

# The Dictionary of Life

*Collective writing and language in context of incarceration*

Carlos Ríos

| Argentina |

translated by Nicole Froio

## abstract

*This work proposes reporting a teaching experience of the literary workshop held in the adult school number 701 of the penal unit 1, in Lisandro Olmos, La Plata (Buenos Aires, Argentina). It presents a possible example on how to reflect upon the relationship between language and people who are deprived of freedom. One of the tools proposed was the creation of a dictionary as an exercise of reflection and writing practice that allows subverting the idea of language as a closed system, stabilized by regulations and history, in order to convert it into an open constellation associated with experience itself. The students themselves make the dictionary entries and write the definitions. Such an exercise makes reflection on the complex processes of meaning production possible and also, at a specific level, on the different forms of definition. But, above all, managing the dictionary according to these guidelines transforms students into language producers, according to their selection and inclusion of terms. Therefore, as active participants in networks of meaning. The process of creating the dictionary reveals the permanent negotiations with the authority of the language as it appears incorporated in the Spanish language dictionaries and reveals itself as a form of history of words that are, in turn, a biographical and social account, crossed by the inseparable articulation between language and experience.*

I start this intervention in the middle of the story, with a thought that is shared across the practice of the literary workshop in contexts of incarceration. Specifically, when I mention the workshop space in front of other teachers, including the students, I do it in a reversible way: "literary workshop" on the one hand and "reading and writing workshop" on the other. What could we base this differentiation on, in a synonymic way? Firstly, in a need not to restrict the workshop's reading and writing practices to a matter of genres; secondly, in order to intensify the degree of breadth of the practice of reading and writing, that is, breaking the fence of fictional representation and linking it to other textual devices.

Far from a casual association [between the two], the mention of such a problem has to do, in a direct way, with the proposal to write a dictionary in the space of the workshop. Making this project their own, which mixes up genres by challenging them, primary school students at Escuela 701 of the penal unit 1 in Lisandro Olmos, in addition to composing the usual texts that circulate that they write in a workshop - short stories, songs, poems, and letters - began to produce texts for the dictionary.

We clarify that it is not a *marginalized* dictionary or glossary - that is, the language that the inmates use when they speak to each other -, and this delimitation is due to an implicit decision in the selection that the students made, when proposing the definition of distant words or with an appearance far removed from the modes of representation typical of the lexicon they use within the penitentiary unit.

The dictionary's objective is based, moreover, on the need to generate occasional writing exercises, which can be solved in a workshop session - we know that the interruption of any development, in the context of prison, is a constant - and configure, little by little, an effective example of collective writing. Proposing the configuration of a dictionary based on the students' experience with words, as an exercise in reflection and writing practice, allows us to invert the idea of language as a closed system, stabilized by regulations and history, to

convert it into an open constellation that is associated with the students' own experiences.

In contexts of deprivation of liberty, education also reproduces content, but at the same time it is necessary to focus on the reconstruction of personal identity, which means expanding personal horizons and providing greater possibilities of expression for students, actions that must be developed without imposing a model. In any case, it is about eradicating - with the difficulties that this implies - cultural hegemonies in the production and reproduction of meaning, thinking of culture not as a system of hierarchies, but as an element of cohesion and social relationship. The battle of words in social discourses today reproduces an inevitable dispute. Writing a dictionary proposes to, in the workshop space, highlight these tensions and challenge them.

## Writing a dictionary?

This “robust and simplistic object” which is conjured by Roland Barthes with neither simplicity or complexity about the language it describes, can be defined in different ways. The most common meaning, perhaps most used in this linguistic region, is the one offered by the dictionary of the Real Academia Española (RAE):

*Book in which the voices of one or more languages, a science or a specific subject are gathered and explained in an orderly way.*

We can also find a more literary definition, not less profound and precise. In this case, we chose the definition Ambrose Bierce provides in *El diccionario del diablo* [The dictionary of the devil]:

*A malicious literary device to dull the growth of a language and make it rigid and inflexible.*

The definition given by David, a student of the workshop, is surprising because it searches for the “objective” of dictionaries in writing:

*It is a book where we find the meaning of words that we do not understand, which are ordered alphabetically, each meaning of each word and their meaning.*

