in over eagerness to try something new or lack of experience in handling certain situations – Table 10.4; and
- pure chance, like when disruptive pupils are absent, and both student-teacher and remaining pupils are more confident in their practice in class:

“Today’s success can be attributed to the fact that students that usually interrupt the lesson with useless questions and jokes, today they stayed at home. The classroom had a completely different atmosphere to it. Girls that usually remain silent in fear that they would be bullied, today really participated and engaged in the discussion.” (Suzanne, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*)

**Table 10.3: Reasons related to pupils' lack of experience with a reader-response approach to teaching literature**

	Reason	Description of event in the student-teacher's own words
<i>Pupils' lack of domestication with a reader-response approach</i>	Over excitement	"Next time I will try to record the text rather than always having to listen to me do the first reading. It would be a change for the better... the students were already so enthusiastic about it when I told them my plans that they did not let me finish my lesson in an adequate manner." Luigi
	Classroom management	"The students did not realise that the discussion was over, and some of them carried on talking, thus hindering the smooth development of the lesson." Kim "Students tend to waste a lot of time to arrive in class on time; occasionally eight to ten minutes are wasted till everyone arrives." Luigi
	Nostalgia of the traditional method	"Some Form 1 students still carry on asking questions on rhyme and meter, and the difference between a traditional and a modern poem. I had to explain that those points will be better dealt with and explained in the years to come." Kim "Some students wanted to take out the book and fill in the poets' words... it was hard to convince them that their words were important at this stage of the lesson." Kim
	Silent-reading	"When my students perform silent reading they do not know what they are doing right or wrong, and therefore opt not to read at all. They find SSR rather pointless. Even though they know that they are not such good readers, they prefer to have an audience and a teacher that corrects their intonation, or suggests how they should read a difficult long word." Suzanne "My students are not accustomed to silent reading, I thought it was going to be an automatic activity, but many of them just stared at me for the duration of the activity." Kim

**Table 10.4: Reasons related to student-teachers' lack of experience with a response based classroom**

<i>Poor implementation techniques</i>	Time management	<p>"I did not make the necessary link between the introduction and the first activity. Moreover, I did not explain in enough detail the writing exercise, and did not plan enough time to complete the task in class." Kim</p> <p>"When I have a long poem, it is better if I divide it in at least two parts corresponding to two lessons." Kim</p> <p>"Next time I will keep the lesson plan right in front of me, so if I either hurry a bit or slow the lesson, or forget altogether a step, I will notice immediately." Kim</p> <p>"Students finished their class work and homework within minutes. I still have to gauge the type of exercise with their abilities. One other suggestion would be to have supplementary work for those that like to work hard and fast." Kim</p> <p>"I tried too much to squeeze too many activities – class discussion and group work – in thirty-five minutes." Kim</p>
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	<p>Uncertainties on what a reader-response approach entails</p> <p>“I feel that in today’s lesson I was uncertain on the emphasis I had to give to the different rhetorical figures. I forgot to mention some of them, and the ones I picked, I did so only minimally and marginally. Actually I don’t know what was learnt.” Suzanne</p> <p>“I made a mistake in searching for a critical comment on this poem before the lesson, and since it struck me, I tried everything I could to pass it over to the students. Now I realise that that note was not that important to them. Ideally I should have left the students to come up with their own interpretation, but I was pressed for time and I knew that the poem was rather remote from their experience and difficult. Not everything that struck me, needs to attract my students’ attention, or mean that I have to present it to them.” Suzanne</p> <p>“I need to better plan my questions. Really difficult, open-ended questions like, ‘What does this poem mean to you?’ sound rather bombastic in my classroom and are rather vague. They need to lead the students from the concrete to the abstract, and be tailor-made to their abilities.” Suzanne</p> <p>“One technique that I did not develop well was a character map on the board. I could have better planned the character name layout on the board, and then ask them to copy it in their file as part of their lesson note.” Allison</p>
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Student-teachers can be seen becoming more conscious that their efforts are not always rewarded in classrooms. They evidence greater caution when introducing a new technique or method of teaching.

“In class I need to ‘struggle’ to elicit their response. They are not accustomed to working in groups. I want to be their teacher who helps them develop their response, and build a bridge between their lives and the texts we read. But I know it is going to be an uphill journey!”

(Allison, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*)

However, with time their efforts may be repaid.

“Unlike the previous items which were to be answered with a true or false, I left the last question open-ended. They were a little bit baffled, but I wanted to show them that a poem can have more than one meaning.”

(Suzanne *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*)

### 10.2.6 Experience, response and interpretation

One critical feature of a constructivist classroom or a response-based classroom is the role of experience. I hammered into my student-teachers the need to start from

the known and experienced, develop an argument or discussion based on pupils' experiences and try to bridge the text to the pupils' experience. So two related key terms within the response-based classroom, interpretation and response, have been emphasised *ad nauseam*. But, from the following comments in Table 10.5, it pays to stress the prime role of experience, interpretation and response within the reading act, for they become a sort of mantra for them.

**Table 10.5: The role of experience, interpretation and response in the reading/interpretation act**

Statements about experience	Statements about interpretation and response
<p>"Today's lesson was one of the best lessons ever. I felt good preparing it since I liked the selected text and I immediately noticed that it reflected current pupils' lives and dreams." Luigi</p> <p>"I wanted them to experience the poems rather than me explaining to them verse by verse. I kicked off the lesson by relating the text to their experiences." Kim</p> <p>"My aim was to help students identify, describe and empathise with the main characters of the novel." Kim</p>	<p>"It is only when the reader gives his/her own personal response to the text, that that text becomes literature." Suzanne</p> <p>"During the whole lesson I tried my best not to impose my opinion or interpretation on my students. I guided them through carefully planned questions to explore the text, and formulate a personal opinion about the text." Kim</p> <p>"I feel that it is important to have some time to reflect on one's own, before sharing with others ones' response." Kim</p> <p>"When the students were sharing their response with their peers, in groups and later on as a class, they realised that different students had different opinions and reactions about the texts." Kim</p>

Successes are not that difficult to come by either. Knowing that the pupils are actually learning something new, in an innovative way and with possibly a more lasting effect, brings pride and satisfaction:

"Choral reading really worked today with class 3.2. They seemed to enjoy waiting for their turn and read/shout their verse. They will not forget it for sure."

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*)

"It was of great satisfaction today to be asked in class by Jacqueline to read in class. Usually she does not participate during the lessons, but today, following the class discussion on how to write a poem, she was keen enough and wanted to read to the class the short story 'inspiration'."

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – Lesson evaluation*)



### **10.2.7 Models of best practice in teaching according to a reader-response approach**

A section of the student-teachers' common core of their portfolio dealt specifically with models of good practice, be it: resources, a model lesson with a set of activities, a quality reading in class, arriving at an interpretation, or anything they felt they excelled in. Reading through the examples, one gets the idea of an eager and fervent experimentation. Their criteria seem to have been mainly to offer the experience of a meaningful and deep engagement with the text at hand, facilitated by good quality resources, producing in some cases a lasting sense of self-satisfaction. The following are some examples.

#### **10.2.7.1 Best lesson**

Suzanne, reflecting on her best lesson related to Form 1 class novel, rather than facing the computer screen for inspiration, plunges herself in methodology books suggested for this study-unit, Collie and Slater's *Literature in the Language Classroom*, and Duff's *Literature*. In her own words, "the moment of planning a literature lesson was demystified when I started to keep as companions the suggested reference books and reading pack... from then on, planning a literature lesson was not an endless race to think of something highly original and preferably effective, but rather two complementary processes: a joyful exploration and acknowledgement of what others have done before, and a longer but at the same time rewarding process of adaption to my needs" (Julie, *Portfolio – My best literature lesson*). 'What would happen next?!' was Suzanne's best lesson title, and as suggested was based on the principle of 'Anticipating and retrospecting' by Benton and Fox (1985: 14). The pedagogical principle that inspired this lesson is "the continuous series of short- and long-term predictions and a complementary series of short- and long-term retrospections" (Benton and Fox, 1985: 14). On the other hand, the critical principle that this lesson is based on is quite a simple one: as readers "we engage in a range of predictive activities including thinking through particular problems 'in advance', extrapolating, hypothesizing, speculating and guessing," for indeed "children's reading, particularly, is characterized by a sense of

anticipation” (Benton and Fox, 1985: 14). Capitalising on this instinct, Suzanne, rightly planned the following lesson:

“As I entered the classroom I could notice that the children, even if in the afternoon, had an expression of enthusiasm. They got used to that something ‘new’ each time we meet, and their eagerness motivates me further. I knew that the lesson’s activity was recommended by two pedagogues I admire, and that was in a sense a guarantee of success... had I applied well their ideas. My only preoccupation was if I had planned too many activities, two, for this lesson. I introduced the lesson by asking them if they had ever done something risky; the children in the novel passed through the fog without knowing what would happen... a risky thing not knowing if they would ever return home or where they were heading. I encouraged the students to write a note to their parents informing them what they were going to do, exactly like the children in the novel did before entering into the fog. I asked them to anticipate what their parents would do once they read their note. Some suggested that they would go mad, others said they would go to the police, and others suggested they would run like wild trying to find them. The whole experience was realistic and electrifying. Then I read a selection from Chapter 6, where one finds the description of the passage through the fog of the main characters. After that, I distributed a simple questionnaire as an exercise where they had to fill in what they would take with them on this scary journey. Then I read the part where they were still in the fog, and then I stopped. Next I asked them two things: anticipate where the main characters would be led from the fog and if they would have joined the children in the novel in their adventure. They were very imaginative and creative in their answers. I felt really satisfied after the lesson for the prediction really worked well, in a sense it was they who did the lesson, I acted as a guide... Had the examiner observed this lesson, I have no doubt that s/he would have been impressed too.”

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – My best literature lesson*)

#### **10.2.7.2 My best resource**

The success of a response-based classroom rests in the variety of resources. The student-teachers recognised this principle of effective teaching early on during their teaching practice. Having to produce so many resources per week, was a taxing endeavour, not without its rewards. One Reflective Task as part of their portfolio was to select one to three best resources and explain why they considered them their best.

“It was a problem having to select the best resource. I find it difficult to choose, and this was one of the difficulties during teaching practice. Sometimes it takes me long to decide on something, since I would like to choose the best possible option, and it takes me ages and time flies at a time when every minute is precious. One of the things I learnt during this teaching practice was that one needs to decide on so many things without having the necessary time to do so.”

(Allison, *Portfolio – My best literature related resource*)

Rather than its quality *per se*, the result that the selected resource achieved when used in class was what made Allison’s choice easier. It was a handout with a series of comments made by different people and students had to say whether or not they agreed with what was written.

“I used it as a springboard for discussion prior to reading the poem. It was well received because it was something completely different for them. I felt proud listening to students that before I hardly if ever heard their voice in class, speaking and arguing with their peers. Furthermore, an examiner saw me using this particular resource and commented favourably about it.”

(Allison, *Portfolio – My best literature related resource*).

### **10.2.7.3 Reading a text, differently**

One crucial element of any literature lesson is the reading of the text. Voicing the text can be a difficult skill to master, and a teacher who cannot read well should really think twice in becoming a teacher of literature. The following is an example of a reading in class that capitalises on both the pupils’ abilities and the student-teachers’ background and knowledge.

“I used to pick out some pupils to come out and read selections from the novel in front of the class. It wasn’t at all difficult to assign pupils to characters in the novel and narrator. They all volunteered to read. Then we arrived on a page where there were two old people who speak in dialect. Since the students knew I can speak in dialect, and so immediately they used to say, ‘Miss, you should read those parts in dialects, and we would like to listen to you reading them.’ And I would change a little my voice to imitate better those two old people. Sometimes they would just start laughing when they heard me use my dialect, but I was not ashamed of it. I was just helping them read the text in a more unique way, always related to the lesson’s aim of enjoying reading. From this experience I learnt that each literary text has its own particular way to be read in a beautiful way, but it is only

the teacher that has all the cards in her hands to present reading in an unforgettable way!”

(Kim, *Portfolio – The reading act: Voicing and Interpretation*)

#### **10.2.7.4 Interpreting a text**

Reading a text in an unforgettable way is the first step towards an engagement with the text. It requires more skill and tact to then lead a discussion or activity that guides the student towards an exploration of the text, possibly arriving at an interpretation of it. Luigi tried to experiment with an activity that involved drawing as an initial response, on which to build ideas of interpretation gaining depth and substance by referring to some words from the text. Like many other activities, this was the first time he experimented with drawing as evidence of an individual response, that would later on be used as the basis for the sharing within the community of that response.

