The Psychodynamics of Work:
Action Research in an Academic Setting

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ABSTRACT

This study on the psychodynamics of work was conducted with some 100 undergraduate students registered in 10 university programs. The main purpose was to analyze the students' relationship to their work organization in an economic context characterized by competition, job insecurity, and anxiety about the future. A number of collective defence mechanisms were identified. They are mainly reflected in silence, individualism, isolation and endurance.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette enquête de psychodynamique du travail fut menée auprès d'une centaine d'étudiantes et d'étudiants inscrits dans dix programmes universitaires de premier cycle. L'objectif principal était d'analyser le rapport des étudiants à leur organisation de travail dans un contexte économique marqué par la compétition, l'insécurité d'emploi et l'anxiété face à l'avenir. Des mécanismes de défense collectifs ont été repérés. Ils se traduisent principalement par du silence, de l'individualisme, de l'isolement et de l'endurance.

In what way do action theories generate a dynamic understanding of problems encountered by students and practitioners in the field of counselling services? Given the current context of work flexibility and job insecurity in the labour market and employment integration, how does action research and, more specifically, the psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2000), contribute to the development of knowledge on which new forms of professional intervention or student actions can be based? These two underlying questions guided the research that we will describe below. At a time when many counsellors and researchers are questioning the standard theories of counselling based on the stability of professional pathways (Collin & Young, 2000), can the knowledge derived from a new research paradigm help to better recognize the intelligibility of the participants' behaviour and, hence, reinforce their ability to act? The goal of this article is twofold. First, to set out the psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2000) as clinical action research that examines work as a social field and a production activity. In the sphere of work, participants can construct their identity or put their mental health at risk. Second, to explain and illustrate the relevance of this counselling approach in helping university students to collectively reflect on the defensive strategies they use to face the training requirements and expectations of their professional future.

Problems Identified by Guidance and Counselling Practitioners

The specific research question and research goals addressed in this article emerged from problem situations and concrete social practices that resulted from the professional experience of university guidance and counselling practitioners. Indeed, the signs of disillusion, loss of interest, cynicism and despair observed among students led the University's directors of psychological, guidance and counselling services to get involved actively in this research and join our teams. Our initial research question was developed with the latter and consisted in understanding how the tight access to the labour market had affected the organization of university training and the ways in which students get involved in their training. Together, we sought to understand the means used by students during their training to protect themselves against anxiety linked to the expectations of an immediate future of competition, under-employment, debt, as well as intermittent and even precarious work. Our basic premise was that students individually and collectively construct defence mechanisms during their studies in order to repress the anxiety and suffering inherent in their situation.

The specific goal of the psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2000) is to identify these defensive strategies, which are often collective, through group deliberation work. These strategies reflect a relatively structured and organized intentionality that finds its source in the organization of work, in this case, student work. Studies based on this approach that were conducted in different workplaces, for example, schools, health institutions, plants, and union organizations (Carpentier-Roy & Vézina, 2001) show that work organization can be both a source of health, when it is possible to strengthen the subject's identity, and a source of mental health pathologies, when it is impossible to change the difficult conditions of the work organization, for example, work load, work pace, schedules, and communication methods. In the case of university students' work organization, some of the results set out in this article show that silence, endurance and repression are but a few responses to a work organization that is most often associated with mass instruction.

The particular type of group work undertaken in this study contributes to the field of counselling services in educational settings (universities, colleges, schools) because students can be supported in in-depth discussion and intersubjective analysis of student life. By helping students to recognize early the sources of pleasure and suffering related to their involvement in their university program as well as the defence mechanisms that are constructed during their training, counsellors can help them to analyze the impact of these defence mechanisms on their mental health in a preventive way.

The Psychodynamics of Work: The Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical and methodological framework of the psychodynamics of work was chosen for its contribution to the analysis of subjective and intersubjective relationships of people in work situations. This approach deals with dynamic

work processes and is part of a constructivist process of making meaning. Its theoretical basis is derived from comprehensive sociology (Brun, 2001), psychoanalysis and professional fields such as occupational therapy and occupational medicine (Dejours, 1996). This multidisciplinary approach requires researchers from a variety of fields. It examines normality rather than pathology, in that its subject of study relates more specifically to the dynamic relations of people to the organization of work (in this case, the organization of student work) as a source of pleasure and suffering, but also as a place where individual and collective defensive strategies emerge. Pleasure includes confidence, recognition, co-operation, solidarity and social interaction. Suffering is where our psychological well-being struggles with disease, and as such, is an imbalance. However, suffering can be creative if our intelligence, cleverness and resourcefulness can be used to deal with reality. It is pathogenic if the space of communication is blocked, thus wounding our identity.

