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Writing in Discussion Forums: Between Primary Genre and Secondary Genre

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Teaching methods supported by technologies help to spread new types of verbal written productions. It is the case for forums, where students are required to interact in order to resolve problems and issues raised by teachers. Forum is the chosen media because of the following characteristics. As it is asynchronous, it slows down time and helps to distance (Bruillard 2010). Furthermore, as exchanges are public and interactive, it promotes explanation and structuration of point of views (Mangenot, 2002). Forum has a function of “mobilization of ideas,” it allows a progressive sort through ideas, it facilitates decentralization and enables gradual adoption. Furthermore, it helps to raise group identity by creating a sort of “groupal skin” (Rinaudo, 2010). As part of a Master of Education and teacher training program, students support for their research papers is provided by discussion forums. We assume that in certain conditions, writing in forums supports the construction of a “discursive community,” which likely promotes reconfiguration and “secondarization” effects on student writing. Bakhtin (1984) distinguishes between the first “gender” (spontaneous production of statements related to the context) and second kinds (production developed statements). From this, Bautier (2005) develops the concept of “secondarization” (Bautier 2005), processes by which the student considers school activities as objects to query, which implies a shift from performance to procedure, and the adoption of a new purpose: to understand the proceedings (Bautier & Goigoux, 2004).

To understand if forums promote this “secondarization process,” we studied twenty student forums (both posts and intermediate writings). The study shows two types of student productions: one whose messages belong to a speech or a first position (Profile 1); and one whose messages show a form of

secondarization more or less accomplished (Profile 2).

This analysis shows that forums enable progress to those who are already in the process of secondarization (Profile 2): if the qualifications specified in writing by the research are already well developed, forums only reflect it; if they are being built, forums, in this case, seem to contribute to their acquisition. However, for students who have not engaged this process (Profile 1), the forum reflects the inability to secondarize. In fact, the forum seems to be mainly useful for intermediate students, allowing them to practice rigorous thinking, testing their analyses and nourishing their reflections with the views of others. It seems forums strongly enhance implicit meanings in communication but promote academic inequalities that correspond most closely to the kind of students in profile 1 who need to be guided more explicitly.

Les nouvelles modalités d'enseignement s'appuyant sur les technologies contribuent à diffuser de nouveaux types de production verbale écrite. C'est le cas des forums, où les étudiants doivent interagir aux problèmes et questions posés par les enseignants. Dans le cadre d'un Master Métiers de l'Enseignement, l'accompagnement à la recherche des étudiants s'effectue via des forums de discussion. Nous présumons qu'à certaines conditions, l'écriture sur les forums favorise la construction d'une « communauté discursive » ayant des effets de reconfiguration sur les écrits de recherche, le forum participant alors du processus de « secondarisation » (par lequel les objets étudiés se constituent comme objets de savoir). L'étude des messages d'étudiants et de leurs écrits de recherche permet d'observer deux profils d'écriture différents, en termes de secondarisation :

- celui dont les messages relèvent d'un discours ou d'un positionnement « premier » (Profil 1),
- celui dont les messages attestent d'une forme de secondarisation, plus ou moins aboutie (Profil 2).

L'analyse montre que le forum permet de faire progresser ceux qui sont déjà dans le processus de secondarisation (profil 2). Pour les étudiants qui n'ont pas enclenché ce processus (profil 1), le forum ne fait que refléter l'incapacité à secondariser, manifeste dans l'écrit de recherche. Il semble que les implicites liés à l'usage du forum jouent un rôle important et relèvent pour certains de la « coconstruction des inégalités » universitaires.

New teaching methods supported by new technologies help to spread and legitimize new types of verbal written production, while making them more sustainable. These new production types are part synchronous part asynchronous, part verbal part written, part individual part collective. This is particularly the case for forums, where students are required to interact in order to address problems and issues raised by teachers for the purposes of learning and/or training.