“I did not know if I would succeed or not, but I wanted to use drawing in one of my poetry lessons. I wanted to see what they would come out with; to check if the pupils would transfer their feelings in drawings rather than words. They never did such an activity, and I was prepared for some resistance. But all my worst fears faded away, as I started explaining to them what I wanted them to do. After explaining twice, and going round to check if everyone had understood, I noticed that they were happily and enthusiastically engrossed in drawing, both the poet’s view of the word in the text, and adjacent to it, how they saw the world. Then each student had to select a quote from the text, to illustrate the poet’s point of view. Under the drawing with their personal view, they had to write a short sentence explaining what they drew. Once finished, a class discussion followed, with the different points listed on the board copied as a note to the text and their interpretation of events in life.”

(Luigi, *Portfolio – The reading act: Voicing and interpretation*)

#### **10.2.8 Final comments and evaluations**

Student-teachers were asked to describe what they managed to achieve during their six weeks with pupils. Impressionistic comments were substantiated by a number of stories of successful and less successful encounters. Reflections and judgments

were not all idealistic, but grounded in their environment, where academic success was not always easily measurable, but a change in attitude and values regarding literature was more easily documented.

“With great satisfaction I truly believe that during these six weeks students understood and learnt that literature can also speak to them, that there is an essential relationship between the text and them.”

(Kim, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

“Through my methods and dedication I think I transmitted an idea of literature as something that can be a source of joy, that literature does not have to be monotonous and depressing, and that themes found in literature are everyday and common people’s experiences, just like them.”

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

“I feel they have made some progress since I could notice a better response towards the end. I made them reflect on the fact that literature is not the Bible, with one single authoritative interpretation. Literature is open to different interpretations. We experimented with different reading styles. I noticed students were more conscious about changing their voice when reading different parts of the text that require a different voice.”

(Allison, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

Students often surprised student-teachers, especially with questions or reflections:

“One pupil asked me, ‘Why do Maltese authors always write about negative experiences?’”

(Kim, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

“I was caught on one foot when they asked me why they have to learn literature, especially poems by heart, when they did not understand them. And then they blasted out, ‘Miss, Maltese poets always speak on the dark side of life. We already have our set of problems, for sure we don’t need theirs to!’”

(Luigi, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

“Given the opportunity pupils will surprise anyone. For example during one lesson, with a text on motherhood, a student asked, ‘Do you think that all mothers love their children the same as Dun Karm’s mother did love him?’ I did not know how to answer. Related to

questioning technique, I noticed that with open-ended questions I was opening a small window on their hearts and minds.”

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

This last statement opens a host of ethical concerns inherent in any response-based classroom. How far should the teacher delve in the personal lives of students? Is it ethical to ask for a response that is very revealing of the self? Can students opt out from discussing personal feelings? What will happen to those students that are too open about their experiences? Vulnerability and confidentiality issues crop up. There are no easy questions, but once literature becomes read more than just as a text with a theme and a number of figures of speech, then one is living the potential of the text. Awareness of context, of the students’ background, one’s limits, should all be considered by the student-teacher and teacher to know how far to go.

One final comment of who taught what to who. We consider the classroom as the place where the teacher teaches the student something. However, the reverse is also true. After the teaching practice Kim admits that:

“These students taught me a lot regarding literature. I was taught that literature can have a multitude of responses and interpretations. I used to go in class with the conviction that this was the interpretation of the text, the one I had studied and thought about for days. Then, in class, this was not the case! When I asked them to tell me what they understood and substantiate their answers with words from the text (the verification principle of any interpretation), they would come out with interpretations full of fantasy and imagination. It is through them that I learnt to appreciate Maltese literature more.”

(Kim, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

Suzanne also admits that her students taught her a lesson or two...

“My students taught me several lessons. They taught me that even if at times one does not see immediately the fruits of one’s investments, one should not be disheartened rapidly. They taught me that change takes time and great effort to be effective. They taught me that if I believe in or desire something really well, then I should work hard to see it through. Those students that initially I found a great difficulty and had to struggle to initiate a rapport with, were the ones that by the end I had the best relationship with by far.”

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – The students I was teaching literature to*)

#### **10.2.8.1 Dénouement**

By the end of teaching practice, student-teachers had experienced a number of incidents where they had to defend their choices and justify their positions. While initially some of them were fearful of the school environment, by the end, some reported they could notice a marked change.

“After six weeks in this school, contrary to my initial impressions, I strongly believe that some teachers, especially the younger ones, are making a genuine effort to provide the pupils with a relevant and worthwhile learning experience, especially where literacy is concerned. I have met teachers encouraged students to read and go to the school’s library. While only few pupils select to read in their free time, they usually prefer to read in Maltese, since it is an easier and more natural language for them. Commendable is the effort to organise small group literacy remedial classes for those students that find most difficulties. I registered a good progress in those students that attended these lessons. However, it is with great regret that I complained about the timing of the remedial classes, usually falling when I used to have literature lessons. To the co-operating teachers, literacy skills (like filling a job application form, or writing a *curriculum vitae*), were more important than reading and appreciating literature. They chose for their students and it was as if nobody noticed what the pupils were actually gaining and missing at the same time. They said that it was more relevant for these pupils to know basic literacy skills, than literature, ‘For with or without literature, the world would still go round.’ That really hurt, coming from a nearly newly qualified teacher.”

(Suzanne, *Portfolio – The school I taught in literature for the first time*)

### **10.3 Assessment as a ‘subversive’ method of lecturing**

It has been already argued that a change in teaching and learning needs to find reflection in a change in mode of assessment (*vide* Chapter 5). Thus this section focuses exclusively on the second cycle student-teachers, with whom I experimented with assessment for learning, mainly through the adoption of portfolios and, more pertinent, the development and employment of two rubrics (*vide* Appendix B) to assess the whole gamut of experiences and mini-assignments they had to complete.

After the first cycle and reading on assessment for learning principles, I became convinced that one cannot think about teaching without thinking ahead of the forms of assessment. The assessment will describe what learning has taken place, ranging from tasks in classroom to what role tests and examinations have (if any) within a different frame of mind. I was convinced that I could not become a better lecturer-researcher without rethinking the role assessment had on the whole process of teaching the study-unit 'The literary Experience in Secondary School.' As stated by Gipps (1994: 125; my emphasis): "The key difference between formative assessment and summative assessment is not timing, but *purpose and effect*."

Rather than just assign a test towards the end of a study-unit, as I had done with the first group, embracing assessment for learning meant that even the kind of lecturing and learning experience had to be rethought, evaluated and radically changed. I was very much aware that proponents of assessment for learning acknowledge that embarking on this journey, apart from being a practical learning experience in itself, is a "risky" business which embraces a "diversity in trajectories of change" (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam, 2003: 118-119) and above all "requires personal change" (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam, 2003: 80).

Change towards assessment model of teaching/learning may touch upon these areas: the kind of questioning that takes place during instruction; feedback through marking; peer- and self- assessment by students; and surprisingly enough for me, the formative use of summative tests (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam, 2003: 31-57). To these, one might add the sharing of criteria between teacher and students, and among students themselves (Black and Wiliam, 1998). This personal conviction moves hand in hand with current knowledge, that is, "widespread use of explicit criteria and descriptors [is] now firmly established in HE..." (Price and O'Donovan, 2006: 108). In addition, their structure, the dialogical way they ought to come into being through transactions between students and teacher, and their purpose is wide and critical for the development of reflection and meta-cognition. Student-teachers' understanding of criteria improves performance, especially when they are made explicit and are the result of "active-learning processes" (Price and



O'Donovan, 2006: 108). Apart from these reasons, criteria are crucial stand-alone features of both rubrics and conferences, two intrinsic aspects of formative assessment. Since in my ethnographic research I wanted to experiment, implement and monitor a change not only in pedagogy but also assessment, these areas were all put into practice at one time or another of my project.

### **10.3.1 My experience with the first cohort**

My point of departure was exclusively the traditional way of assessing a study-unit: a test at the end of the second semester at the very end of the academic year. I announced the mode of assessment on our very first lecture, and over twenty-eight lectures later, they had to sit for a test. It must be kept in mind that student-teachers had to keep a reflective diary, work a number of reflective tasks, compile a portfolio, all of which was not minimally considered in their final grade. However, I am convinced that the above three activities have helped them learn in a more effective way the content of this study-unit. In an hour, they had to choose and answer between two broad questions in Table 10.6:

### **10.6: The test questions for the first cohort**

1. Different pedagogues propose different models of a literature lesson divided into various stages. Discuss the relevance of one model you found particularly useful when preparing a literature lesson during your teaching practice in a secondary school.
2. One cannot have a discussion during a literary experience lesson without the proper preparation and selection of different types of questions that will animate it. Discuss with special reference to a specific example suitable for secondary school students of your choice.

All student-teachers performed well, and could answer both questions with ease. However, they had just the same examination stress, and would have preferred something different, a mode of assessment that would acknowledge their efforts and

competences mastered throughout the study-unit. The answer to their desires was not easy to find, construct, and implement and assess.

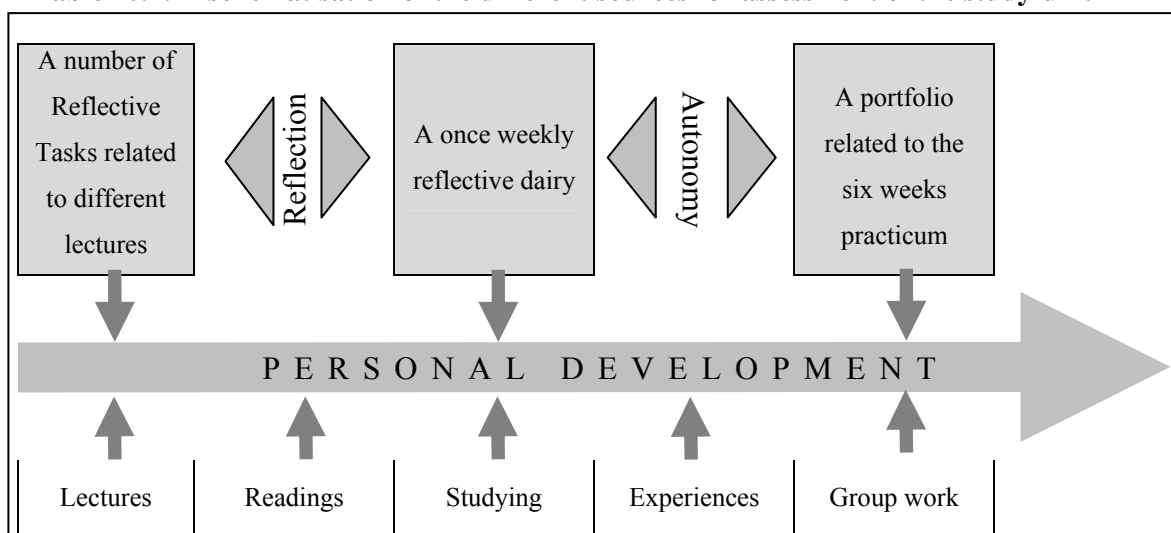
### **10.3.2 Leap of faith: Embracing and implementing an assessment for learning framework**

However, having read about portfolio assessment during that same year, I was willing to take my project a step further. That is, embracing throughout the assessment for learning culture, with its emphasis on feedback, self- and peer assessment, multiple sources as evidence to support judgement, and rubric construction (*vide* Chapter 5). Actually this leap of faith was a very calculated risk, for I had already been doing most of the assessment practices according to a constructivist classroom or an assessment for learning framework, with the first group, without actually on a personal level taking credit for it, or really giving credit to my student-teachers for their attempts (*vide* Chapter 8). Having learnt from the experience with the 2003-2004 cohort, I was willing to go all the way and try to assess for the first time the study-unit with a 100% assessment for learning style.

Assessment for learning culture brings with it a heightened awareness of the teaching and learning process, and infusing assessment with the learning experience as a continuous dialogical process (*vide* Chapter 5). It meant a change of long-held habits to accommodate a new way of conceiving teaching. In doing so, my relationship with each student-teacher improved since an assessment for learning process warrants a continuous flow of open discussion, a search for individual meaning with feedback at the heart of assessment. Furthermore, I felt responsible to constantly guide student-teachers to review and improve their performance and output. This was acknowledged by a number of student-teachers; this comment is representative: “I felt that our lecturer always strived to encourage us to aim higher ... there were times when I felt I had given my best, but with tactful questions, I could easily, then, identify room for improvement” (Marika, *Portfolio – Evaluation*).