Using this approach in a training context, our starting point is the idea that the work of pursuing a university education is like any other work. The theoretical and practical challenge of this research is to transpose the notion of work, which is usually understood in the context of the production of goods and services, into the context of a university education. In this case, production means the production of self, social relations, and knowledge or skills that are increasingly associated with the new economy. Like some labour economists, sociologists, and other researchers on the world of work who are concerned about the crisis in employment and work (De Bandt, Dejours, & Dubar, 1995; Schnapper, 1997), we believe that the notion of work needs to be broadened to include all human production activities and to better acknowledge the many useful but unpaid forms of work, for example, volunteer work, caring for family members, studies, and training periods. By broadening the notion of work, concepts from the psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2000) can be borrowed and used to analyze the links between students' production and work. Thus, student work can be defined as the activity to educate oneself by attempting to satisfy both one's desire and the institution's production requirements, in particular, course and program requirements. Work is also considered to be a space where "being and doing" are combined in concrete activities; it is a preferred social place where identity and social position are constructed on the basis of production activities and recognition from other people.

According to the psychodynamics of work, there is always a gap between prescribed work organization and real work organization, a gap that individuals seek to fill through their subjective investment in the production activity. In the context of university training, the prescribed work organization refers to the training requirements to which students are subject: progress prescribed in the curricula, programs, course contents, pedagogical methods, and evaluation methods. On the other hand, the real work organization corresponds to the strategies used by students to educate themselves in their own way and to deal with the constraints of the prescribed work organization, such as personal work methods, specific

know-how, time management, studying tips, and types of collaboration. From the perspective of the psychodynamics of work, these strategies attest to the practical knowledge that is built up through action and contributes to individuals' identity construction. However, these strategies can sometimes become counterproductive. The group-based process helps us to explore the gap between prescribed and real work organization since it is in this gap that we find the actions allowing people to fulfil their obligations in a clever and resourceful way as well as the defence mechanisms against various sources of suffering.

The communicative act. From the perspective of the psychodynamics of work, action is defined as a communicative act, that is, a discourse that is shared within discussion groups. Since "talking is the most powerful way to think" (Dejours, Dessors, & Moliner, 1994, p.116), as a theoretical and methodological approach, the psychodynamics of work makes it possible to "talk about what one is doing" while at the same time "talking about what one is." In fact, everyday life's practices must be recognized as such, otherwise they remain isolated and have no impact. Language and group work allow for this objectification of individual experiential practices as well as for incorporating them into a common sense reality and a tradition which broadens from the meeting points of everyday life to a macro-social space, going through various intermediary structures (Leclerc, 1999a). In order to be transformative, the discourse which asserts itself must therefore be collective, a discourse which is taken up by others and leaves its mark on a public space (Dejours, Dessors, & Molinier, 1994).

An approach that is part of the action research field. Brooks and Watkins strategies (1994, cited in Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000) identify four common dimensions of action inquiry strategies: (a) the construction of new knowledge on which new forms of action can be based; (b) the central role of people concerned by the research in determining the research process; (c) the recognition of the participant's experience as a crucial source of knowledge; and (d) generation of change that leads to improvements in professional practice, organizational outcomes, or social democracy. These four elements correspond to the clinical principles of the psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2000). The contributive aspect of this approach is the recognition of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Thus, the participants are recognized as producers of meaning and knowledge, and not as research subjects who are sounded out through experimental methods. This is what makes this approach both a clinical and research process.

Forms of action vary considerably according to the following factors: the respective powers granted to researchers and the different categories of actors associated with the process; whether the strategies used are part of an adaptive or transformative perspective; whether the aim is to change an individual or a group; the methods and instrumental supports used; and the degree of importance granted to the process of joint construction or appropriation of knowledge by the people directly affected by the change.

In terms of Gauthier's (1986) classification of action-research practices, our research uses inter-understanding and critical analysis of a situation, in this case,

the situation of university students grappling with particular difficulties in their training and transition to employment integration. In some practices oriented towards the search for solutions, the explicit aim of action research is to develop concrete actions; in other cases, its aim is to establish a mechanism conducive to the clarification of practices, critical reflection and development of a sense of belonging. This second perspective better characterizes the psychodynamics of work approach. Even though our process did not exclude the establishment of specific mechanisms for action, it was first up to the participants to decide on what action to take and be responsible for it in their social environment and in relation to their own structures, that is, student associations, program committees, and other authorities.

