



Articulating Meaning: Reflexivity, Mediation and Self-Presentation in Private Higher Education

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Abstract: This research focuses on meaning-making discourses developed by Master's 2 students within private higher education institutions. Based on a qualitative approach grounded in semi-structured interviews and reflexive fieldwork, the study analyses how university communication devices contribute to the production and narration of student trajectories. The findings highlight a strong capacity among students to articulate their aspirations, doubts and professional projects. Far from being the spontaneous expression of individual interiority, these discourses also appear as the product of institutional frameworks that encourage reflexivity and self-presentation. Drawing on the works of Erving Goffman, Pascal Lardellier and Hartmut Rosa, the article shows how pedagogical interactions, academic rituals and support mechanisms contribute to the construction of meaning in student trajectories. This reflection leads to questioning the limits of institutionalised reflexivity and to emphasising the importance of the mediation of interactions and relational resonance in renewing social ties within higher education.

Keywords: higher education, mediation, reflexivity, meaning-making, interaction, resonance, social ties

1. Introduction

For several years now, the question of meaning has occupied an increasingly prominent place in discourses relating to higher education, work and professional futures. Students are regularly invited to reflect on their aspirations, their values and the coherence of their personal and professional trajectories. This search for meaning appears today as a major concern, particularly in a context marked by the acceleration of social rhythms, economic uncertainty and the transformation of career pathways.

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In higher education, this evolution has been accompanied by a proliferation of devices encouraging reflexivity: dissertations, skills portfolios, professional appraisals, career plans and self-assessment exercises. These spaces invite students to verbalise their doubts, make their choices explicit and construct a coherent narrative of their trajectory. As a result, the production of discourse about oneself has become a central activity in contemporary university education.

It is within this context that the present research is situated, conducted among Master's 2 students within private higher education institutions. Initially, the study aimed to explore manifestations of doubt, uncertainty and loss of bearings among students facing the transition to the professional world. However, the initial findings rapidly brought an unexpected observation to the surface. Far from encountering hesitant or hard-to-formulate speech, the interviews revealed a remarkable discursive fluency. The students interviewed proved capable of analysing their trajectories, verbalising their questions and mobilising an elaborate vocabulary to describe their relationship to work, success and the search for meaning.

This observation leads to a shift in perspective. Rather than examining only the content of discourses, it becomes relevant to examine the conditions of their production. The Information and Communication Sciences offer a particularly fruitful analytical framework here, making it possible to understand discourses not as simple reflections of an inner reality, but as situated productions shaped by communication devices, interactional norms and institutional frameworks. The reflection draws notably on the works of Erving Goffman on interaction rituals, the analyses of Pascal Lardellier devoted to contemporary forms of social ties, and the reflections of Hartmut Rosa on resonance and social acceleration. These approaches illuminate the mechanisms by which institutions participate in the construction of certain forms of reflexivity and in the valorisation of particular modes of self-presentation.

The research question guiding this study can thus be formulated as follows: how do the communication devices of private higher education contribute to the production and staging of meaning-making discourses among Master's 2 students?

The hypothesis put forward is that the meaning-making discourses observed during the interviews do not stem solely from a spontaneous expression of individual experience. They also appear as the product of institutional devices that encourage, structure and valorise certain forms of reflexivity. The ability to speak about oneself, to narrate one's trajectory and to verbalise one's questions thus constitutes a socially and academically recognised competence. In order to explore this hypothesis, the article is organised in three parts. First, we will analyse the communication devices that encourage reflexivity within higher education. Second, we will present the findings from the survey conducted among Master's 2 students. Finally, we will discuss the limits of institutionalised reflexivity and the perspectives opened up by the notions of mediation and resonance for rethinking the renewal of university social ties.

2. Communication Devices for Reflexivity in Higher Education

2.1 Interactions as Frameworks for the Production of Meaning: The Contribution of Erving Goffman

The works of Erving Goffman occupy a central place in understanding social interactions and the mechanisms of meaning construction within institutional spaces. In *Interaction Ritual* (1974), the author shows that exchanges between individuals never arise from pure spontaneity. They are inscribed within normative frameworks, implicit rules and social expectations that orient behaviours and discourses.