Specifically, as part of a Master of Education degree preparing students for the teaching, education and training professions, the scaffolding of research writing skills for students who are studying using the Distance Learning method only (henceforth DL) or a “hybrid” method (part DL, part face-to-face) is provided by discussion forums where groups of students interact, knowing that over the two year course they must write a research paper taking the form of a research note at the end of master’s year 1 (30,000 words) and a research thesis at the end of master’s year 2 (50,000 words).

We assume that in certain conditions, the new ways of using writing arising from the use of forums foster the construction of a “discourse community” (Bernié, 2002) promoting the reconfiguration of research writing, with the forum becoming part of the process of “secondarization” (Bautier, 2005).

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Remote Interaction in Discussion Forums for Learning

The numerous studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and computer-assisted collaborative learning (CACL) describe the advantages for teachers’ professional development (Bruillard, 2010; Daele and Charlier, 2002; Ferone, 2011). While there is no consensus on the analysis methods used, researchers in this field mainly refer to the theories of Wenger (1998) who underlines the social dimension of learning and the importance of participating in “communities of practice.” It is true that it is thanks to interactions in a community of practice that the learner can develop a pertinent representation of the profession, internalize the content and didactics and accept the personal transformations initiated by the learning process (Fabre, 1994). Bernié (2002) also underlines the need to build socio-discursive spaces for the sharing of meanings in “discourse communities,” as training depends above all on affiliation processes (Coulon, 1997) and identity construction (Dubar, 1991).

A discussion forum proves useful for encouraging interactions in learning due to its characteristics. Being asynchronous, it slows down time and fosters detachment (Bruillard, 2010). Furthermore, as it is public and interactive, it

promotes the structuration of exchanges and the presentation of points of view (Mangenot, 2002). A forum thus serves a purpose of “mobilizing ideas,” enabling the construction of a list of possibilities and allowing the creation of a kind of “group skin” (Rinaudo, 2010). Kuster and Lameul (2010) also advocate the use of debate forums for teacher training:

Debate forums could be of key use in training, by designing them in a way that shifts the sharing of training responsibilities to the student teachers: the student teachers would produce the main substance of the training thanks to the interlacing of the descriptions of their actual practices and the arguments for the rationale behind them; the teacher trainers would have a special vantage point from which to take part in the conceptual clarification of the themes addresses, and in the critical analysis of the practices described.

Within this technical pedagogical approach, the role of writing is crucial.

1.2 The Discourse Community and Role of Writing for Learning During Training and for Building a Research Perspective

Writing makes it possible to step back and think and fosters the construction of a writing subject identity (Bautier & Rochex, 1998). Crinon and Guigue (2006) also underline the importance of writing in the professionalization of teachers, to structure and give meaning to their experience:

Writing [indeed] leads the students, not only to state their experience (its unseen opacity), but to give meaning to it (by putting it into writing and by the choice of words) and to progress by developing the same perspective as that of the professional field in which their words will be heard.

Writing in this context also makes it possible to become part of a discourse community, that of education sciences research students who are observing/querying/interpreting phenomena related to teaching/learning, the subject of the research paper required. The dialogical component, asynchronous though it may be, would contribute through the confrontation of points of view. The role of language thus seems to be decisive in the process for training research students and on account of the characteristics of forums, writing in forums is conducive to facilitating learning and setting in motion the “secondarization” process.

1.3 Secundarization

The distinction made by Bakhtin (1984) between primary genres (spontaneous production of context-related statements) and secondary genres (elaborate production of unanchored statements like literary text) results in the concept of “secundarization” (Bautier, 2005), the process by which the pupil considers “school activities as a world of objects to query upon which they may (and must) exercise thought activities and a specific task” and implying “on the one hand, the removal of the pupils’ attention from performance to procedure, and on the other, the adoption of a new purpose: to understand the procedure” (Bautier & Goigoux, 2004).

This process is a source of differentiation between pupils as it makes it possible to distinguish those who can construct the world’s objects as knowledge objects from those who cannot, who are simply accomplishing tasks for example or remain at the I-here-now specific to primary genres.