Having had a one year experience with the process, I presented information in Table 10.7 to illustrate visually the new form of assessment.

**Table 10.7: A schematisation of the different sources for assessment of the study-unit**



After teaching practice, during our first lecture which was also a review of their experiences in a secondary school and a concluding conference, I presented a list similar to Table 10.8 (arranged in alphabetical order so as not to influence them in any way), without percentages. They had some time to discuss the different component weighting as two small groups, and then individually assigned a percentage to each component. I gathered all the sheets and issued an average, and rounded the final percentage for each section. Therefore, the percentage each aspect carries was the direct result of negotiation; it was more their decision rather than mine. Table 10.8 gathers the percentages each section carried in the final assessment.

**Table 10.8: The different components with the respective percentage from the final grade**

Component	Percentage
▪ Portfolio	40%
▪ Reflective tasks	25%
▪ Different comments on a number of articles/chapters	15%
▪ Reflective Journal	15%
▪ The literature mini-syllabus (group work)	5%

Both top and last preferences were further justified by sentences such as the examples gathered in Table 10.9.

**Table 10.9: The most important to the least important items in assessing this study-unit**

① Portfolio	② Reflective Tasks	③ Comment on an Article	④ Diary	⑤ A literature mini-syllabus
<p>“The portfolio helped me reflect on myself in relation to teaching literature.” Suzanne</p> <p>“I found the portfolio really useful, and I worked hard on it throughout the teaching practice. It helped me to reflect on different aspects of teaching literature.” Luigi</p> <p>“I was undecided between reflective tasks and portfolio, both were important, but the fact that the portfolio was so new, made me swing my vote, and picked portfolio as my best choice.” Gianna</p>		<p>“I found it difficult and did not find it relevant to my development as a teacher of literature.” Suzanne</p> <p>“I did not give it much importance, since I found it very difficult to meet other members of my group.” Kim</p> <p>“I found the group syllabus writing rather difficult, especially at the very beginning... it was difficult for me to find time to identify texts and write appropriate lesson notes.” Ella</p>		

### 10.3.3 Exemplars, artefacts and the individualised component of the portfolio

While student-teachers had to collate their portfolio, one section proved more difficult than the rest – the individualised component. Only when I presented them with two different examples of both hypothetical content list around a theme and different samples of finished work from the previous year, did they finally start to envision what was expected of them. Indeed, “students will learn better if we not only explain what skills and techniques we expect them to master, but also show them models and examples” (Showalter, 2003: 55). Table 10.10 gathers some examples of the theme selected for their individualised component.

**Table 10.10: Some examples of the individualised section of their portfolio**

① Authors from Gozo	② Food in literature	③ Literature and the sea
⑧ Censorship	Individualised content of the portfolio	Travel literature ④
Reading culture in my school ⑦	Animals in fairy tales and Hans Christian Anderson in Malta ⑥	Rabbits in literature ⑤

It is interesting to see their creativity roam and explore. I supported their choice by sending emails (one or two per student) to highlight particular texts or different artefacts they could choose to illustrate their theme. Table 10.11 lists two themes with the different artefacts that were chosen and developed by two different student-teachers.

**Table 10.11: Different artefacts developed around two themes**

Theme	I - Rabbits in literature	II - Food in literature
Artefacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some nursery rhymes with rabbits as their main character</li> <li>A booklet with creative presentation of the rhymes with rabbits as their main character</li> <li>An ideal textbook for Form 1 pupils: <i>Xi tridu jagħmel il-Fenek l-Aħmar?</i> [What Would You Like the Red Rabbit to do?] by Trevor Żahra</li> <li>My translation of Aesop fable: 'The rabbit and the tortoise'</li> <li>My memories and reflections of rabbits as pets within my family</li> <li>A lesson plan around the rabbit poem</li> <li>Rabbit: A Maltese traditional food</li> <li>A film review of <i>The World of Peter Rabbit and Friends</i></li> <li>A comment on one of Beatrix Potter's illustrations of rabbits</li> <li>Rabbits during Easter time</li> <li>A critical appreciation of Titian's 'Madonna with the Rabbit'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A calendar with traditional Maltese rhymes mentioning food</li> <li>A set of ten bookmarks with a poem on food on each one</li> <li>A comment on three famous cartoon scenes with food, from <i>The Lady and the Tramp</i> (pasta dish), <i>Snow White</i> (apple) and <i>Winnie the Pooh</i> (honey)</li> <li>Review of the film <i>Chocolat</i></li> <li>Reading Roald Dahl's <i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> and <i>Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory</i></li> <li>Who is Roald Dahl?</li> <li>A critical comment on two of Ġorġ Borġ's poems named after a food: 'Hobża' [A bread] and 'Il-qoxra ta' lewża' [The skin of an almond]</li> <li>A critical comment on Joe Friggieri mention of food in his tales</li> <li>A comment on the lyrics of the song 'Be our guest' taken from the film <i>Beauty and the Beast</i></li> <li>What Maltese people used to eat throughout the ages</li> <li>A short biography of Carmen Carbonaro [the first woman to popularise cooking books in Malta]</li> <li>A comment on the image of <i>The Maltese Woman</i> by Carmen Carbonaro written in the middle of the twentieth century</li> </ul>

### 10.3.4 Conferences

Sharing portfolio experience normally occurs during ‘conferences,’ “a purposeful dialogue between two or more people... to help the participants gain insight into the motives, learning processes, and standards surrounding one’s performance [...] they provide metacognitive and motivational information ” (Paris and Ayres, 1994: 84-85). Two conferences were conducted during teaching practice. The first conference focused more on how to identify the theme for the individualised content and possible artefacts for both sections of their portfolio. The second focused on consolidating individualised content and initiating standard setting and rubric construction. Both meetings were met with different degrees of enthusiasm and participation. During both I tried to facilitate discussion by ‘asking genuine questions’ and ‘listen carefully’ (Shaklee, Barbour, Ambrose and Hansford, 1997: 105). Table 10.12 gathers some comments after the conferences in evaluations.

**Table 10.12 Student-teachers’ comments before and after the conferences**

Student-teachers’ comments...	
Before conferences	After conferences
<p>“To tell the truth, when I heard that I had to come to university for conferences, I did not jump with joy! I felt it was an added burden with all the work related to teaching practice.” Mia</p> <p>“Initially, before the conferences, my portfolio was just an empty word; I did not know enough about it, even if I read the guidebook.” Doriella</p> <p>“I did not want to come to university. I always felt that was an extra burden on us students reading for Maltese... no other subject organises meetings during teaching practice.” Priscilla</p>	<p>“I must admit that after this conference I feel relieved. I met my peers and we shared the same difficult experiences. After the conference I feel encouraged to carry on!” Julie</p> <p>“Initially I had a cacophony of ideas about what is a portfolio. After the conference my mind is clear, and I know what I plan to do to develop my portfolio further.” Cleo</p> <p>On our last conference we were a small group of four. I prefer discussing issues among friends rather than the whole class. Thanks to the discussion and examples, I made my mind on the individualised content of my portfolio.” Kim</p> <p>“I shared the same experiences with my peers, and that was a relief.” Mary</p>

#### **10.3.4 Portfolio and rubrics**

There is a strong relationship between artefact collection and evaluation, and setting standards or criteria to evaluate the final product. They should not be viewed as two separate stages. Selection of artefacts in a portfolio requires active involvement in the learning process “since they [students] must use higher-level cognitive skills to analyse and evaluate their own work against set criteria to select the best package to present for assessment” (Bowie, Joughin, Taylor, Young and Zimitat, 2002: 55). Therefore it is recommended that issues related to criteria and artefacts are discussed concomitantly. To that end, I immediately introduced the idea of criteria from the very first conference, so the student-teachers could immediately think about what they want to aim toward and achieve. Criteria were developed to cater for two aspects: their portfolio and their study-unit (Appendix B). The portfolio criteria were divided or organised according to these themes: the portfolio process; the quality of presentation of the portfolio; the common contents of their portfolio; the individualised content of their portfolio; and their reflections. Each criterion was developed by recommendations through emails by the student-teachers. My role was to systematise and organise the different criteria under different headings. Then, we discussed what we understood by each, and through dialogue created a community of practitioners. In doing so, I was aiming to touch upon what is considered the most important characteristic: “rubric construction and use must be a collaborative activity based on the natural activities and processes students experience” (Taggart and Wood, 1998: 74).

While I was very pleased with my first attempt at rubric construction, I am very much aware that this rubric is meaningful only to the group that constructed it. With a new group, the whole process would have to be initiated once more, even if this time I have a wealth of experience behind my back and an example in my pocket. For indeed: “Rubric use is ongoing. Evaluations must be made of rubric reliability, validity, and utility” (Taggart and Wood, 1998: 74).

With student-teachers working hard to develop their portfolio content, and involved in criteria selection and later on in applying them on their work and that of their

peers, I was sure that I was touching upon the salient features of a portfolio system of assessment. According to Black (1994: 98): “the criteria for the selection of pieces of work, the criteria for scoring them, the time span over which they are collected, and the extent to which there is pupil involvement in the selection, or in assessment” guarantees a portfolio process that may turn even into a portfolio culture.

### 10.3.6 Assessing the study-unit: A basic questionnaire

Towards the end, I wanted to get some feedback and general evaluation of the whole study-unit. I designed a simple user-friendly questionnaire to be completed anonymously. In Table 10.13 there are some indicative results. Generally speaking, it came out clear that the study-unit ‘The literary experience in a secondary school’ demanded much more effort and work than other types of study-units. Probably, having all the different components included in the final assessment induces the students to work hard on all of them. Perhaps some sections, like the comments on articles and/or literature syllabus, need not be assessed, thus creating some breathing space for the remaining tasks.

**Table 10.13: Comparing ‘The literary experience in the secondary school’ to other study-units**

Compared to...	<i>Much more work</i>	<i>More work</i>	<i>The same work</i>	<i>Less work</i>	Total
▪ Other Maltese methodology study-units	11	8	-	-	19
▪ Content study-units	8	10	-	-	19
▪ Methodology in your other subject	7	7	5	-	19
▪ Other study-units within the Faculty of Education	12	6	1	-	19

#### 10.3.6.1 The time factor

Knowing that the quantity of work related to this study-unit was quite substantial, I asked the student-teachers to identify one factor that most taxed them during the last academic year. Their answer was nearly unequivocal: the time factor. Nearly all



student-teachers, with the exception of three, considered their time-management as the factor that worried them most. The questionnaires included answers to this open-ended question with sentences like those in Table 10.14.

**Table 10.14: Comments on time factor**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Time! Should I add anything else!?” Cecilia</li> <li>▪ “I did not used to find enough time to finish everything on time.” Ella</li> <li>▪ “The main challenge was time. There were a lot of bits and pieces of work, and if you did not mange well your time, you ended up having a mountain of work waiting for you at the end.” Suzanne</li> <li>▪ “The amount of work required for this study-unit was overwhelming, and the time was rather limited.” Allison</li> <li>▪ “The main challenge was to find time, to manage to do all the work at a satisfactory level.” Deborah</li> <li>▪ “The most difficult aspect was finding time to do everything. I found it rather hard to correct other people’s portfolios.” Kim</li> <li>▪ “The lack of time, especially towards the end when everything seemed to conflict with other study-units’ work.” Mia</li> </ul>
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Interestingly enough, they did not question the amount of work they had. Although we negotiated elements of it, especially deadlines, no one ever complained about its volume. Furthermore, three student-teachers identified personal problems, lack of creativity during teaching practice and portfolio related issues, respectively, as the most worrying factors or challenges that they had to overcome during this academic year.

### **10.3.6.2      Some recommendations**

Student-teachers were asked to recommend from a list what activities they would have liked to have more or a threat since they did not have sufficient experience during the academic year. The following were the most frequently selected items:

**Table 10.15: Specific recommendations by student-teachers for the improvement of this study-unit**

Number of student-teachers	Recommendation
18 student-teachers	▪ Increase in the value of the study-unit
14 student-teachers	▪ Possibly teachers from the field come to university to share their experiences
10 student-teachers	▪ More individual presentations ▪ More small group tutorials
6 student-teachers	▪ More meetings with authors
4 student- teachers	▪ More group work
1 student-teacher	▪ More time for discussions ▪ Pilot a literature lesson prior to teaching practice ▪ More film viewing similar to <i>Dead Poets Society</i> ▪ Micro-teaching in schools

### 10.3.7 Small steps in the ‘right’ direction

Notwithstanding certain improvements that students teachers would have liked to see, their feedback of the study-unit was very positive indeed. In a way it assesses the perceived achievements by the student-teachers during the last eight months.