On the other hand, in the entries by Luís and Rodrigo, there's a juxtaposition of subjective elements to the proposed objectives:

*It is to reflect what we see in others or in ourselves to make it clear who I am or what I'll do, it's a guide for writing, understanding.*

*It is primordial, one of the most important steps in life. Education is the language and vision of all human creation, name, utility, correction, perfection, writing, explanation of science and the earth.*

At last, I include the definition of the *dicionário* according to Nahuel, another student. His definition dilutes itself and is completed after some brief context, where the meaning of the word takes on a particular aspect that is attributed to experience:

"One day, wanting to teach my niece how to do her homework, a lot of which I didn't understand, we were looking for a word that we couldn't find, my niece told me let's look it up in the dictionary, and I asked her what a dictionary was, and she told me *it's a part of reading that helps to know how to put words together, to know how to dissolve (sic) questions*. She ended up teaching me what a dictionary is."

The idea of writing a dictionary at the same time as other texts opened up a series of questions. What is a dictionary? Which hierarchies does the dictionary emphasize, which familiarizes and at the same time as it disorients? We did not lose sight of the fact that words, in addition to referring to things and jointly offering us a representation of the world, refer to other words.

Who are in charge of inserting the words into these books? Use it as a tool, but how? Open it just like that? What are the protocols? It goes without saying that the dictionary marks a useless utopia, that of registering the invariability of the language while showing its

development and transformation, its constant reformulation as a result of its indiscriminate and mestizo use by the speakers of a given community.

That's the strength of speakers; and the richness of a language lies largely in its transgression. The institutions, on the other hand, and in tension with the speakers, try to normalize this language, to channel each group of words into more or less autonomous, standardized chains of meaning, governed by use, appropriation and the powers that are constructed through them.

Firstly, the proposal to choose a word and think about how we could explain its meaning to a person who does not know it, brought students closer to knowledge, to what we know about things through words and through our experience. When writing, they needed to establish bridges between the thing described and the word that names it. How do I explain to someone who has never seen a mirror what a mirror is? This question, as guided as it was uncertain, concentrated on each of the students the possibility of transmitting knowledge and taking it into account. What initially appeared as a doubt, as an impossibility - what do I have to do? How do I do it? -, gave way to a progressive consolidation, supported by the practice of writing.

In each word, the objective aspect of the dictionary definition and the subjectivity of the speakers come into conflict. Group work sustains and strengthens production, students work as an involuntary work committee, so that it doesn't matter who defines this or that word, but the emergence of unexpected networks of meaning, once the possibility of creating a book is understood which mostly only academic institutions are able to produce.

## **The space for practice**

According to Philippe Hamon, the descriptive system is organized from three types of knowledge: the encyclopedic, the experience and the language. In this triangle, the life of words and what they represent is resolved, as well as the information they bring us from the world. In the workshop, we worked on the three aspects, emphasizing the prior knowledge that students have. The words make it possible for them to return, initially in a

hazy form that gains, as the sessions advance, an ever greater degree of precision. In this way the school appears, a dictionary in a house or in a house in a particular situation.

The students understand this approximation. Below I transcribe some of the students' memories regarding the use and presence of dictionaries.

**Hernán:** "I saw the dictionary in a police station, a vermin (a policeman) was teaching a *muleque* (a young boy) who was detained with me, he kept saying he should read it so he wouldn't be so stupid..."

**Leonardo:** "In 2005, when I worked in a travel agency, so I could use more words and so I could involve the buyer in words they didn't understand, and with those words, hide the truth about the trips and make them happy and satisfied about the trips they were purchasing, I had to use a dictionary."

**Ricardo:** "In my house, there's a dictionary so all my grandchildren can learn the meaning of each word."

In the workshop sessions, the selection of words has different origins: students choose words, sometimes I select words from literary texts or they select words from newspapers and magazines that call their attention for a particular reason or because they do not know the word or its meaning. I write the words on the board and ask if anyone knows what they mean or could mean. It is interesting to observe that there always appears to be a relationship, more or less remote, with a meaning that allows us to trace [other] meanings.