If this concept was devised in the context of teaching pupils/pupil learning, we contend that it can be transferred to situations of teaching students/student learning, providing curriculum continuity, and that writing in forums is conducive to exploring the conditions for this transfer, if we consider research writing to be the final outcome of the process and the forum to be a means to that end.

2. Data

The data was collected in the framework of the “research” teaching units of this M.Ed. degree, the purpose of which is to initiate students to research in the field of education sciences by integrating their work into an ongoing research project of the laboratory in question. The aim is to encourage the analysis of professional objects from the perspective of knowledge production (observe/query/interpret) along three lines: the learning content and materials; the learning outcomes; and the teaching practices.

The lessons, combined with forums, provide scientific content including both theoretical and methodological content, with discussion and regulation seminars taking the form of webinars (for the DL model) and on-campus sessions (for the hybrid model).

2.1 Forums

We observed the forums combined with the lessons of the research option for two groups (M₁ - M₂) using distance learning (DL) only and two “hybrid”

groups (M₁ - M₂) (part distance learning, part face-to-face learning), that is to say four groups of students over two years. The audience for these two types of learning models is different because for the first, recruitment is selective, and directed to students who for the most part have highly-developed socio-linguistic and socio-cognitive skills, while for the second recruitment is open, notably attracting weaker students.

The forums are designed to be the continuation of the remote sessions: an online lesson (theoretical or methodological content) is systematically attached to a forum, where elements found in the corresponding lesson must be commented upon, discussed, or illustrated. Part of the lesson content is identical in both models of the option (DL and hybrid), as the aim is to build a shared culture, even if this shared culture is slightly colored by the research profiles specific to the lecturers-researchers responsible for the Teaching Units.

The written material that is the subject of the present analysis, and that forms the data thereof, is the body of messages from the discussion forums provided for the students of both models, on the same course questions. Regulation forums or forums less likely to trigger interactions were not included in the corpus.

By way of an example, here are three of the questions posed:

1. The book "*Le bonnet rouge*" (*The red bonnet*): expansive or restrained? (Lesson on comprehension and interpretation of texts from children's literature)
2. According to Jacques Crinon (2000, p.10), the main obstacle to the production of intermediate writings in the classroom lies "in the persistent idea that the mastery of written language is a precondition to its utilization." What do you think? (Lesson on written production)
1. What do you think of the way in which the three dyads work together? Are there any differences in the way in which they collaborate? Do they have any impact on learning? (Lesson on collaborative learning, corpus analysis)

The analysis covered 271 student messages, distributed over 18 forums, posted by around twenty students in four groups. The discussions are long and structured, with an average message length of about 200 words (see Appendices 1 and 2), showing that the production is more closely related to structured writing than to the spoken word. By way of a comparison, in Piolat (2006), 13 forums are studied, and the number of words per message varies between 48 and 97 words depending on the forums.

Table 19.1. Number of messages analyzed by group

Group	M1 Distance course	M1 Hybrid course	M2 Distance course	M2 Hybrid course
Number of forums	7	5	2	4
Number of messages	140	50	39	42
Total forums	18			
Total messages	271			

The research papers are divided between research notes (end of master's year 1) and research theses (end of master's year 2). The messages observed were those of students posting regularly on the chosen forums, that is around twenty messages (thirteen research notes and seven theses).

3. Analysis

This type of forum, identified as being set in an institutional context, engages the students in a specific way of using writing most unlike the one they would use in a totally different context: if all written production is the “management of constraints” (Plane, 2006), writing on an institutional forum strongly highlights, in our view, the “constraints resulting from prescriptions imposed by the assignment or that the writer imposes on himself.” In this case, these constraints notably include the supposed linguistic requirements, as well as the constraints “imposed by the production medium”—in other words, the influence of the specific space of the forum and its dialogical configuration.

It may thus be noted that whatever the level of difficulty for the students, the enunciative choices made by the students in their messages belong to an academic style of writing, even if it is to a more or less elaborate degree, in a written language that is characterized as follows:

- Consideration of the communication context,
- Textual cohesion and consistency, with in particular an argumentative focus translating into linguistic markers,
- Appropriate syntax and spelling.