#### 10.3.7.1 Modelling at university

Student-teachers perceived that what they were experimenting with was the way they should teach and assess in class. Although I never put it in those terms to them, the message was clear. Much of my lecturing was geared towards providing a secure environment where the prospective teachers could experience first-hand a variety of reader-response methods. Since this aspect was lacking in their education (*vide* Chapter 9) I considered one of my aims not just to lecture about reader-response and constructivist classrooms, but rather, more effectively than that, create one within the limits of a university setting.

“I find there is a strong relationship between what was covered at university and what I experienced in secondary school. The lecturer did in practice what we, in turn, should be doing with our students in classrooms.”

(Kim, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

### **10.3.7.2 The theory-practice link or divide**

This study-unit, with its limits, has been a living example of linking theory to practice, and vice-versa. It had always been my contention that a theory-free practice is an oxymoron. Practice is an embodiment of a particular theory, even if the practitioners themselves are not aware of it. At the other extreme of the spectrum, theory is a reflection of practice and informs future deliberate actions when one becomes aware of it. It must be stressed that student teachers found it difficult to eradicate the theory-practice divide.

“I can honestly say that my experience in a secondary school classroom helped a lot to understand how I can put into practice what I heard at university.”

(Ella, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

“What was covered at university came in very useful when I entered in a secondary classroom. However, I learnt other things on site, together with my students.”

(Cecilia, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

### **10.3.7.3 Students in secondary school**

One of the aims of entering a teacher-training course, and more specifically this study-unit is to get an idea of the different methods and resources most consonant to contemporary teaching of literature. Therefore, I could understand that part of the success of this study-unit rested in the hands of the audience of these student-teachers, that is the reception by pupils in secondary schools of these innovative or progressive ideas. I was pleased to read: “The majority of pupils I used to teach did enjoy the literature lessons, since they had opportunity to think, discuss and be creative” (Suzanne, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*). Certain issues, while discussed at length at university, seem not to have faded away, but rather become more pressing in their urgency... “However, some students never seem to find relevance in such type of lessons, saying that they would not lead them to passing the examination as currently set” (Suzanne, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*).

#### **10.3.7.4 Personal improvement**

One aspect I really worked hard at was to have a safe and supportive and, at the same time, challenging environment conducive to personal improvement and enrichment. Student-teachers need to approach a class with confidence inspired by competence.

“I used to feel very confident that my point of view would be given due attention by nearly everyone in classroom.”

(Ella, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

“I found this study-unit really useful. I had all the time to express my thoughts and discuss issues with my peers. During other lectures I hardly move, let alone speak my mind. During this study-unit it was as if I could not stop talking about my past, my experiences in different classrooms with different pupils. It was very intensive, with a lot of different tasks to finish and a barrage of deadlines. However, I came to know better my peers, and my lecturer.”

(Kim, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

One way of encouraging self-expression and self-discovery, was by opening a 24/7 channel of communication with my student-teachers, through emails. This meant that at a convenient time for the student-teacher, s/he could write and receive a reply within the next day. It was a sort of tacit agreement that I would reply within twenty-four hours.

“Email use was highly effective and very useful. One cannot keep a free flow channel of communication with every lecturer, this is a much welcomed exception!”

(Ella, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*).

“When we did not meet for lectures or tutorials, emails were a vital life-link with my lecturer. We could communicate with him any time of the day.”

(Allison, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*).

#### **10.3.7.5 Becoming a reflective practitioner**

One of the aims of the study-unit was to develop a reflective attitude among student-teachers. Throughout the study-unit I envisaged a reflective attitude towards the profession of teachers of literature. Reflection is a quality, skill and value very

much sought after in initial teacher education courses (*vide* Chapter 4). From the start, student-teachers recognised that reflective writing was going to be an integral part of this study-unit. I even dedicated a mini-lecture on writing skills and distributing material about reflective writing. A very simple question asked all student-teachers to quantify their ability at reflection and reflective writing at the start of the study-unit, and towards the end of the study-unit. Taking the second group of student-teachers as an example, their response, shown in Table 10.16, was staggering. All student-teachers perceived an improvement in their reflective writing skills. With the exception of one student-teacher, the majority of student-teachers placed their initial attempts at the start at five or even below. This perceived improvement ranged from two up to five, a wide bracket. All gained from this experience.

**Table 10.16: The perceived improvement in reflective writing skills**

Start of study-unit	7	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	3	2
	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
End of study-unit	9	9	9	9	7	7	7	6	8	5
Perceived Improvement	2	4	4	4	2	3	3	2	5	3

This perceived improvement was elaborated further in their comments to this answer, from simple statements like “Towards the end I found it easier to reflect” (Ella, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*) to more elaborate statements:

“At the beginning I used to fall in the trap of writing superficially about many things at once. Now I realise that I would be more effective in my writing if I carefully select one incident and elaborate on it from different points of view.”

(Suzanne, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

“I still have a long way to go to improve my reflective writing skills. However, during the last few months I became more aware of what reflective writing entails, and above all what role it should play in every teacher’s life.”

(Cecilia, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

Committing free wandering thoughts to writing, structures one’s thoughts...

“Before this study-unit I used to think about things, but I rarely wrote anything down. Then, I seldom systematised my thoughts and I used to go around in circles rather than reflect. Now that I got used to

writing reflectively – all those lesson evaluations, portfolio, reflective diary and those tasks! – I can make sense out of my own thinking.”

(Deborah, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

Reflection is a journey, with no end ever in sight. One cannot say that one has mastered this skill, but rather that one is still getting good at it...

“Reflection isn’t easy! Even though I have improved my writing, I still have to practice more; there always seems to be room for improvement.”

(Kim, *Final Evaluation Questionnaire*)

“I have come to believe that reflection has an important role in my development as a reflective teacher. I am not keeping this skill to myself. Actually I am encouraging my students to reflect too. I try to encourage them to reflect on their emotions during literature lessons. And after four weeks of teaching practice I encouraged them to reflect on what they have learnt, what they liked and disliked. It was a new experience for them. This wasn’t without difficulties... pupils are not that used to reflect. Initially they would describe what we did together, but later and with special prompting from my side, they became more specific.”

(Mia, *Portfolio – Final Evaluation*)

#### **10.4 End note**

This chapter focused on the two most emotionally charged experiences throughout the study-unit: teaching practice and the assessment of this study-unit. Student-teachers have evidenced a predisposition to experiment with a reader-response approach to teaching literature, even if the school context was not always supportive. Their experiences, difficult as they might have seemed, were very rewarding. On the other hand, assessment of this study-unit was a much more intensive experience, with preparation being initiated months in advance. Student-teachers were asked to participate in the construction of rubrics that facilitated peer- and self-assessment of most of the work submitted for final grading. Although this was their first such experience, on the whole they seem to have participated fully in the process, thus feeling that they owned the assessment process and not considering assessment as being done to them. This experience should be invaluable when they, as teachers, implement similar methods with their own pupils.

## CHAPTER 11

### Closure, traits, recommendations and coda

#### 11.1 The idea of closure

Traditionally, research aims towards a set of conclusions which are the result of the methodical analysis according to a process of data gathering to that end. However, within a postmodern frame of mind, this idea of permanent conclusions is greatly debated and the idea of closure, is preferred instead. “Although all our stories will provide some kind of closure, some anchoring of meaning, this is always bound to be temporary” (Usher and Edwards, 1994: 147). Within this context, by closure one might understand temporary bracketing of past events, in order to proceed, knowing that “[w]e are after all always ‘in’ closure” (Usher and Edwards, 1994: 147). The past is never resolved and most probably the future will be interpreted in the light of those events that one wants to keep at bay. Indeed, Jürgen Habermas’ (1994: 55-72) words are pertinent: “The past as future.” The past always haunts the present and the future, in a spectral way (Derrida, 2006).

The idea of closure with a preference over termination, finishing and completion, and similar words denoting a permanent end to an activity, is relevant in this context. Closure denotes the never ending process of the relationship that was instated months earlier. At the same time, closure encapsulates the suspension of things as they are, with the awareness that things will carry on, but in a different form. I agree with Robin Usher and Richard Edwards (1994: 30) that “experience and subjectivity are always out of control and therefore to impose a closure is to deny the openness of the meaning of experience and the continual formation and re-formation of subjectivity.”

Closure can be achieved by an insight, very similar to the ‘aha moment’ or ‘haiku moment’ when writing haiku (Giroux, 1974/1999: 45-74; Yasuda, 1957: 30-33),

with that exhilarating feeling of ‘now I got it!’ Alternatively it may be achieved with a deliberate decision that closes off other possibilities in full awareness that the full all embracing understanding and explanations of an event can be aimed and desired, but never actually be achieved or finely resolved, very much akin to a psychological ‘analysis’ (Lacan, 2006).

The evidence from student-teachers’ reflections and my own deliberations in my research diary and in my writing, can be considered as fragments or partialities of a much bigger, elusive phenomenon or lived experience, that can never be ‘totally’ described or analysed (Moustakas, 1994). My writing positions myself and certain discourses to the foreground, while other themes and motives are set at the background or not considered at all. Writing, including, research writing, is always selective and at the same time “it lets us see that which shines through, that which tends to hide itself” (van Manen, 1997: 130), for indeed phenomenological writing “...speaks through silence: it means more than it explicitly says” (vanManen, 1997: 131). Therefore, rereading the previous chapters, I can safely attempt at drawing a list of what best can be called traits, rather than conclusions in the traditional sense of the word, that, as a self-study and induction into a reflective mode of my student-teachers, will carry on beyond the temporal boundaries of this study.

## **11.2 Some traits of my research**

I propose to divide the traits that emerge from my research in two: those that refer to the philosophical understanding gained through this research, and another category based on insights drawn from my research as a lived experience and as a writing up of that experience. These traits directly relate to my main research question and supporting or subsidiary questions (*vide* Table 1.1 and 1.2).

### **11.2.1 Philosophical traits**

Researched experience is a complex non-linear experience, where the researcher rather than scrupulously adhering to one method, embraces a bricoleur stance to



greatly facilitate his/her task (*vide* Table 1.2 Question B; Chapter 6). It is with a broad knowledge of the different methods and techniques that are available to the qualitative researcher that one can select what best fits one's needs at the time. This open and flexible approach greatly facilitates the data collection process and can yield various insights about the whole research project in a more authentic way. It is the search that dictates the methods and techniques, bearing clearly in mind the context and situations.

Considering the rather fragmentary nature of initial teacher training, the writing process too had to change to reflect this, as was suggested in supporting question F (Table 1.2). Thus, a multi-genre approach (*vide* Chapter 2) was adopted, not without proper attention to the canonical expository and analytical genre. My mode of writing here reflects a bricolage stance (*vide* Intermezzo I and II), aware of a myriad of possibilities I consider the most fitting genre for the matter in hand. It is not systematic at the very start, but lends itself to representing details of what had happened coupled with subsequent insights and deliberations. Thus my writing understood as a bricolage experience also reflects a dialogic experience of reality and how I made (and still make) sense out of it. In hindsight I consider this journey of self-discovery as writer and researcher as an instructive experience.

As much as possible, even if very difficult because it goes against my whole upbringing, I tried to avoid bipolar logic. Instead, following Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) moderate approach to literary theory and events, I tried to keep away from extremes, and instead find my own version of things. Further, extremes were not considered opposites in a Hegalian sense of the word, as if they were a thesis and antithesis, with a synthesis of the two positions as the final outcome. Things, to me, are a little bit more complex than that. I wait, ponder, try to find and select what I consider as best from the two or more initial positions, construct my own position, that need not be a synthesis, even if the building blocks are directly extrapolated from the initial positions. To use a metaphor from Derrida (2006: 5), my conception of things develops into something like a spectre...

It becomes, rather, some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. [...] *It* is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. [...] Here is—or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or anything, some thing, ‘this thing,’ but this thing and not any other...

### **11.2.2 Traits from the research project**

Drawing on a number of personal resources a lecture room, with great effort by the lecturer but also with the complicity of the student-teachers, is turned into a constructivist classroom or a response-based classroom (*vide* Chapter 3) modelling what could be a relationship between the parties according to what is envisioned to be instated when student-teachers go in secondary classroom with their pupils (*vide* Chapter 10). This means that the mode of teaching/lecturing can be transformed to embrace ideas from an assessment for learning model (*vide* Chapter 5). This transformation was inspired by more than one of my subsidiary research questions (*vide* Table 1.1 Questions D and E; Table 1.2 Questions C and G).