Interaction can thus be understood as a social stage upon which individuals produce a self-image adapted to the context in which they evolve. Each actor seeks to maintain a coherent and socially acceptable self-presentation. This perspective is particularly illuminating in the context of higher education, where students are regularly required to speak about their projects, aspirations or difficulties.

In the context of this research, the interviews conducted with Master's 2 students cannot therefore be considered as simple access to an inner reality. They also constitute interactional situations in which the respondents mobilise specific discursive resources in order to construct a valued image of themselves. Discourses relating to the search for meaning thus appear as situated productions, shaped by institutional expectations and by the norms of communication that structure the exchange.

2.2 The Ritualisation of Social Ties in Higher Education: The Contribution of Pascal Lardellier

Pascal Lardellier's works extend this reflection by emphasising the role of rituals in the construction and maintenance of social ties. According to the author, contemporary societies remain deeply structured by forms of rituality that allow individuals to recognise one another and to build society together despite the transformations of the social world.

In *Eloge de ce qui nous lie* (2023), Lardellier shows that rituals constitute essential mediations between individuals. They make it possible to organise relations, reduce uncertainty and create spaces of mutual recognition. Far from having disappeared, rituals are being recomposed and taking new forms adapted to contemporary contexts.

Higher education can be analysed as a strongly ritualised space. Dissertation defences, academic papers, professional interviews, skills assessments and oral presentations all contribute to the production of specific relational frameworks. These devices are not limited to the evaluation of knowledge; they also constitute spaces of self-narration where students are invited to formulate their projects, ambitions and questions.

From this perspective, discourses on the search for meaning can be understood as the product of ritualised devices that encourage certain forms of reflexivity and valorise the capacity to verbalise one's trajectory. Analysing these mechanisms helps to better understand how institutions participate in the construction of the representations that students develop about themselves and their futures.

2.3 Social Acceleration and the Search for Meaning: The Contribution of Hartmut Rosa

The works of sociologist Hartmut Rosa offer a third perspective that is particularly relevant for analysing the discourses gathered during this research. According to Rosa, contemporary societies are characterised by a phenomenon of social acceleration that profoundly transforms relationships to time, work and human relations.

In his works devoted to resonance, the author shows that the permanent acceleration of life rhythms can produce a feeling of disorientation and a growing difficulty in establishing meaningful relationships with the world. In response to this dynamic, the search for meaning appears as an attempt at subjective reappropriation of individual trajectories.

This perspective illuminates the discourses of the students encountered during the survey. As they approach entry into the labour market, many express the need to give coherence to their trajectory and to reflect on the place they wish to occupy in society. However, these reflections are not elaborated in a social vacuum. They are produced within institutional devices that explicitly encourage the expression of this reflexivity.

The concept of resonance proposed by Rosa then proves particularly fruitful. It invites us to move beyond a purely instrumental approach to education in order to examine the conditions that allow students to build meaningful relationships with knowledge, with others and with themselves. This reflection opens up interesting perspectives for thinking about the role of mediation and social ties in contemporary higher education.

2.4 Transition

The insights provided by Goffman, Lardellier and Rosa thus make it possible to consider student discourses not as simple individual testimonies, but as communicational productions inscribed in specific interactional, institutional and social frameworks. It therefore becomes necessary to examine empirically how these mechanisms manifest themselves in the field. The presentation of the research methodology will make explicit the conditions under which data were collected and analysed.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 A Qualitative Approach in Information and Communication Sciences

This research is grounded in a qualitative approach within the Information and Communication Sciences. It aims to understand the representations, discourses and logics of meaning mobilised by students at the end of their studies within private higher education institutions.

The objective is not to measure a phenomenon statistically, but to explore how students construct and narrate their relationship to the future, to work and to their personal trajectory. A comprehensive approach was therefore favoured in order to capture the complexity of lived experiences and the meanings attributed by the actors to their own trajectories.

This stance is part of a research tradition attentive to processes of mediation, interactions and communication devices that contribute to the production of meaning in contemporary educational contexts.

3.2 Presentation of the Research Field

The survey was conducted among students enrolled in Master's 2 programmes at private higher education institutions specialising in the fields of management, digital technology and engineering.