The example of Amandine, DL M1, on intermediate writings illustrates this:

The idea that written language must be mastered in order to use it seems self-evident. For indeed at first sight, how is it possible to write without mastering the codes of writing. Today, however, the conception of writing has broadened. It no

longer only takes into account the mastery of written codes.

However, we observe two different writing profiles with regard to secondarization:

- One where the messages pertain to speech or a primary position (profile 1), marked in particular by an immediate consideration of other people's point of view, often not reformulated, the repetition of previous remarks with no recontextualization, general statements, etc.
- One where the messages show some form of secundarization, more or less accomplished (profile 2), marked in particular by the recontextualization of remarks in relation to previous ones, the reformulation of previous statements, with concessive modalities, tautly strung, in some cases a summary of previous remarks, etc.

3.1 Profile 1: The Writing on the Forums

Profile 1-1: Impermeability to Knowledge Brought by the Lesson and by the Interventions of Others

The example of Anaïs, hybrid M₂, on children's literature:

I will try not to repeat what has already been said. I think that children's literature gives pupils the desire to read, I find that the different books read in school contribute to the interpretation of the real world. They also help pupils with written production thanks to the analyses done in the classroom. The pupils develop their imagination.

We see here a very weak recognition of the contributions of the lesson and of the remarks of others (brushed off by a rhetorical diversion, "*I will try not to repeat what has already been said*"), an immediate personal position (I-here-now: "*I think*," "*I find*"), the reiteration of doxic and naive perceptions (exposure to books being enough to give the desire to read, reading serving to improve writing, etc.).

Profile 1-2: "Primarization" of Secondary Discourse and Prescription

The example of Claire, hybrid M₂, on children's literature:

This lesson was very interesting and taught me that children's literature **is not stereotyped by an appropriate vocabulary**, with Jean Giono's example "The man who planted the trees" we see that only the cover illustration "**sets the tone**" but the text remains the same for adult and child readers. **It is**

blatant to see how a book may be read on two levels. With regard more particularly to comprehension, **the focus of my research**, this difficulty represents a dilemma for the teacher who wants to draw the pupils' comprehension to the surface **by making them search for possible interpretations of inferences. It seems clear that** this type of work must be adapted to children not only with regard to their reading skills, as one might think, but just as much with regard to their experience and literary culture.

This example shows an attempt to take into consideration knowledge brought by the lesson (inappropriate vocabulary, improper reuse of notions, misapplication of concepts, for example those of “*stereotype*,” of “*interpretation*” or of “*inference*”). In parallel, the student introduces the prescription as being self-evident.

This student takes time to reply and to try to report what she thinks she has understood, with application and implication. However, she is ceaselessly exporting elements from the scientific domain to the everyday, by the use of a “primary” vocabulary, reformulating in a kind of incomprehensible jargon, where it is difficult to know whether it corresponds to the perception that she has of scientific language or it demonstrates an incapacity of expression.

Profile 1-3: Plagiarism (Extreme Case)

The example of Marie, hybrid Mr, on adult dictation; two cases of plagiarism, of which an example is presented below (the points in common between the two messages are in bold):

Published 4th March (Thomas): This adult dictation given to a nursery school class 2 shows diversified knowledge of a literary kind. The choice of title “Goldilocks and the Wolf” plunges us directly into literary memories intertwining the tale of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” with that of “Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf,” fairy tales with which nursery school pupils are often familiar. This first indication informs us that this adult dictation is part of a specific literary genre, that of the fairy tale. The incipit “Once upon a time” used at the very beginning of this text confirms that we are indeed in a fairy tale. . . .

Published 7th March (Marie); (there are several entries between the two messages) Hello Mrs. (teacher's surname),

This adult dictation was given to a nursery school class 2, and brings together diversified knowledge of a literary kind. The title of the story “Goldilocks and the Wolf” takes us into literary memories mixing the tale of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” with that of “Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf,” these fairy tales are often familiar to young pupils. This adult dictation is part of a specific literary genre, that of the fairy tale. . . .