The research process also implies calling into question the social division of knowledge and the partners' power so that an egalitarian pattern of interaction between researchers and participants can be established. Considered to be co-researchers, the participants bring out the first analytical material from what start out as very open questions. Far from excluding the essential critical distance, the intersubjective work of deliberation and hermeneutic analysis that follows requires continuous exchanges of interpretations between the research team and the participants. In this way, the research results are continuously subject to criticism and the process of joint construction of the reality in which the participants are engaged with the researchers. The latter drop their neutral role as observers or external experts in favour of a participative attitude that combines empathic listening with the establishment of "participant-to-participant relationships" between all the partners.

In contrast to a daily situation in which students mostly have to adapt themselves, that is, submit or conform to the institution's expectations, including going to the university, attending classes, taking notes, and being evaluated, this approach allows them to take time for themselves and with others. This time is used to reflect on the meaning of their studies, their actions, their career orientation, and the methods of current work organization at University. The primary aim of the present research was to understand the participants' situations, but the research process also had the potential to be a mobilizing form of action. Thus, its purpose was transformative in that we are openly in favour of helping persons to regain control over their own lives by engaging in a process that may transform the ideas they have about their reality. This process also fosters the consolidation or emergence of a sense of belonging.

Group work. This type of study requires group meetings because they reveal strategies, particularly the group strategies used by participants to deal with the constraints inherent in their common situation. These strategies are most often revealed in everyday conversations. For example, stereotyped phrases, well-worn phrases, and pet words are indicative of a particular mentality whose subtleties can be discovered. In this sense, links should be made between the comprehensive psychodynamic analysis of work method and certain action-research practices. The group-based approach used here builds on the creation of spaces for

discourse in which the participants' constraints and explicit and implicit rules of daily life can be revealed, discussed and questioned in a useful manner. In these places of discussion and deliberation, the participants get to know each other and are exposed to the judgement of people who are in the same situation. This assumes not only that the individuals consent to participate in the research, but also that they wish to establish relationships of trust by taking the risk of having a part of their identity revealed through the disclosure of their resources, ruses, tricks, and the strategies they use to deal with their situation (Dejours, 2000). What occurs in the group meetings is that the participant comes to the realization that his or her particular situation, that is, what he or she thinks, feels, says and does, is common to the group (Leclerc, 1999a). When these participants engage in public discussion of the rules of their daily lives, they develop links that break their isolation and allow them to get involved in the solidarity actions that they consider relevant.

From pre-inquiry to discourse to deliberation. The professional experience of counselling practitioners who were associated with this research was considered crucial because students confided in them every day about their difficulties, which vary according to program: for example, work overload, selection practices, pressures to perform, high dropout rates, and anticipated difficulties in employment integration. Program directors and student associations were therefore invited to support a study to be conducted in their respective environments, which are likely to have these problems. Announcements were made in classes and information sessions were held to explain the research process. The groups of students, called inquiry groups, were formed on a voluntary basis. During the preparatory meetings, the aims and purposes of the research as well as the theoretical and methodological framework were explained in detail and discussed with the participants. The students' expected involvement was clarified so that everyone would understand the importance of his or her participation. At the same time, information on the programs was collected, including a description of programs and their objectives, selection practices, dropout rates, the situation of employment integration, particular difficulties. These steps, which are specific to the pre-inquiry stage, provide the researchers with some understanding of the environment and help the team to get to know each other and the context.

More than 100 undergraduate students participated in the three-year study. The students were registered in a wide range of programs including architecture, visual arts, biology, public communication, physical education, occupational therapy, computer science, literature, physiotherapy and sociology. Whether stated explicitly or not, the reasons why students participated in these meetings included the fear of not finding a satisfactory job, their unease about the competitive environment in which they found themselves, the desire to react against the job insecurity linked to their chosen discipline or career field, the desire to reflect on the meaning of their career choice, the need to take time for themselves in a crucial period of personal and professional development, and curiosity about how their peers were coping with the constraints of their training.

Based on the creation of spaces for discourse, groups of around 10-12 students in the same program participated in the process. This is the ideal size for taking into account the wealth and variety of the students' subjective and intersubjective experiences. It encourages discussions while preventing individual viewpoints from dominating. The composition of the gender-based groups varied according to program. Thus, in male-dominated programs such as biology, the number of men greatly exceeded that of women, and vice versa in female-dominated programs. Participants could be registered in the first, second, or third year and were not selected on a strict basis. The discussion revealed that first-year students found hearing about the experiences of third-year students highly beneficial.