The choice of this field rests on the particular position occupied by students at the end of their studies. A few months before graduating, they find themselves at a pivotal phase of their trajectory. This period corresponds to a transitional moment marked by the preparation for professional integration, the completion of studies and projection towards new responsibilities. This situation constitutes a privileged observatory for analysing discourses relating to meaning, professional futures and representations of success.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data mobilised in this research are drawn primarily from semi-structured interviews conducted with Master's 2 students. The interview guide was constructed around several themes: the academic trajectory, representations of success, professional aspirations, concerns relating to the future, and the meaning attributed to studies and work.

The interviews were complemented by the keeping of a research journal. This tool made it possible to record observations made in the field, reactions prompted by exchanges and methodological questions that arose during the survey. From a reflexive perspective, this journal constituted a complementary analytical support allowing the researcher to examine the conditions of data production and the researcher's own place in the inquiry process.

The analysis of the collected materials was based on a thematic approach consisting of identifying discursive recurrences, the categories of meaning mobilised by students and the forms of self-narration observed during the interviews.

3.4 Reflexivity and Positioning

This research accords an important place to reflexivity. Works in the anthropology of communication and qualitative research emphasise that the production of data always results from an interaction between the researcher and the respondents. During the survey, certain observed elements prompted methodological astonishment. Whereas the initial hypothesis envisaged the expression of possible difficulties in verbalising doubts about the future, the interviews instead revealed a strong capacity among students to analyse their trajectories and to mobilise an elaborate discourse on their search for meaning.

This observation progressively led to a shift in the research object. Attention was no longer focused solely on the content of discourses, but also on the conditions of their production. This development played a decisive role in the construction of the analysis presented in this article.

3.5 Transition

The methodology implemented made it possible to gather rich material highlighting a remarkable homogeneity in discourses relating to meaning, success and professional futures. The analysis of the interviews brings to light several findings that invite reflection on the role of communication devices in the construction of this student reflexivity.

4. Findings: When the Search for Meaning Becomes a Mastered Discourse

4.1 A Surprising Discursive Fluency

The initial interviews conducted as part of this research rapidly brought an unexpected observation to the surface. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the students interviewed did not appear to experience particular difficulties in discussing their questions about the future, work or the meaning of their trajectories.

On the contrary, the majority of participants spontaneously mobilised a rich and elaborate vocabulary to describe their aspirations, doubts and professional projects. Notions such as fulfilment, alignment, values, work-life balance and impact recurred frequently throughout the exchanges. This discursive fluency contrasts with the image often associated with periods of academic and professional transition. Where one might have expected hesitation, difficulty in verbalising certain anxieties or fragmented accounts, students generally produced structured, coherent and highly reflexive discourses.

This observation leads to questioning the conditions of production of this speech. The fluency observed does not appear to stem solely from an individual capacity for self-expression. It also appears to be linked to the institutional environment in which students evolve. Throughout their studies, they are regularly invited to present their projects, analyse their competences, justify their choices and construct a coherent narrative of their trajectory.

Contemporary pedagogical devices thus encourage the development of reflexive competences that allow students to elaborate a relatively mastered discourse about themselves. The ability to speak about one's trajectory gradually becomes an academic competence in its own right.

4.2 Doubt as a Communicational Resource

The analysis of the interviews also reveals that doubt occupies a particular place in the collected discourses. Far from appearing solely as a sign of fragility or uncertainty, it tends to be presented as a normal, even valued, stage of the student trajectory.

The respondents frequently evoke their questions about their professional future, personal aspirations or place in the world of work. However, these questions are generally formulated in a mastered and organised language. Doubt is often presented as a moment of constructive reflection that makes it possible to refine a project or better define one's priorities.

This way of narrating uncertainty contributes to the construction of a reflexive and lucid self-image. Students do not define themselves solely through their technical competences or academic results; they also valorise their capacity to take a step back from their trajectory and question the meaning of their choices.

Doubt thus becomes a communicational resource mobilised in self-presentation. It contributes to constructing a student identity compatible with the contemporary expectations of higher education, where autonomy, reflexivity and adaptability are strongly valorised.