Student-teachers arrive at a study-unit with preconceived ideas, beliefs, impressions and prejudices (*vide* Chapter 9). These have to be scrutinised within a philosophical framework that privileges reflection as a core value (*vide* Table 1.1 Question D; Table 1.2 Questions B and C). Such beliefs find their meaning in past events, in the individual’s personal history. Without any doubt, these past experiences need to be reflected upon at length. The best attempt at a critical analysis can be achieved during an open discussion with peers. Raising to the level of consciousness the possible meaning or interpretations of single critical incidents can be therapeutic and enriching.

Among the student-teachers’ experiences that left an indelible mark on their identity as prospective teacher one finds their first encounter with the literate world. Within the nuclear family, the mother role is really strong, and then when one considers the

extended family, the grandparents' role takes precedence. Within a bilingual context like Malta, issues of English and Maltese with their unequal perceived importance and the distribution and visibility of print culture impinge.

The student-teachers' relationship with their subject is complex and cannot be reduced to simple findings or straightforward answer to one of my research questions (Table 1.2 Question D). Suffice to say that the dynamics of subject identity are mediated through their subject knowledge. What they learnt at secondary school and at higher education is the beginning limit. From my research, while some student-teachers find pleasure in reading on their own, rarely does this experience impact decisions on canon and pedagogical considerations (*vide* Chapter 9). Their limits in this area are quite evident, favouring a perpetuation of the *status quo* rather than experimenting with new texts and being themselves agents of change. Outside the pedagogical canon, texts need a seal of approval from an outside body and student-teachers are often not initially willing to risk anything. They need more prompting when presenting simulations and a more experimental oriented environment to break off the shackles of their own learning experience. Bridging the gap between the official content knowledge and reading outside that canon is still to be resolved.

Images and metaphors can be liberating but also constrictive. With reference to research question E (Table 1.2), from the analysis of their images of a literature teacher comes a vision of hope, since they critically look at a traditional way of teaching literature, they clearly understand the limitations inherent in the traditional way, and envision an image of a teacher that is more intellectually dynamic and stimulating, pedagogically competent and resourceful (*vide* Chapter 9). Their reasons for becoming teachers within a long four-year course, reaches its aim if they themselves change over time to cope with the pressing needs of present day classrooms but also if they construct and implement positive pedagogical ideals.

Most of the time, knowledge at university is useful so long as it works in the classroom. I believe that a reader-response approach to literature teaching is a

powerful solution to present day malaise with the traditional mode of teaching the subject. Student-teachers needed to familiarise themselves with basic principles and practices of reader-response, but they still had to challenge their convictions. Indeed, two of my research questions (Table 1.2 Questions B and F) focused specifically on teaching practice, the time where they had to implement a new vision for teaching literature (*vide* Chapter 10). Their experiences are not all the same. Resistance seems to be a common theme, be it from the school administration, the co-operating teacher, pupils and examination culture. My research demonstrates that school culture does not wash away university teaching. Within this context, schools provide an interpretive critical lens to university teaching, which can be self-indulgent, esoteric, out-moded, research-based and possibly decontextualised. It grounds with reality a discourse that can be remote from schools' and teachers' needs, while holding out the possibility of change and innovation in schools.

As with schools, examinations may filter most of the ideas that make it to the classroom. At university the mode of assessment greatly impinges on the quality of the learning experience. While initially I was a bit hesitant, during my second cycle, I was all in favour of an assessment for learning paradigm. This was reflected in one of my personal research questions (Table 1.1 Question E) and another research question related to my student-teachers (Table 1.2 Question G). That meant personal change of the way I planned and designed the study-unit, a rethinking that brought greater faith in student-teachers, along with a desire to experiment and be innovative (*vide* Chapter 8). On the other hand, a number of reflective tasks, article/chapter summaries, a portfolio and a reflective diary were used as primary sources when assessing the quality of learning that took place during the study-unit, in relation to two subsidiary research questions (Table 1.1 Questions D and E). I had to face student-teachers' resistance, especially when I had to convince them to assess each other's work (peer-assessment) and their own work (self-assessment), especially from those who believed that assessment was something done to them by the lecturer, rather than appropriating for themselves according to negotiated criteria and rubrics. This was very much in line with another supporting question I had set

for my research (Table 1.2 Question G). Finally, the experience was rewarding and worth input of all involved.

Notwithstanding the traits that have emerged, I don't conclude that this is 'the interpretation' of what happened during those long eight months. Other points of view or discourses can explain other features, or highlight aspects that I did not consider important. It is a personal critical retelling of a rather complex dynamic experience that certainly cannot be resolved or brought to a conclusion by the end of a thesis. Indeed, my relationship with the participating nineteen teachers has progressed during the fourth year of their course and with some deepened further when they selected me as their thesis supervisor. "In a real sense, teaching never ends, and the conclusion of the semester does not conclude the teacher-student relationship or the implicit contract" (Showalter, 2003: 142). I must admit that when the third year came to an end, I felt rather drained and positive that I tried my best to provide them with something new and possibly unforgettable. Rather melancholic in tone, I admit that "Perhaps it is always ourselves we mourn for in the end of any season..." (Showalter, 2003: 101). I saw them become teachers of literature which makes me, like any teacher trainer, proud.

### **11.3 Some recommendations**

Researching this subject for years, I have identified a number of recommendations that I believe would greatly improve the experience of student-teachers in their transition to becoming teachers of literature.

Following the great importance of literary theory, especially reader-response forms of criticism, having in the reorienting process a study-unit that explains in detail the various positions, major authors and texts' insights along the lines of Chapter 3, greatly helps the understanding of the principles, practices, methods and techniques involved in the pedagogy of literature at secondary level.

Since reflection plays an important part in the analysis of past beliefs and present thinking, it is strongly recommended that student-teachers be provided with training in this special writing skill, as early on as possible in their teacher-training course. This would facilitate their lives in a number of study-units, including one on teaching literature.

While it is encouraging to notice that my study-unit capitalised on insights from assessment for learning, it is rather alarming to witness that this was their only opportunity to experience such a mode of assessment throughout their entire life in formal and higher education. Aware of teachers' need to experience first-hand different forms of assessment practices, I recommend that small projects and initiatives commence at secondary level, initiatives that would pilot assessment for learning experiences. This would increase their confidence, self-esteem and would be replicated once they finish teacher-training course.

Technology, while I used it sparingly throughout my study-unit, has proven to be a vital link with my student-teachers. They could communicate with their lecturer about their preoccupations, and receive a number of solutions or possible interpretations that would help them see the bigger picture, or help them reflect in a way they previously did not think about. While I used emailing as the way to communicate, I propose a platform like Moodle where student-teachers can contribute to a discussion. Ethical issues should be addressed in advance before lecturers and student-teachers embark on this open dialogue.

Aware of how critical teaching practice can be to student-teachers and after experiencing the success the organisation of support groups during teaching practice focusing on teaching of literature and portfolio had, I would suggest that this personal initiative be institutionalised to become an essential part of the block teaching practice. Probably, I would advise that the facilitator would not be one of their examiners/tutors, so as to avoid a role conflict. Furthermore, instead of focusing on teaching literature and portfolios, I would be more inclusive, and tackle a variety of issues, especially classroom management and discipline concerns, which

from my research seem the very basic existential need of the student-teachers during the first few weeks.

Student-teachers know that lecturers and examiners have a wealth of experience and knowledge, but at the same time are a bit sceptical of their awareness of life in schools. I suggest that co-operating teachers are assigned a number of responsibilities, after undergoing some training sessions to successfully complete their crucial mentoring role.

Given the duration of my research, and the conviction that becoming a teacher is a long process that spills over the eight months of training as reported in my research, or four year course, it would be interesting to see what insights can be attained if one adopts a longitudinal study, from initial teacher training to a career and tenure spread over years. While this may be desirable, it has never been attempted maybe due to a number of factors such as, lack of resources, funding, patience to get something published, perseverance of the persons involved in the initial research, the changing personal circumstances of the researchers and the participants. However, with financial resources from the different EU projects, I do not foresee any reason why this research project should not be carried out.

#### **11.4 The end as a partial beginning**

Initially, I proposed to answer the following question: *How can the initial training of Maltese literature teachers benefit from a reader-response approach?* This guiding question, as well as the subsidiary questions (Tables 1.1 and 1.2), have been tackled at length in Part III of my research. After considering the wide range of evidence presented based on personal and student-teachers' generated data, the in-depth critical analysis that framed each issue and partial conclusions for each strand, and if I take into account the different closures I hinted at in the preceding sections, I believe to have made strong the case in the affirmative. The journey was not without its problems (*vide* Chapter 7) and the research has its own set of limitations (*vide* Chapter 11). However, at the end I find that personally and each

individual student-teacher has struggled to appropriate a reader-response approach to teaching, be it at University or at a secondary school. From time to time I wonder if the same experience and effect could be achieved without reader-response; probably not, or else a different narrative would emerge contradicting or confirming whole passages. Without any doubt, we all have improved ourselves in the spirit of reader-response approaches to reading and teaching literature. My transformative journey and that of my nineteen student-teachers' inexorably goes on... but that is another exciting story to tell some other day.

### **11.5 Coda**

The personal journey as novice lecturer and the individual student-teachers' trajectories that I documented, did not end when the student-teachers finished their course. My journey as a not so novice lecturer carried on the following year with another group of student-teachers who were eager to learn and understand what it takes to become teachers of literature. In a sense, perpetually teaching new student-teachers "gives the illusion of a fountain of youth" (Showalter, 2003: 142). The recurring story is a sweet *déjà vu* or a facet of the Nietzschean eternal return. I am very much aware that: "Developing a coherent teaching self is a life-long process" (Showalter, 2003: 143). My self as a lecturer and researcher, and my student-teachers' self, is in a never ending process of 'becoming' (*vide* Intermezzo II). The student-teachers learn from their lecturer, as much as the lecturer learns from their experience; it is a to-and-fro relationship, with roles changing. While the institutional regulations inevitably would indicate a date of the termination of this relationship, I am convinced that actually this rapport moves way beyond the time spent at university...

#### **I.**

Getting to know my student-teachers, and they getting to know me, is a rewarding experience of any teaching worthy of the name. Although student-teachers finish university, they carry on living with in some ways. On my biannual school visits it



is very likely that I hear a recognisable voice at the end of the corridor calling, “Hawn Sir...” [Hello Sir... / How are you, Sir?] Can there be sweeter words for someone who as a teacher has formed tomorrow’s teachers?

## II.

Emails, as indicated, have proved to be an essential channel of communication. It is a way of changing with times, difficult at the start, but rewarding, very rewarding, at the end...

**Subject:** Thank you  
**From:** Anne  
**Date:** 08/09/2005 18:32  
**To:** Terence Portelli

Terence,  
Last week I sent a CV to St Colin’s College. Last Monday they contacted me for an interview on the following day, which I attended. Wednesday they informed me that they chose me as a teacher of Maltese, Full-time. The post was advertised as a part-time job, but when they saw how much I worked, my teaching practice file, my literature portfolio, the different resources I prepared, the student and class profiles, the detailed lesson evaluation, they decided to employ me as a full-timer.  
Although it was all my work, I would like to thank you from my heart because it was with your dedication and hard work that I presented such good quality highly finished material, for you always strove to improve our abilities to the maximum, to present near perfect work, without losing faith in my capabilities. Thank you once again for everything you did,

Anne

## III.

Zen practitioners find solace in stories that shed light on a reality, that while being possibly contradictory, store a gem of truth or insight that is powerful and meaningful. The following, by Japanese Zen Master Dōgen (1971: 105) who lived in the thirteenth century, I feel, is really inspiring...