The discussion got under way with the students' concerns. The participants were invited to talk about the satisfactions and constraints of their daily student work, without pre-established questioning by the researchers. In our particular inquiry, two research teams were set up. The researchers led the meetings together with the directors of the counselling services or the research assistants who were graduates in career and counselling sciences. Four to five three-hour meetings were held with each of the inquiry groups. The first two meetings were used to get to know each other, to foster a climate of trust, then to listen to the students talking about their experiences in the university. It is advisable to practise risky listening, that is, agreeing to hear what we do not necessarily want to hear and what we sometimes find destabilizing; suspending our judgement and renouncing our position as expert; and accepting obscure points. This arrangement requires that we listen carefully to the sometimes contradictory remarks that are made and return to the discussion points later.

Analysis, validation, and appropriation of results. This analysis is based on the work of deliberation and interpretation of accounts which started within the group, was passed on by the research team, and continued during the two stages of feedback to the groups (third and fourth meetings). The stages of analysis and the validation of the research process are explained here. The interviews were transcribed in their entirety. The research teams, including at least two researchers and the assistant, started with an open categorization process, that is, the categories were constructed as the analysis was made, through an iterative method in which the identified units of meaning were processed and then interpreted by the researchers (Savoie-Zajc, 2000). This initial categorization process opened the way for the interpretative analysis of accounts. This analysis was constructed in such a way as to detect the individual and collective defence mechanisms developed by students in relation to the training organization in which they were evolving. At the third meeting, the researchers made a verbal synthesis of their intersubjective analysis and the discussion continued within the group. These initial results were set out as proposals to be discussed and not as expert knowledge that could not be discussed. The participants, considered to be co-researchers, also co-constructed the analysis through a dialectical exchange between themselves and with the researchers.

Between the third and fourth meeting, a written report, a testimony of the process, was sent to the participants who could, individually, correct the report,

qualify it, or suggest additions to it, in short, they could validate it as they saw fit. The group analysis then evolved on the basis of the new discussions provoked by the written report until all participants felt comfortable with its content. The atmosphere of these meetings for analysis could then become tenser because participants also became aware of their defensive strategies and involvement. Once again, it was mainly the discussion between participants that incited the group members to reflect on and change their ideas.

To sum up, based on discussions provoked by the verbal or written synthesis that was given to them, a process of deliberation and interpretation of accounts then got underway in the group. This led to an appropriation of results, because the goal was to get participants to see themselves as a group in the process and to feel that they had written this report as a group. At this last stage, the group and the research team concluded an agreement on the changes to be made. The research team scrupulously respected this agreement. In this process, the validation of results was thus ensured through a triangulation of analyses by researchers and co-researchers.

Another appropriation of results was planned for those who had not been part of the process, that is, other students, professors, department or program directors, through a public or semi-public presentation of the results of the study. A new discussion got under way, this time with larger groups who wished to continue the discussion. The written report was then used as a basic document for reconstruction and a communication tool for future action.

In accordance with the ethical principles of the psychodynamics of work, the written report belongs firstly to the participants. It is the students themselves who decide on further actions to take and who were the catalysts of this process. As this was agreed upon at the beginning of the process, the students were made aware of the importance of acting themselves on the inquiry, if they deemed it appropriate, within their own institutional structures. In some cases, the discussion continued in the program committees of which the students were members and where a number of their demands could be transformed into concrete actions; in other cases, the debate was transferred to the departments, to be held among the directors and teachers who had read the report. This set the scene for stormy debates because the topics of discussion relate to highly sensitive realities. In all cases, discourse was still the principal means of conflict resolution since the rationality of the process was to empower individuals who wished to take back their discourse, awareness, and control over their situation. In this sense, action research is an educational approach because the rudiments of discussion and deliberation are practised and exercised in the real world, based on students' concerns. Ultimately, the latter acquire deliberating skills which will be useful for them in the future. It fosters a democratic ability to act. In brief, this type of action research acts on the ideas that people have of their collective reality without providing them with the means to take action. It is up to them to act. However, acting on the ideas means being part of a transformative perspective and results in a significant step towards action.