Among the words chosen by the students to insert into the dictionary, we can mention the following: *hang gliding, love, air, peace, delinquency, horse, landscape, jail*. Suddenly, a ludic space opens up: we feel like detectives or word hunters, we explore their materiality, we establish families by roots and endings, we let ourselves be carried away by similar sounds, we carry out free associations, without exemption from whims. In this group search, the word is a magnet that searches for a particular story, its recovery in the context of an experience, each word attracts countless words and thus we form an ever wider space of

meaning.

These words, their possible definitions, are written down and then spoken, first without opening the dictionary. Generally, the comparison with the dictionary is done at the end of the workshop or not at all; such a comparison allows us to continue glimpsing the meanings that interfere according to the use and the communicational situation. In each case, it is about expanding the vocabulary based on associations that have to do with the different levels of the word.

The dictionary in process reveals the permanent negotiations of the speakers with the authority of language as it appears incorporated in the dictionaries of the Spanish language and reveals itself as a form of history of words that are, in turn, a biographical and social account, crossed by the inseparable articulation between language and experience.

## The words in use

Next, I want to expose three moments of the work of writing the dictionary that emerged in the workshop. Situations that help us reflect on the project of generating an "open doors" dictionary.

**a) Ratify and rectify** I ask the students, as at other times, to choose any word and explain it, to try to define the characteristics of what gives the word its name. Leo chooses the word "rectify" and defines it as "making something new". The relevant example is the rectification of an engine. I ask if there's a similar word and they say they don't know. I write "rectify" and "ratify" on the board. Someone asks if it's the same word. Ricardo says no, he remembers the word "ratify" because in a trial where he was present, an almost illiterate witness said many times that he "ratified" that the accused person was the one he had seen selling drugs.

The judge, according to Ricardo, told the witness that the word "ratify" did not belong to him, it was not a word he could use, surely someone told him and the man repeated it. When we establish the difference in meaning between modifying an opinion or confirming it, they

are surprised. It was one of the most intense sessions of the workshop, where I realized that the students had clearly seen the value of words in their placement on stage, the importance of understanding and how they compete for spaces of power in the language territory. As Irene Klein says, "Language is never naive". The next day, I took newspaper headlines where both terms were used and analyzed them.

**b) Beast and beast** Leo defines the word animal to refer to someone "sleepy, slow, silly". Amongst ourselves we spoke of other meanings of this word: "a kind of insect", wrote Nahuel, also any animal or a "live" person to do things. This last meaning contrasts with the meaning that the word "beast" has inside the prison unit: outside, someone [who is a] "beast" is a cunning person; inside, the "beast" — the worst, the "pet" — is someone "slow".

**c) Independence** On the occasion of the celebration of Independence Day, I asked them to define the word "independence", after reading the Act of 1816 in the workshop session. Along with the word independence, other related words appear: freedom, justice, wisdom. To the linear or figurative explanation of the concept that the students wrote (eg: "independence is like the wind, it exists, but we don't see it"), we added a "mathematical" composition method that consisted of adding the terms and attributing a result (eg : "justice + wisdom = independence"). This synthetic way of delimiting the senses excited the students, to the point of elaborating more than thirty instructions. They were read at the school party celebrating the 9th of July. We had an excellent reception from the faculty and other students. We made copies of the texts and distributed them to everyone.

The organization of the dictionary according to these guidelines and discoveries transforms students into language producers based on the selection and inclusion of terms, so that they are active participants in networks of meaning. From these practices, the student understands that the inside and the outside are resolved, also in words. That the selection of words when we communicate the knowledge we have of them contributes to organizing a report about the world and favors its interpretation.

Now we are aware that in addition to physical conditioning there is another aspect, which defines words, and operates on the perception of reality, on the relationship I establish with others and on the system of representation of the world. Knowing more about words and



improving communication with the environment allows students to take more and more advantage of their possibilities to integrate themselves into the school in a different way. Working the words, we feel how cultural inequity recedes. The work is excessively slow, but despite everything we do what we can.

## An incessant quest

In the preface to the Hachette Dictionary published in 1980, Roland Barthes warned that "language is not only man's privilege, it is also his prison. That's what the dictionary reminds us of". In the opposite sense, contrary to this statement, we could say that the dictionary written by the students in the literary workshop in the adult school number 701 breaks the patterns of language appropriation and exclusion, by introducing a system of references and proper meanings; the neutral register of the dictionary is interpellated by the dictionary of experience and vice versa.