The failure to understand the challenges of the requested task results in the student not using the lessons provided and plagiarizing what other students write (reformulating certain turns of phrase so that they are no longer strictly identical), while addressing the teacher. The *Hello Mrs. (teacher’s surname)* is indeed proof that the author of the message is addressing the prescriptive teacher of the forum and not the other students, as the forum is not seen to be a dynamic, collective space conducive to reflection by the confrontation with and discussion of the ideas of others.

3.2 Profile 1: Research Writing: “Primary” Position/Discourse

The discourse characteristics observed in the research writings of students of profile 1 are comparable to those in the forums.

To take the example of Marie, Theoretical framework for research note, hybrid M1:

Some children say that they don’t like reading and it is true that the joy of reading is not for everyone. . . . Documentary reading demands less cognitive effort and secundarization is not always necessary. However, the author of a literary text does not say everything, does not explain everything!

Or the example of Claire, Theoretical framework for research thesis, hybrid M2:

The teacher or another adult will have to motivate pupils of this age and support them in this discovery, which will start with observation and may lead to detailed literary analysis: such as finding the type or genre of a text.

These two examples are characterized by naive representations of what is involved in work on literary texts, erroneous conceptions, for example on the joy of reading or the inherent difficulty of certain types of text, the failure to take into account available knowledge, with no indication of reference au-

thors, and the misuse of concepts, such as secundarization, undefined. This is almost always accompanied by the use of prescriptions, with references to universal solutions that are never queried.

The “primary” position or discourse of this writing profile is reflected in the following way in research writing, despite what was sometimes strong scaffolding by the mentor:

- The failure to take into account the works of others, indicated by the absence of references, or by references that are purely formal,
- The presence of generalities or clichés,
- Numerous prescriptions (schools must, the teacher will have to . . .),
- The juxtaposition of enunciations,
- An unstructured, summative strategy (the aim being to reach the length required),
- A strict obedience to the announced rules (the approach to and stages of the research paper being purely mechanistic).

The failure to understand the quintessence of research work is for these students partly based on an illusion, which is tantamount to a misunderstanding: mistaking self-sufficiency for autonomy, resulting in the exclusion of the work, the ideas and even the existence of others, who are only recognized in the form of collective and prescriptive shared spaces, considered to be private.

For profile 1, writing on the forum would appear to be of no benefit. In these cases, it is less a question of effects than of identical strategies, reproduced in parallel with no cohesion or correlation.

3.3 Profile 2: From Forum to Research Paper, Secundarization Undertaken in Continuity

To take the example of Maëlys, DL M₂:

Excerpt from the forum: . . . As C. Tauveron underlined in her article on . . . Illustration, in my view, enables . . . As C. Tauveron says (2002) . . . Nonetheless . . . At this stage of the narrative, **it is still reasonable to wonder . . .** The “why” of the denouement forms the equivocal area of the work. It may, in a teaching-learning situation, be the subject of an interpretive debate as it lends itself to **a different appraisal depending on the individual and his own life story, experience and knowledge.**

Excerpt from the thesis:

The necessity of deliberative debate: clarifying the grey areas of the narrative

Comprehension thus covers a univocal, undisputable area that must be shared by all the readers. **As C. Tauveron says (2002) . . .**

At this stage of the narrative, **it is still reasonable to wonder . . .** Thus, as defined by C. Tauveron (2002)

The polysemy of the story

. . . The “why” of the denouement forms the equivocal area of the work. It may, in a teaching-learning situation, be the subject of an interpretive debate as it lends itself to **a different appraisal depending on the individual and his own life story, experience and knowledge.**

The bold characters indicate common elements between the reply on the forum and its reuse in the thesis, where the initially ad hoc response to a request for analysis nourishes the dynamics of the analysis in the thesis.

In the case in point, what is written on the forum is an argumentation that is often quite long, suggesting a reply to the question asked, nourished both by theoretical contributions (in this case the lessons) and the contributions of previous posts that are truly taken into consideration, whether they are validated or contested, and illustrated by examples taken from the corpus to be examined (book or teaching sequence) or from personal experience.