Problem Situations and Defensive Strategies: an Overview
of the Group-Based Analysis

A number of situations, selected from each of the programs studied, were used to present an overview of the sources of suffering and defence mechanisms obtained from this type of inquiry. In this article, we chose to highlight defensive strategies, because once the constraints of work organization have been identified and analyzed, the defensive strategies implemented to protect themselves can also be analyzed to allow participants to think about transforming their own ideas and defensive reactions. It is only through this double movement of transforming the pathogenic conditions of work organization and breaking down the defensive strategies that a better relationship between work situations and mental health can emerge. Of course, sources of satisfaction and pleasure were expressed in the meetings, for example, the desire to make progress, the desire to surpass oneself, the recognition of work judged according to the generally accepted principles of the profession, and sociability, but these experiences did not occur as often as the students would have wished. Moreover, since students rarely had a chance to voice their opinions, they wanted to make sure that the complex issues that they raised were acknowledged and discussed in public; this was part of their wish to engage in group reflection. A selection of students' situations reflecting their work organization and the collective defensive strategies implemented to deal with them are presented below.

Examples of Organizational Unease and Defensive Strategies

Emulation is a feeling that incites people to make efforts to match or surpass others. In this sense, emulation is an opportunity to get to know others and also to get to know oneself; it is a healthy incentive to learn and develop which is part of the pleasure of studying. But what is sound and positive can be knocked off balance when emulation is transformed into organized competition and that excess becomes the norm. In a context of rigorous selection, professors and professionals often told students that they must have the profession in their blood in order to be able to be successful. In Architecture, for example, transforming the perfectible into perfection became, for some students, an insatiable pursuit of the ideal as a finality: doing a little bit more; producing successive versions; accumulating nights of work, all this began to look like exaggeration when the over-investment in the work became a new productivity norm. As the students repeated: "We cannot study architecture without passion, without a desire to create, change and intervene" (Maranda, Hamel, & Lapie, 1999a, p. 10). However, students wondered about this and tended to seek perfection in its tiniest details in order to prove that they deserved to be there. As there is a pervasive fear of not being able to get a job (access to the architecture profession having become very difficult), signs of emulation and passion have increasingly become new selection and hiring criteria. The initial meaning of these feelings is thus distorted: "It takes a rock-solid ego," said the students (p. 12). It is in this continuous quest for perfection

that true passion is mobilized, but it is also this very same passion that can work against the person, (Maranda & Leclerc, 2002), in particular when employment is scarce and the tendency is to imitate those who advocate excess as a condition for success. To be born with architecture in one's blood may, in this context, mean internalizing the constraints beyond reasonable limits and to the detriment of equilibrium.

New requirements have been subtly added to those of academic results and can be linked with the incredible development of "social skills" expected by organizations. For example, in Occupational Therapy, one must be a well-balanced person. In wishing to project an image of near-perfect students and future professionals in the fields of health and helping relations, there is a risk of doubling the performance related to high academic results with that related to psychological balance. For participants of this group, it was no longer enough to succeed. As they said: "We have been trained to charge into the future" (Maranda, Hamel, & Lapie, 1999b, p. 9); but students must now project the image of well-balanced persons, show self-confidence in the face of uncertainty and manage their stress. Students in occupational therapy, most of whom are women, were aware of the dangers inherent in a productivity-centred work organization, having read academic studies on stress and burn-out. These students' discourse was strongly marked by the idea of movement and equilibrium: "surfing the marks," "riding the crest of the wave," "walking a tightrope" (p. 12). Thus, they believed that they were on a well-balanced path because they possessed the information that allowed them to develop an objective knowledge of these issues. However, this is but a narrow line and these students had begun to wonder whether "they would be on top all their lives" (p. 13), which shows to what extent they have been conditioned to obtain first prizes. Within this ideal transmitted through academic training and professional supervision, there is little room for counter-performances and fatigue since a bad mood, disagreement, or mistake can be regarded as signs of weakness. Given this state of mind, students may try to repress their feelings and project a reassuring self-image. However, authenticity and the idea of projecting perfection cannot be easily reconciled.

The accounts seem to indicate that there is an implicit culture in programs that have a great number of students. According to the rules of this culture, in order to belong and to stand out both during the training and on the labour market, students need to have the right personality since personality counts more than the skills acquired during their training. For example, in Public Communication, a program that has unlimited enrolment and many students, the unspoken norm was that students must develop a winning personality: "In communication, you have no choice but to stand out, that's communication" (Leclerc, Le Blond, & Bédard, 2001, p. 28). One of the criteria of success retained by the participants was to be actively involved in the community, for example, in academic, extra-curricular, and professional activities, so as to be visible and recognized in public. To have an opinion about everything and to defend it without hesitation is another characteristic of the winning communicator: "I always do my PR" (p. 28).