In the middle of the sea, there is a place where great waves rise known as the Dragon Gate. If a fish can pass this place, it turns into a dragon. This is why it is called Dragon Gate. Yet it seems to me that the waves are no higher than those in other places, and the water must be just as salty as anywhere else. Strangely enough, though, any fish that passes there becomes a dragon without fail. Its scales do not change; its body remains the same; yet suddenly it becomes a dragon.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **A Compendium of Reflective Tasks**

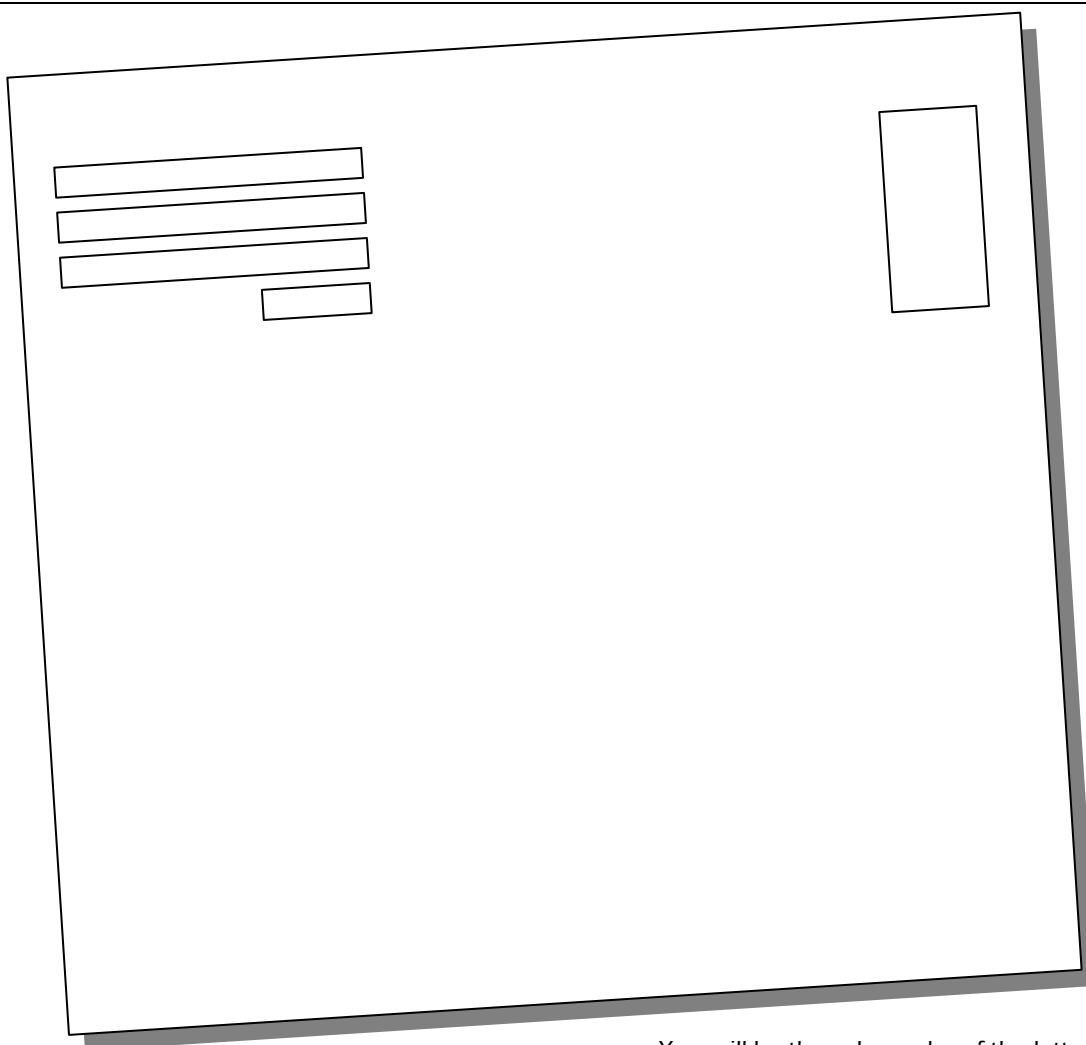
## I What would you like? A self-addressed letter

The B.Ed. (Hons.) course is highly structured. One rarely has the opportunity to say what one wants from a particular study-unit before its commencement; it is more likely that one would air out a disappointing comment at the end, usually at the lecturer's back.

Following the discussion during the first lecture, you have expressed your views on what you feel is important to learn/read during the study-unit 'The Literary Experience in the Secondary School'. You are now asked to think and write about the following two questions:

- What you would like to learn/read during this study-unit; and
- How would you imagine yourself to be after finishing this study-unit.

To facilitate your answer, imagine to be writing a self-addressed letter that will be posted back to you in eight months' time, towards the end of this study-unit. Who knows what will be your reaction when you read what you wrote to yourself?



You will be the sole reader of the letter.

You may feel free to share parts of your letter with peers and lecturer, once the study-unit ends.

Even without knowing, your past has a deep impact on the way you construct your future. Reviewing your education can illuminate present beliefs and assumptions that will be better explored and at times challenged during this study-unit. Therefore, think about your past by going through the following questions that are intended as an aid to your memory and subsequent reflections. Then, write what strikes you most. You can reproduce any artefact(s) you consider particularly meaningful in your growth process.

### First memories

1. What are your earliest memories related to reading?
2. When you were still young, what did your parents, relatives, grandparents read to you?
3. A bedtime story you particularly remember.
4. Did you like being read to?
5. The first book you remember reading.
6. What types of books did you like best when you were still very young?
7. A particular character you read about when still young, and still remember with joy.
8. A particular picture you saw in a book when still young, and still remember.
9. When still young, who was the person who you always saw reading?

### Learning to read

10. Did you have a particular teacher who helped you come close to the reading world?
11. What do you remember most of the reading lessons you had at primary school?
12. What do you remember most of the reading lessons you had at secondary school?
13. Did you have a library at home? Did you make use of any of the available books?
14. What was the first book you bought with your own pocket-money?
15. Do you remember anything from your first visit to a bookshop?
16. Do you remember anything from your first visit to a library?
17. Any memories, sensations and emotions you carry from entering a big library?
18. Did you ever read a book to someone younger than you?
19. Is there a particular book you cherish?

## Your reading history II

### *Your literary preferences*

Years of formal education developed in you a sense of literary taste, which to a certain extent is peculiar to you.

How you were taught literature, who taught you particular texts, the layout of a book you read, an activity you made around a literary text, an unforgettable moment when you read something, and the like... all had an impact on your literary tastes.

However, it was not the formal education alone that had an impact on your literary tastes. Your initiative to explore new texts embarked you on a journey far away from the four walls of your classroom. For some, this early excursion has developed into an irresistible passion for reading.

Your life history has had an impact on the literary preferences in such a way that you do not possibly acknowledge.

#### *The best...*

1. Your very own 'Author Top 10'.
2. The best five poems.
3. The most effective sentence you ever read.
4. The most powerful verse.
5. The most enticing play you have ever watched.

#### *The book you...*

6. The book you suggest to someone you love.
7. The book you suggest to someone you do not particularly like.
8. The book you could never finish.
9. The book you suggest to a politician or a religious figure.
10. The book you would like to take with you to a desert island.
11. The book you feel that left the strongest impact on your life.

#### *If...*

12. If all the books were to be destroyed, which one would you save?
13. If you were a member on a censorship committee, which type of writing would you ban?
14. If you heard someone say, "The world without books would be a better place!" ...what would your reaction be?
15. If you had to write a book, what subject and style would you choose? Why?

## Your reading history III

### *What type of reader are you?*

Did you ever think that there are different types of readers? And that the same reader can read differently in different situations?

The aim of this task is to help you better understand the type of reader you have become and to gain greater awareness of the different ways you read in particular settings and situations.

Furthermore, you will better understand how you look at yourself as a reader that very soon will teach others how to read literature.

1. From a score of one to ten, how much do you like to read? Explain your choice.
2. Two adjectives that best describe you as reader.
3. Which genre do you prefer to read: poetry, narrative or drama?
4. Do you prefer to read in Maltese, in English, or any other language? Why do you prefer one from the other?
5. The place you choose to read for pleasure and to study.
6. If you were on a bus, do you prefer to read or simply to gaze? Why?
7. Do you read at the seaside?
8. If you were to review exclusively last summer, what type of writing (novels, newspapers etc.) did you read most? Do you notice any difference with the winter period? Why?
9. Did you ever read a book after you watched its film? What was your reaction?
10. Did you ever watch a film after you've read the book? What were your comments?
11. Were you ever stimulated to read a book / a poem / a play after having read a critical comment on it?
12. A book you enjoy re-reading.
13. A book you bought just because you liked the cover.
14. Did you ever regret having read something that in hindsight you feel you should never have read?
15. When you open a book, from where do you start reading?
16. When you are reading, what do you notice most?

## Reasons for teaching literature at secondary school

Behind every subject there are a number of reasons for its presence on the curriculum for students in the secondary school. From time to time these reasons change to better reflect the new subject identity within an ever evolving knowledge struggle that legitimises certain knowledge and delegitimises other areas. From the following list, select your preferred reasons for teaching literature within a first language syllabus?

Maltese literature is taught at secondary school because...	Agree	Disagree
1. students find the activity enjoyable.	①	② ③ ④
2. it stimulates the students' imagination and fosters their creativity.	①	② ③ ④
3. it develops the students' critical and analytic skills.	①	② ③ ④
4. it helps and facilitates the development of reading skills.	①	② ③ ④
5. it refines the students' literary taste.	①	② ③ ④
6. students will be able to comprehend the complexity and intricate use of language.	①	② ③ ④
7. teachers love reading.	①	② ③ ④
8. literary terms and devices are best taught in context.	①	② ③ ④
9. it forms part of the national identity/heritage of the Maltese.	①	② ③ ④
10. although it is written in Maltese, it shares the same wealth of universal themes that touch the spirit of each and every one.	①	② ③ ④
11. otherwise students reading Maltese at university will not find a job.	①	② ③ ④
12. it improves vocabulary.	①	② ③ ④
13. great or classical authors continue to be revered in the future.	①	② ③ ④
14. it leads to a better understanding of the authors' biography.	①	② ③ ④
15. articulating one's response to a literary text is an important task.	①	② ③ ④
16. students do not read at home and therefore the school has to compensate for this	①	② ③ ④
17. if it was not part of the syllabus no one would read literature in Maltese.	①	② ③ ④
18. it nurtures a more sensitive person.	①	② ③ ④
19. teachers will not have anything else to teach three/four lessons per week.	①	② ③ ④
20. it aids the development of a morally sound person.	①	② ③ ④
21. some day someone identified literature as a subject and there's no way things are going to change in language teaching syllabi.	①	② ③ ④
22. literary critics think it is valuable.	①	② ③ ④
23. it is an integral part of the language exam especially the secondary education certificate.	①	② ③ ④
24. literature acts as a good model to creative writing.	①	② ③ ④
25. it extends the experiences of the readers, for example if you never went to Brazil you can read an account of that place.	①	② ③ ④
26. it can be used in comparative studies with literature written in other languages.	①	② ③ ④

## 6 A description of a traditional literature lesson

The description between traditional education and progressive education made by John Dewey in his *Experience and Education* (1938) might be relevant where it came to describe educational movements in general, and more specifically when writing and discussing about teaching literature.

At a time when teacher training was not possible, novices used to observe what worked in others, and synthesised what can be called the traditional method of teaching literature. One used to go back on the way he or she was taught, without proper critical evaluation of one's provenance. After years of experience, teachers feel secure about the merits of their way of teaching, and proud that little if anything has changed.

On the other hand, novice student-teachers ascribe a different meaning to their own education. Indeed they voice their concern about certain practices, and voice a real desire to move away from the traditional way of teaching literature.

"Today I acknowledge the pressing need to read more books and articles in order to improve my teaching methods of teaching literature, so that I don't teach in the traditional fashion"

"The pupils used to adore me. Probably since I am very young, or possible because I use new methods that their teacher never dreams of using, because her practice is solely based on the traditional way of teaching."

Like last year's two novice student-teachers, you are still at the very beginning of your training. What is your opinion on the traditional method of teaching literature? Can you describe a traditional lesson in detail? The following questions are aimed to help you start reflecting...

1. Do you think that the traditional method really exists? If, yes, what are its merits?

2. What is the teacher's role in the traditional literature lesson?

3. Between the teacher, the student, the author and the text, who is considered the most important in the traditional literature lesson?

4. List the basic steps of a typical traditional literature lesson.

5. Who do you think are the great defenders of the traditional way of teaching literature at secondary school?

6. How you use to feel during a literature lesson based on the traditional method?

8. What is the role of examinations within the traditional paradigm of teaching literature?

9. Who are the people that are gaining more from the traditional way of teaching literature?

7. What are the short- and long-term effects on the students of being taught literature in a traditional way?

10. Can you describe the type of student that fits best with the traditional way of teaching literature?

11. Look-up in a dictionary of literary terms, 'New Criticism'. Can you notice any similarities with the principles of this method and the teaching style within the traditional paradigm of teaching literature?



## 7 My first literature lesson

Nothing seems as beautiful as the first love. The same might apply to other experiences in one's life that although repeated provide the same initial sensation. Last year, with all probability, you did your first literature lesson during the Wednesday sessions. Take a look at what you did when still without the pedagogical and experiential know-how that you have today.