4.3 The Staging of Authenticity

One of the most striking findings of the survey concerns the recurrence of discourses emphasising authenticity, personal coherence and the search for meaningful work.

Students regularly express the wish to pursue an activity corresponding to their values and deepest aspirations. They claim to be seeking a balance between professional success, personal fulfilment and social usefulness.

However, the analysis of the interviews shows that these discourses present strong similarities. The same themes, the same expressions and sometimes the same formulations recur from one interview to the next. This homogeneity invites us to go beyond a strictly individual reading of the collected discourses.

It suggests the existence of institutional and cultural frameworks that orient the way students speak about themselves. Discourses on authenticity cannot be understood solely as the spontaneous expression of a personal experience. They also appear as the product of communication devices that encourage certain forms of self-narration and valorise the capacity to produce a coherent discourse about one's trajectory.

This observation does not call into question the sincerity of students. It simply underlines that all speech is inscribed in social and institutional contexts that influence the ways of saying, thinking and presenting one's experience.

4.4 Transition

These findings highlight the role of communication devices in the construction of student discourses relating to the search for meaning. They invite reflection on the effects of this institutionalised reflexivity and its limits. The following discussion proposes to examine these issues from the perspectives of mediation, resonance and social ties.

5. Discussion: Mediation, Resonance and the Renewal of Social Ties

5.1 The Limits of Institutionalised Reflexivity

The findings of this research highlight a paradox. Whereas contemporary higher education encourages the development of reflexivity, the latter tends progressively to become an institutional norm. Students are invited to analyse their trajectory, to make their choices explicit and to construct a coherent narrative of their academic and professional pathway.

This development presents many benefits. It encourages stepping back, the development of autonomy and the capacity to project oneself into the future. However, when reflexivity becomes a permanent expectation, it can also produce certain paradoxical effects.

As a result of being constantly required to explain their motivations, justify their choices or formulate their professional project, students may experience a form of weariness in the face of the continuous exercise of self-narration. The search for meaning may then risk becoming an additional injunction rather than a space of freedom and personal construction. This observation echoes analyses that highlight the tensions between the demands of performance, autonomy and fulfilment that characterise contemporary institutions.

5.2 The Question of Resonance in Higher Education

The works of Hartmut Rosa make it possible to shed light on this situation through the concept of resonance. For the author, individuals seek to establish meaningful relationships with the world, with others and with themselves. These experiences of resonance are characterised by a sense of engagement, recognition and mutual transformation.

Yet the discourses gathered during the survey show that students frequently express the need to be heard, recognised and supported in their questioning. Behind the accounts of success or professional projects, a deeper expectation often manifests itself: that of being able to build a more human relationship with education, knowledge and the future.

From this perspective, the search for meaning cannot be reduced to a simple individual undertaking. It also appears as a search for relationships that carry recognition and reciprocity. Meaning is not constructed solely through introspection; it is also constructed through interactions and through the quality of the ties established with others.

5.3 The Mediation of Interactions as a Path Towards Re-enchanting Social Ties

The findings of this research thus lead to reconsidering the place of mediation in higher education. The works of Pascal Lardellier remind us that rituals and forms of ritualisation contribute to the construction of social ties and the creation of spaces of mutual recognition. In a context marked by the acceleration of educational rhythms, the proliferation of assessments and the uncertainty of professional pathways, the mediation of interactions appears as an

essential resource. It makes it possible to create spaces where students can be recognised not only for their academic performances, but also as subjects in the making.

This reflection invites us to consider pedagogical devices not as simple tools for the transmission of knowledge, but as places of construction of social ties. Interactions between students, teachers and professionals play a decisive role in the university experience and in the development of a sense of belonging.

The challenge therefore does not consist solely in supporting students in the definition of their professional project. It also involves fostering forms of relational resonance capable of strengthening trust, recognition and the sense of participation in a human and intellectual community.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to analyse how the communication devices of private higher education contribute to the production of meaning-making discourses among Master's 2 students. The survey highlights a strong capacity among students to mobilise elaborate narratives about their trajectory, aspirations and questions. Far from appearing as a spontaneous and isolated form of speech, this reflexivity is inscribed within institutional frameworks that encourage and valorise self-narration.