In the same way, we observe in research writing where the writing pertains to profile 2:

- An argumentative organization appertaining to “dispositio,”
- A consideration of the otherness of the discourses (other contributors, theoretical knowledge) leading to a personal and pertinent reflection,
- A reinvestment of forum contributions that reinforce a scientific approach.

For these students, the writing on the forum demonstrates the development process of a reflection that is both collective and personal, the very kind that is sought after in the writing of a master’s thesis.

4. Discussion: Ways of Using Forums and Reinforcement of Inequalities

The forum is used here with minimum scaffolding from teachers and a de-

liberate absence of institutionalization. These choices are founded upon the conception of a discursive approach where the students, assumed to be autonomous, are capable on their own of benefiting from interactions with their peers and reaping the rewards.

However, the notion of the co-construction of educational inequalities demonstrates that:

- There is a correlation between “students’ socio-discursive and socio-cognitive aptitude and, on the other hand, the opacity and implicit nature of school requirements” (Bautier & Goigoux, 2004).
- An “aptitude for study” is peculiar to “those who are already most familiar with the school environment and its requirements,” while teachers assume that this familiarity has already been fully acquired by all (Rochex & Crinon, 2011).
- Recurrent “misunderstandings” prevail in school activities: task performing *vs.* perception of the challenges of cognitive development (Bautier & Rayou, 2009).

Our observation of research forums for students in master’s years 1 and 2 leads us to think that the concept of the co-construction of inequalities can be transferred from the context of school to the context of university.

We notice that there is a correlation between the aptitudes of weaker students and the implicit nature of the forum requirements, which teachers assume to be self-evident. If the aim of these forums is to put students into an inquiring position in their own research work, that does not mean that this aim is made explicit, as it is assumed that the change of position has already been understood. In fact, while certain students grasp the cognitive challenges of the activity, others are simply accomplishing tasks: the cognitive misunderstanding is indeed under way.

5. Conclusion

Forums enable those who are already in the process of secundarization (profile 2) to progress: either the research writing skills sought are already well developed, in which case the forum simply reflects them; or they are in the process of being built, in which case the forum seems to contribute to their acquisition.

However, for students who have not yet engaged this process (profile 1) the forum simply reflects the inability to secundarize, evident in their research writing.

Forums would thus appear to be useful for intermediate students, allowing them to engage in rigorous reflection, as well as for stronger students, as

they test their analyses and nourish their reflection with the views of others.

Forums would appear to overly rely upon implicit communication and contribute to the co-construction of academic inequalities that probably correspond to students with profile 1. This kind of student would need to be guided more explicitly.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Forum on Adult Dictation

Instructions:

“Here is a text used for an adult dictation in nursery school class 2, in May. Identify the literary knowledge that the text demonstrates.”

Participants and number of words per message:

DL M1		Hybrid M1	
Anne	255	Alice	298
Lucie	246	Thomas	345
Christine	170	Manuelle	355
Chaima	144	Jeanne	263
Birgit	124	Mélissa	527
Manuela	251	Chloé	227
Romane	171	Marie	322
Clara	148	Julia	229
		Fatima	195
		Joy	484
Total	1509		3245
Average words / M	189		324

Appendix 2. Forum on intermediate writings

Instructions:

“According to Jacques Crinon (“Écrire pour apprendre” [Writing to learn], *Cahiers pédagogiques*, 388-389, 2000, p.10), the main obstacle to the production of intermediate writings in the classroom lies “in the persistent idea that the mastery of written language is a precondition to its utilization.” What do you think?”

Participants and number of words per message:

DL M1		Hybrid M1	
Lucie	220	Joy	1060
Romane	181	Mélissa	341
Chaima	169	Manuelle	588
Julie	315	Thomas	362
Birgit	165	Jasmine	208
Anne	214	Julia	305
		Chloé	205
		Alice	361
		Jeanne	164
Total	1264		3594
Average words / M	211		399