Then, use the questions/ideas in the three columns to describe, rekindle memories, and learn from your first lesson.

Before the lesson	During the lesson	After the lesson
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. An adjective to describe how you felt before the lesson.</li> <li>2. How would you describe the school's context where you delivered your first ever literature lesson?</li> <li>3. How would you describe the classroom context where you delivered this lesson?</li> <li>4. What was your greatest preoccupation before you delivered the lesson?</li> <li>5. How difficult or easy was it to plan this lesson?</li> <li>6. How did you choose the literary text for this lesson?</li> <li>7. Did you consult any book/website/person when you were planning this lesson?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. An adjective to describe how you felt during the lesson.</li> <li>9. An incident that happened during the lesson for which you did not plan well enough.</li> <li>10. During this lesson, what did you do to give individual attention to students with different learning styles?</li> <li>11. What was the students' reaction during the lesson?</li> <li>12. How did you read the literary text?</li> <li>13. Did you use any particular resources during the lesson? What was their effect in the classroom?</li> <li>14. What do you think the students learned by the end of this lesson?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. An adjective to describe how you felt once the lesson came to an end.</li> <li>16. From one to ten, what was your grade of satisfaction after the lesson? Explain.</li> <li>17. Did the students comment after the lesson?</li> <li>18. Since nearly over six months have passed from that experience, what do you remember most?</li> <li>19. If you had to deliver the same lesson again, what would you keep unchanged and what would you vary? Explain why.</li> <li>20. If the tutor was in the classroom when you delivered this lesson, what do you think would have been his/her reactions?</li> </ol>

## 8 Designing a literature syllabus

Even if designing a literature syllabus may seem far away from your immediate needs, this specific competence is a must in your professional development. More pressing is this need in view of what the *National Minimum Curriculum* (1999) envisions as part of the decentralisation process, that is a situation where teachers design a syllabus according to students' needs within a general framework agreed upon, like the attainment targets (Camilleri Grima, ed. 2001). Indeed the attainment targets of the literary experience are an important aid in such an endeavour. Your familiarisation with and the application of a set of criteria for textbook or text selection will be of great help. With these in mind, you can design a small syllabus of the literary experience. You can present the work performed, as a group report with different sections as specified below.

① Title Page	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A title for your syllabus.</li> <li>▪ The attainment targets' level and the organisation principle for this level.</li> <li>▪ Members' names.</li> <li>▪ Date of presentation.</li> </ul>
② Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A short paragraph of not more than one hundred and fifty words that synthesise what you will be proposing.</li> </ul>
③ Index	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A list of the different parts of the report.</li> </ul>
④ The Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A short (hypothetical) description of the context that this syllabus will be designed for: the school's locality; the type of school (AS, JL, PF, CS); the students' age; the school's catchment area; the number of lessons per week (three / four / five) and how many of them can be devoted to the literary experience; if it is going to be a same sex school or a co-ed school; students' ability; students' knowledge that you consider as already mastered; the period of the year the syllabus is designed for.</li> </ul>
⑤ Work Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The groups' agenda-minutes, therefore how many times you met, where did you meet, how long the sessions took, who was the secretary, and most importantly of all, what decisions were taken after each session.</li> </ul>
⑥ Attainment Targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explain your choice for this particular level of the attainment targets.</li> <li>▪ What advantages do you consider this level has when compared to other levels?</li> </ul>
⑦ Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In a table divided into two columns, from the attainment targets (first column) derive a set of aims (second column) that later on will be used in particular lessons and in conjunction with selected texts.</li> </ul>
⑧ Your Choice of Particular Literary Texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Which texts do you feel best suit the aims you developed?</li> <li>▪ Which book/s did you consider for students to buy?</li> <li>▪ A hypothetical letter to the publisher or distributor to verify if the book is in print and that the required amount of books is available.</li> <li>▪ A justification in around seventy-five words for each text chosen (poem / book / novel / story / play / selection / anthology).</li> </ul>
⑨ Ten Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A list of ten resources you consider necessary to complement the learning process, plus where these can be found / obtained.</li> </ul>
⑩ Scheme of Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A scheme of work focusing on the literary experience to demonstrate how you are going to sequence each lesson for a period of two months.</li> </ul>

## 9 Choosing a literary text(book)

Part of the pedagogical competence of teachers of literature is selection of literary texts and/or literary textbooks for use in their classrooms. While there are different situations where Maltese teachers have no voice in text selection (for example Maltese state schools have to follow a prescribed syllabi and textbooks, and Form 5 common Secondary Education Certificate exams) one cannot ignore those contexts and opportunities where teachers have the opportunity to select texts that appeal to their students, and hence, develop further their students' literary competence. Among the latter context one can find private schools, church schools, parent foundation schools, and specific dates in the scholastic calendar.

The former situation can be compared to a doctor who has no choice and liberty to prescribe the medicine that s/he feels best fits his/her patient, or with a barrister who has his/her hands tied when it comes to selecting those arguments that provide a better chance for his/her client's acquittal. Every member of a profession has a responsible degree of autonomy, a responsibility that emanates from professional competence.

As part of a degree, every teacher of literature already has mastered certain knowledge about literature. Apart from competency in content, every student teacher needs to acquire and develop those skills necessary in selecting those texts from the repertoire that best reach and augment the literary interests and competence of his/her students. Every selection needs to relate to that specific cohort's whole year's program for the teaching of Maltese literature. One ought to acknowledge that whilst there should be an agreement on what the students should learn, there can be flexibility in the methods employed to arrive at that end. However, the selection of specific texts should never rest solely on what the students' interests are; although these should act as a starting point for further deliberations.

### A

Choose five literary texts (short stories, novellas, poems, plays, or a selection) that you consider as ideal for one classroom you have taught last year. Then, in no more than one hundred words, explain your choice.

### B

Read the different criteria for textbook selection found in *Stedina għat-Tagħlim fis-Sekondarja* (Portelli and Camilleri Grima, 2002: 359-360).  
Select a book that you consider as an ideal textbook when it comes to teaching literature in the secondary school. Mark the list and then elaborate your comments in a short report you are to present to the schools' textbook board.

## 10 Why did you want to become a teacher?

The reasons why one wants to enter into a profession are never ending. These reasons may range from the pragmatic to the idealistic. But awareness of these reasons may uncover hidden reservoirs of energy that come in handy when one starts to lose sight of the initial reasons or when the strong winds of uncertainty start to take hold of one's beliefs.

One way of knowing why one wanted to become a teacher instead of another profession is to write down these reasons and then review them from time to time.

You might reflect on why you wanted to become a teacher of Maltese and more specifically a teacher of Maltese literature. Maybe it is not that incidental: you passed a literature exam with flying colours or remember reading a particular book in class, or it is just because of the inspiring way of teaching of a particular teacher you had in the past. On the other hand, maybe you don't have specific reasons: literature just happens to form part of Maltese syllabus and exams and at the time you did not have a voice in this decision (other languages have opted for a separate exam paper for language and literature). Or it is just the case that you are following William Wordsworth words from 'The Prelude':

"...What we have loved,  
Others will love, and we will teach them how."

1. Why did you want to become a teacher? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Why did you want to become a teacher of Maltese? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Why did you want to become a teacher of Maltese literature? \_\_\_\_\_

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## 11 The influence of a teacher

Most probably one of the main reasons one becomes a teacher is because of the deep and long standing influence of a teacher. Everyone has a dedicated teacher that s/he remembers more than others. Maybe it was just the general characteristics that made us aware of the influence s/he can have on other people. Maybe there was a teacher who had a particular way of teaching and unconsciously transmitted to us the love to teaching. Maybe it was just a small nearly insignificant experience that made us think about the impact this person had on other people. Or in other cases it may be completely the opposite, knowing that the general characteristics and particular events that were enacted by this person are the ones we would never emulate, and we plan our journey on completely different lines. Apart from your choice, reflect upon the influence of a particular literature teacher in the light of his/her general characteristics and in the light of a particular incident that you still remember.

General Characteristics

Critical Incident

- Context
- Narrate what happened
- Why do you think the incident evolved in that way?
- What does this incident mean to you?
- Why is this critical incident still important to you today?

## 12 Images of a teacher of literature

We all carry within our hearts an image of the ideal teacher we strive to become. During this course you will familiarise yourself with different roles and responsibilities of a teacher of literature. This image will remodel the existent image which although very crude still impacts on the way you want to become.

One way of exploring the ideal image of a literature teacher is through a metaphor, which is comparing what a teacher does to a host of other professions. Pick the one you choose from the list below and further elaborate what are the characteristics that are comparable and maybe those that are miles away.

Repeat this activity once the course ends and after your first teaching practice.

The matchmaker

The missionary

The tourist guide

The guardian

The general

The mechanic

The psychologist

The model

Others

## 13 Looking at yourself as a teacher of literature

After reflecting on a past teacher of literature that left an indelible mark on you, it is time to reflect on yourself as a prospective teacher and specifically a teacher of Maltese literature. The aim behind this task is to enable you to identify early on in your profession those aspects and characteristics that you hold as:

- helping you in developing as a teacher of Maltese literature;
- hindering you from developing further; and finally,
- reservoirs of energy that will keep you going in difficult times.

### A list of characteristics

1. What are those characteristics you would like to develop as a teacher of literature?
2. How would you describe your role as a teacher of literature in a secondary school classroom?
3. Do you feel any responsibility when teaching Maltese literature?
4. Do you foresee any major hurdles in this process of becoming a teacher of Maltese literature?
5. How would you describe an ideal situation where you teach literature to your highest capability (for example, no examinations, no tutors, attentive students....)?
6. If during a job interview someone asks you to describe those characteristics that would make you their ideal candidate, what would they be?

### Your literary training

1. What aspects of Maltese literature (specific authors, periods, genres) do you consider as your forte?
2. What aspects of Maltese literature (specific authors, periods, genres) do you consider as your major weakness?
3. Is there any specific knowledge and/or any particular reading competency that you consider necessary to a teacher who would like to teach in a secondary school?
4. Are you reading more than is expected from you to broaden your repertoire of Maltese literature from which later on you can choose different texts?
5. Having recognised lacunae in your literary training, what are you willing to do to improve on that situation?

### Your interest in the literary world

1. Do you take interest in cultural activities related to literature? Did you ever attend a literary evening? Are you a member of a book club? Did you ever participate in a group discussion about literature? Do you have a subscription to a literary magazine?
2. When was the last time you went to the theatre? If it has been some time now that you attended a theatrical representation, what holds you back? If you never attended a theatrical representation, what is stopping you from going next weekend?
3. How do you keep up to date with contemporary Maltese literature?
4. What is holding you back in developing as a teacher of literature whose lifestyle reflects his/her own passion for literature?

### Your interest in pedagogy

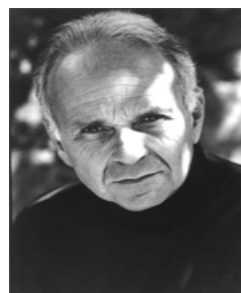
1. How many hours per week do you assign to studying material that will help you become a more dedicated and competent Maltese literature teacher?
2. What are you willing to do to become a more competent teacher of Maltese literature?
3. How would you measure your successes as a teacher of Maltese literature?
4. Is there a person that you feel can help you in your journey to become a teacher of Maltese literature?
5. If you identified a particular person, or have a particular person in mind, what type of relationship do you have with him/her? How can you improve on your relationship?

## 14 The anxiety of theory

Many student teachers feel comfortable so long as during their pedagogy lectures they discuss and learn about different practical methods they can use when teaching literature, as if these methods and techniques were magical formulae that make miracles in classrooms! A good teacher of literature, and above all a true professional, should delve deeper than the stated and walk the road less travelled. A good literature teacher should try to understand what makes one practice better than another. Reading seminal texts on the teaching of literature by pedagogues and literary theorist who wrote during the last few years, people like Jonathan Culler, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and above all the guru in the teaching of literature, Louise Rosenblatt, can shed light on this difficult and at times lonely endeavour. These authors contributed with specific ideas – literary competence, lacunae in the reading process, interpretive community, the continuum between aesthetic and efferent reading – and moved forward the research on the teaching of literature.

As a novice you should read and familiarise yourself with these concepts that your practice – whether knowingly or unknowingly, whether you want it or not, whether you admit it or not – is based upon. If you take pains to understand these new concepts, your reading of these texts, the discussion that will follow and, furthermore, your own practice as a teacher of literature, will make a lot more sense.

Where is the anxiety of theory of those that prefer to walk the road less travelled, of those that feel anxiety only in front of superficial ideas and easy solution to complex problems?