The analysis thus underlines the role of interactions, academic rituals and mediation devices in the construction of meaning. It also shows the limits of a reflexivity that has sometimes become normative, and invites us to rethink the conditions allowing students to develop more resonant relationships with knowledge, institutions and others.

In this perspective, the mediation of interactions appears as a fruitful path for strengthening social ties within higher education and for supporting students through the transitions that mark their academic and professional trajectory.

7. Research Contributions

This research makes a contribution to the Information and Communication Sciences by offering a communicational reading of the search for meaning in higher education. Whereas many studies approach this question from a psychological or sociological angle, this study highlights the role of communication devices in the production of students' reflexive discourses.

It shows in particular that the capacity to speak about oneself, to narrate one's trajectory and to verbalise one's questions constitutes a competence progressively constructed within educational institutions. The study also underlines the interest of articulating the notions of interaction rituals (Goffman), social rituality (Lardellier) and resonance (Rosa) in order to understand the contemporary transformations of the relationship to meaning in higher education. Finally, it opens up research perspectives concerning the role of pedagogical devices in the construction of social ties and in the support of student transitions.

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Appendix A. Selected Interview Excerpts

The following excerpts are drawn from the semi-structured interviews conducted with Master's 2 students. They are presented here to illustrate the main analytical categories discussed in the article. The excerpts are presented in anonymized form in order to preserve the confidentiality of the participants.

Excerpt 1. Meaning as an Existential Quest

"I feel like anything is possible today, and that is exactly what is holding me back. My parents tell me I am lucky to be able to choose, but precisely because of that, I no longer know what to choose. I am afraid of committing to a path that will not suit me. I am looking for something that means something to me, beyond salary or status. But I cannot fall apart either."

Associated notions: disenchantment; plurality of possibilities; decision fatigue; reflexivity.

Excerpt 2. Meaning as a Search for Personal Alignment

"I do not just want to find a job. I want to find work that is consistent with my values. I need to feel that what I do contributes to something greater than myself. Otherwise, I am afraid of spending my life carrying out tasks without conviction. The rat race — not interested, no time for that. I do not want to end up like my parents."

Associated notions: quest for authenticity; self-realisation; identity coherence.

Excerpt 3. Doubt as a Social Competence

"These days, we are constantly asked to think about our professional project. In interviews, in dissertations, in placements, we always have to explain who we are, where we are going and why. Sometimes I feel like I spend more time recounting my trajectory than actually living it. And it wears me out."

Associated notions: injunction to reflexivity; self-narration; identity performance.

Excerpt 4. Meaning as a Temporal Privilege

"I can still afford to hesitate because my parents support me financially. I know that if I make a mistake or take an extra year, I will not be left with nothing. This security gives me the time to reflect on what I really want."

Associated notions: family capital; material security; right to hesitation.

Excerpt 5. The Relationship to Knowledge as Personal Fulfilment

"I love learning but sometimes I wonder what it is all for. I feel like I am accumulating knowledge without always seeing how it will fit into my future life. Some things will never be of any use to me."

Associated notions: academic disenchantment; usefulness of knowledge; professional projection.

Excerpt 6. An Instrumental Relationship to Studies

“Honestly, I have never really had the time to ask myself whether my studies had any meaning. For me, they represent a chance. My parents sacrificed a great deal for me to be here. My main objective is to succeed, to find a stable job and to build something solid. Meaning — I think it will come with time.”

Associated notions: social mobility; merit; instrumental relationship to knowledge; ethic of effort.

Excerpt 7. Resonance and Pedagogical Recognition

“The best moments of my studies are not the good grades. They are the moments when I met a teacher who believed in me, who took the time to talk with me. In those moments, I really had the feeling of existing.”

Associated notions: recognition; resonance; pedagogical mediation; social ties.

Excerpt 8. The Weakening of University Rituals

“Sometimes I feel like I am passing through university without really belonging to a community or to anything at all. We attend classes, we hand in assignments, but there are no moments that bring us together. Everything is more efficient, but also colder. It is actually sad to be a student.”

Associated notions: de-ritualisation; weakening of the collective; sense of belonging; social ties.