Returning to Barthes no longer a prison, it is mainly a question of taking life transformations as a reference, the consecration of the existence of things through the word, in the projection of a "dreaming machine" called a dictionary that, by "engendering itself [ ...] from word to word, ends up being confused with the power of imagination".

In this sense, the construction of the dictionary is detached from its original form to meet in a way that is not resolved in the accumulation of words and their alphabetically ordered definitions; each word that is inserted finds its place and gives another aspect of meaning to the set, dynamizes it, takes it to another part: *exonario*, *indiccionario*, *archivo blando*<sup>1</sup> Here I make reference to three very different experiences of (dis)articulating, remixing and transmitting keywords in different contexts: in *Exonario* by Jorge Mux, the book *Indiccionario do contemporâneo* [Un-dictionary of the contemporaneous] and *Tecnopoéticas argentinas*, *archivo blando de arte e tecnología* [Argentinian technopoetics, bland art archive and technology]. , a sensitive artifact of perception and reading that registers the dream of other possible worlds. To be spoken to by the words and, in turn, enter the language and tell it "I'm here".

In the workshop, the dictionary takes shape, almost imperceptibly. It expands its world

every time we discover a keyword, other liberating words, words as keys. One purpose is to select one hundred words in alphabetical order, and it is possible that its name comes from this: "One hundred words for...". This will be the next lesson when putting together a first version and finding a title for it. Some introductory words also as a suggestion or instructions for use, in a descriptive register or closer to the literary imagination, something like a basic guide for explorers who venture into the "thick jungle of the real", to say it in the words of Juan Jose Saer.

The culmination of the project in the publication of the dictionary could have the format of a notebook, with interventions from other dictionaries and the addition of images as if it were a collage. It is also important to make it a social experience through reading sessions and make a record of this path, delve into the different interventions, finally, articulate the perspectives on this unique object that, far from closing a program, expands it and frees it for multiple uses of words. I would like to close this article with one of the most popular poems by Alejandra Pizarni, "The word that saves", which summarizes very well the spirit of the dictionary, its incessant search:

*"Esperando que un mar sea desenterrado por el lenguaje, alguien canta en el lugar en el que se forma el silencio. Luego comprobará que no porque se muestre furioso existe el mar, ni tampoco el mundo. Por eso cada palabra dice lo que dice y además más y otra cosa."*

"Waiting for a sea to be dug up by language, someone sings where it forms in silence. Soon it will be proven that it's not because of fury that the sea exists, nor the world. That's why each word says what it says and beyond that, it says something else."

**B**elow are transcribed, as a sample of the "dictionary of life", some entries written by

students in the workshops. Many of these words come from the readings they do at the literary workshop. Although each student chooses a word, from the oral exchange they also write and complement the definitions of their classmates.

**HANG GLIDING.** It's a class in the air, a way to fly without an engine..

**HORSE.** Good animal, used for work and walks, obedient and beautiful, they have many coats, big and small, sleeps in the field, has four legs, has mane and is beautiful.

**ALLIGATOR.** Ferocious animal, because it is found in the European region.

**PRISON.** Something very bad that can happen in your life, being away from your family, bars everywhere, police, people you don't know, you hate everything, you have to wait a day to see your family, a lot of evil, fights, betrayal.

**DELINQUENCY.** Robbery, for example with a firearm, entering an establishment and throwing people to the ground and stealing a motorcycle or car. I did it out of necessity, today's kids do it out of spite.

**JAMYN.** White plant that grows in warm places, particularly with a very pleasant aroma, its petals are fragile, very pleasing to the eye. It serves to flavor the environment, it is used as a perfume, to make tea or to decorate.

**FREEDOM.** Right of expression, right to be free and to do what you want, as long as you don't bother other people. It is in those who want to find it.

**BOOK.** Binding that tells stories, poetry, etc., serves both to learn and to spread your ideas.

**LANDSCAPE.** A certain point on the planet that someone is looking at and finds attractive and wonderful.

**PARADISE.** Shady tree with many branches, leaves and round seeds and green.

**NURSERY.** My mind is like a nursery because I grow through my thinking.

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