When you are reading alone or as part of a group the assigned article/chapter, if you want to improve the process of understanding then follow these steps:

- Look for the main idea. There is no need to understand all the words and paragraphs to get a grasp of the main idea.
- Identify the keywords and find where they are explained or used most in the article.
- Differentiate between arguments and examples.
- Take note of the former and try to find similar examples in Maltese of the latter.
- Make use of a specialised dictionary or the internet when you want to clarify any ideas.
- In not more than twenty minutes, share with the whole group the main concept of the article.

When you finish reading the article/chapter, discussing the article/chapter, listen to the presentations... answer the following:

*In what way do you find the ideas explored in your article relevant to the teaching of literature at the secondary level in Malta?*



## Does literary theory liberate or stifle teaching Maltese literature?

Nick Peim (1993) in *Critical Theory and the English Teacher* critically adopts a number of post-structural literary theories to exemplify how these can bring about change in the teaching of literature in secondary classrooms.

The above mentioned theories, when taken together, may intimidate the novice reader. However, follow closely the instructions below. When you reach the very end you will have gained greater insights and better understanding of some of them.

### ► Step one - Reading 'differently' a text

Write a brief critical comment on a literary text of your choice in the light of the aims and insights of one or more of the following literary theories: semiotics (pp. 41-45); phenomenology (pp. 45-47); psychoanalysis (pp. 47-54); deconstruction (pp. 54-61); feminist theory (pp. 64-65).

### ► Step two - Design a lesson

Write a detailed lesson plan where you show how step after step you will guide your secondary pupils to read a text 'differently' and in a hidden way follow the principles of one particular theory. List all the questions you intend to answer during that lesson and that will guide you in the discussion that you plan to lead. Try to devise a task sheet different from usual ones.

### ► Step three - Reflect

The following questions can help you reflect on the experience in steps one and two:

- Why did you choose that particular theory? ■ What attracted most your attention? ■ What did not convince you in the other theories? ■ How do you feel when reading a text that you do not understand immediately? ■ How difficult or easy was it to understand what was expected from the reader working within the framework of that theory? ■ Did you use any reference material to better understand the chosen theory? ■ What criteria did you follow when selecting a text to experiment the new way of reading? ■ What did you discover using this new way of reading a text? ■ How easy or difficult was it to design a lesson plan that you weaved along a particular reading theory? ■ What would you predict would be the students' reaction to this lesson? ■ Do you feel you will ever put into practice this way of reading a text with your students in a secondary school?

### ► Step four - Respond in essay form

Do you feel that literary theory liberates or stifles the teaching of literature in a secondary school?

## 16 The (ir)relevance of literature

From time to time, literature comes under attack from those that hold that it is without any utility with no relevance in the education of future citizens; an accusation that knows its origin in Plato's *Republic*. The defence of literature from those who perniciously criticise literature's role in society and in the holistic development of a person was the mission of many poets, literary theorists, philosophers and pedagogues. The writing of those that defend literature's privileged position in a society is known as apologetic literature.

A recent attack on the value of literature was voiced by Morgan, a character in Aidan Chambers' *Breaktime*. In a way Morgan's words synthesise the major arguments against literature of all times.

### CHARGES AGAINST LITERATURE

(I mean fiction)

I charge that:

1. Literature as a way of telling stories is out-moded. Done. Finished. Dead. Stories as entertainment are easier got from film and TV these days.
2. Literature is, by definition, a lie. Literature is a fiction. Fiction is opposite to fact. Fact is truth. I am concerned with truth.
3. Novels, plays, poetry make life appear neat and tidy. Life is not neat and tidy. It is untidy, chaotic, always changing. Critics even complain if a story is not well plotted or 'logical'. (Life, logical!) They dismiss characters for being inconsistent. (How consistent are you, Ditto? Or me?) And they admire 'the literary convention', by which they mean obeying rules, as in ludo or chess. SO:
4. Literature is a GAME, played for FUN, in which the reader pretends that he is playing at life. But it is not life. It is a pretence. When you read a story you are pretending a lie.

THEREFORE:

5. Literature is a sham, no longer useful, effluent, CRAP.

As I said.

Q.E.D.

Morgan

Write a letter to Morgan:

- a. To show your solidarity with his arguments.

OR

- b. Defend literature.

Whatever stance you take, you may refer to ideas you read about literature's contribution and maybe specific incidents in your upbringing as a student of literature and now as a teacher of literature.

## 17 Towards a personal definition of literature

Teachers of literature, like other specialists who study literature as their area of specialisation, need to define their alleged expertise by defining the stuff they work with: literature.

But this task may be superfluous or at the same time daunting, when one considers that after two thousand years no one definition satisfies all, and that literature is much more similar to an ever evolving creature than to solid rock. Maybe it is just one of those irresistible questions with no real answer?!

However, you might be tempted to take a go at defining literature yourself. Keep in mind that the way you define literature will have great impact on what is selected in class.

1. Write your definition of literature.

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2. Write a definition of literature suitable for secondary school.

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3. In what ways are definition in 1 and 2 similar OR different?

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## **APPENDIX B**

### **The Two Rubrics Used in the Assessment of the Portfolio and Study-Unit**

## THE FIRST EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING LITERATURE IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL: THE PORTFOLIO EVALUATION RUBRIC

Candidate's Name:	
Date the Portfolio was Presented:	
Portfolio Assessor:	

### Legend

1	2	3	4	5
Low quality work Unacceptable work No evidence Uncreative work		Average quality work Presentable work Little evidence Work with little originality		Above average work Exceptional presentation Unequivocal evidence Creative work

### The Criteria

#### A. The Portfolio Process

A.1 In the portfolio there is evidence that the common elements were developed during a period of weeks, coupled with an extra effort post-teaching practice carried out to finalise the individual component and different reflections.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
A.2 The candidate attended all the conferences organised (except if s/he missed a session due to serious reasons such as illness).	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
A.3 The portfolio encapsulates enough evidence to demonstrate growth during the last six weeks of teaching in a secondary school.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

#### B. The Quality of Presentation of the Portfolio

B.1 The portfolio is presented in a neat and original manner.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
B.2 The portfolio has all the sections clearly marked.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
B.3 The portfolio contains a variety of artefacts, such as different writing genres, pictures, illustrations, mind maps, photographs, tables and the like.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
B.4 The portfolio is written in standard Maltese and without any orthographical mistakes (except for typos).	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
B.5 The portfolio contains a list of references used throughout the whole portfolio written in a systematic way.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

#### C. The Common Contents of the Portfolio

C.1 The Portfolio has all the common contents. (Abstract / My portfolio in a nut shell; Content List; The Context where I taught literature for the first time; A Positive Model; Reflections and Evaluations).	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
C.2 The Portfolio includes the school's context where the candidate taught literature, the candidate demonstrates his/her observation skills and a wide array of documents to substantiate his/her observations.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

C.3 The candidate clearly and convincingly explains why s/he chose the particular model of positive practice: a) why they are the best, b) how they were used, and c) what prompted him/her to select that particular model instead of others.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
C.4 The lesson evaluations have two main characteristics: a) a situation, a dilemma or one critical incident from a series that took place during the lesson; and b) an attempt to contextualise and better understand this situation, dilemma or critical incident with the theoretical underpinnings of teaching literature.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

#### D. The Individualised Content of the Portfolio

D.1 The reasons behind the themes' choice (relationship with the experience of teaching literature in a secondary school and/or personal interest) are clearly explained.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
D.2 All artefacts in the individualised section of the portfolio are related to one theme.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
D.3 There is clear evidence that the candidate tried to view and explore the theme from different perspectives.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
D.4 The individualised section of the portfolio is original, even if some ideas are extrapolated from the list presented in the <i>Guidebook</i> .	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

#### E. The Reflections

E.1 The reflective pieces gel and hold together the portfolio.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
E.2 The candidate explains what s/he has learnt from the portfolio experience.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
E.3 The candidate chose to include a reflection on the portfolio's utility and contribution in her professional development, at least of one or more of the following: a) a selection of the Examiner's comments in the teaching practice reports; b) a selection from the correspondence with the lecturer related to the development of the portfolio; c) the timetable's hidden meaning; and /or d) her personal meaning of the teaching practice file once this experience has come to an end.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
E.4 The candidate demonstrated that s/he has reaching the level of critical reflection expected at this level (vide <i>Guidebook</i> for a description and examples of the levels of reflection expected).	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

Comment/s

Portfolio's Assessor's Name:

The Candidate's Final Mark:  Date:

<p align="center"><b>Rubric for the Evaluation of the Different Components of:</b>  <i>The Literary Experience in the Secondary School</i></p>
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*Student's Name:*

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Your Comment of 15 Different Articles from the Reading Pack		15%
Criteria	Note/Comment/Evidence	+
A.1 In your comments you demonstrate that you are being critical.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the <i>Guidebook</i> for a description of and examples of reflective writing.</li> <li>Be on the lookout to avoid as much as possible a descriptive writing or a summary of an article.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
A.2 In your comment you infuse references to particular critical incidents or situations you experienced when you were still a student in secondary or post secondary school, including references to university.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You would reach this criterion if you narrate and reflect on an incident of when you were still young, that relates to what you read.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
A.3 You filled all the boxes in the particular form.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simply fill in all the boxes in the form.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5

Your Answer to the Different Reflective Tasks		25%
Criteria	Note/Comment/Evidence	+
B.1 Your answer relates to the question and uses the appropriate writing style envisaged in the Reflective Task.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In most Reflective Tasks, you were provided with a number of questions to aid reflection. Edit your answer so as not to resemble an interview or answers to a comprehension test.</li> <li>Use subheadings to help the reader make better sense of your thoughts.</li> <li>Make sure that your answer emulates the genre's particular characteristics.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
B.2 Your answer reflects your opinion on the matter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing with a strong sense of voice.</li> <li>There is nothing wrong in making a subjective argument on an issue related to the reflective tasks.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
B.3 In your answer you make a conscious effort to reflect on the issues highlighted in the reflective task's question.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the <i>Guidebook</i> for a description of and exemplars of reflective writing.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
B.4 You make specific references to particular personal experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>You could say you have reached this criteria if you select a memory you're your childhood, narrate it in not so many words, and you use it as a springboard for your own reflection.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
B.5 When needed, your answer adopts a series of references.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not all reflective tasks need references (for examples Your Reading history is one with little if no references).</li> <li>However, there are some Reflective Tasks that require you to explain and document from where you got your ideas.</li> <li>Use a reference system consistently at the end of your Reflective Tasks.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5

Your Reflective Journal		15%
Criteria	Note/Comment/Evidence	$\times 3$ $\div 5$
C.1 Reflective writing, loyal to the student-teacher's opinion rather than being complacent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the <i>Guidebook</i> for a description of and examples of reflective writing.</li> <li>A piece of writing with a great sense of voice; you resonate in every sentence.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
C.2 The reflective journal was duly filled after each session throughout the whole academic year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Check that you have the date of each individual piece of journal entry</li> <li>Teaching practice was the only period you could have opted out from writing your journal.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
C.3 The reflective entry focused on one specific issue or theme that arose during the lecture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Every lecture had a theme, and therefore your writing is inspired by or relates to it.</li> <li>Your writing should be focused rather than a general comment.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
C.4 In your writing there is some evidence that you have moved or tied to move beyond the lecture notes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid having a summary or paraphrase of your lecture notes!</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
C.5 In your journal entry you include both questions that were raised during the lecture and possible or tentative answers to those questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speculation or making daring questions (for example 'who knows if...?' 'if...?' 'could it be that...?') are ingredients of a serious reflective process.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5

The Literature Syllabus (Group Work)		10%
Criteria	Note/Comment/Evidence	$\div 2$
D.1 The syllabus follows rigorously the different sections and requirements as indicated in the information sheet related to this section.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Every section should begin on a fresh page with the title clearly written on top specifying the contents.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
D.2 The lesson's aims, the selected texts and the relative scheme of work, demonstrate a developed content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read through the different writings so as to select those that are most representative.</li> <li>Think of new and up-to-date methods that emphasise individual and communitarian response.</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5
<i>Student's Mark</i>		

The Portfolio		40%
<i>First Reader's Mark</i>	<i>Lecturer's Mark</i>	$\div 2$

### THE FINAL MARK / GRADE

COMMENT	REFLECTIVE TASKS	JOURNAL	SYLLABUS	PORTFOLIO	TOTAL

A+ = 100-95 | A = 94-80 | B+ = 79-75 | B = 74-70 | C+ = 69-65 | C = 64-55 | D+ = 54-50 | D = 49-45 | F = 44-0



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