Lastly, for many people, having contacts was another condition of professional success. Confidence and spontaneity may give way to distrust, a form of insidious competition and, finally, doubts about people's sincerity. In reality, a great deal of manoeuvring seems to go on before employment and generates tensions which incite students to get together in fairly closed small groups or cliques.

In Biology, jobs are scarce and divided between a kind of biology that has marketable benefits (more jobs, possibility for scholarships, and contracts for research assistant positions) and environmental biology (very few jobs and extremely rare scholarships and contracts). Students were anxious about having to choose between these two possibilities: "You have to be doing the right kind of biology (lucrative biology), that's where the future is" (Maranda, Hamel, & Girard, 2000, p. 14) Students try usually not to talk about their anxiety since this is viewed as a loss of control over their thoughts or a weakness that might lead to overwhelmingly depressing thoughts. Some thought that if they were seen to be ambivalent about their choices, they could lose the support of others. Expressing worries about their training process might suggest that they feel insecure about their immediate future: "When you are motivated, you go after things, you don't leave room for doubts" (p. 13). In the experience of those students, such expression is repressed because it might set them apart and it might be viewed as an individual weakness in the competition for scholarships, offers of a teaching or research assistant position, and the race for employment: "To be part of the group, you should appear to be motivated" (p. 12) Even students who were very sociable did not, in general, bring up the topics of passion and real motivation because they feared being judged by professors and peers. In their view, loss of motivation was something personal, and this kind of negative feeling could be shared with others. It was better to complete projects and remain active. To slow down, to catch one's breath, to take a step back in order to think were reactions that go against the trends associated with success.

Although the interpersonal relationships between students were more linked with sociability and fun, competition still existed and was related to the fear of lack of jobs or the inability to project oneself into the future. This cloud of competition hung over Sociology students (Maranda, Leclerc, Bédard, Lapie, & Hamel, 1999). They competed unhappily with each other, subjected to practices in which they were ranked, and painfully aware that not everyone would make the grade. One of the reasons for this subtle competitive atmosphere was that students knew very little about the real career opportunities related to sociology: "What are you going to do with training in Sociology? If you are good at school, why not go into Medicine?" (Maranda, Leclerc, Hamel, Bédard, & Lapie, 1998, p. 10). They had a hard time visualizing themselves clearly in a professional role, at least during the first years of their training. Some rebelled against the absurdity of fighting for crumbs while others left themselves a way out or got ready to fight. In some cases, students postponed the moment when they would have to get involved: "We go to the pub and relax a bit, but our work is constantly on our mind" (p. 11). When the reward for investment seemed to be uncertain, procrastination could be a

reassuring short-term strategy. Sitting around drinking beer and engaging in intellectual discussions was sometimes a way to postpone the moment when time and efforts had to be invested. Procrastination could also be a face-saving device: if one got a bad mark, lack of time could always be put forward as an excuse. But this defensive strategy was costly because those who continuously put off their tasks could deny reality and anxiety eventually resurfaced.

In recent years, the reductions in expenditures imposed on the university's departments have led to a general cutback in services, and more specifically, to a decrease in the number of professors and the number of courses offered in the programs and, consequently, to an increase in the number of students per class. For participants, this context of mass education (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1998) made them feel anonymous. For example, it was still difficult for Literature students in these large groups to be known by their professor and peers and to assert their singularity: "Some profs don't write anything: you open your paper and only the mistakes have been circled. All there is, is a mark at the end" (Le Blond, Leclerc, & Bédard, 2001, p. 24). On the other hand, it was easy in such an environment to melt into the crowd: "You feel really stupid, so you say to yourself that it's not worth it. You'd rather keep your ideas to yourself than having them challenged by other people's ideas and belittling yourself in your own eyes" (p. 34). Thus, the dynamic of the professor who talked away in front of students who, in turn, slipped into a passive attitude and a protective silence that tended to reproduce themselves. This could initially suit students who preferred to keep a low profile since it made it easier for them to evade the responsibility of contributing to discussions. In a context where the chances of being confronted with oneself and others are growing slimmer, withdrawal is proving to be a widespread and readily available defensive strategy. However, since training in literature is known to respond to aspirations to embrace other cultures, this prevailing individualism must be questioned.

When communication is blocked and work organization does not allow for expression and recognition, everyone withdraws into his or her own private space. Thus, individualism and disengagement reign. Almost all of the students in the study would have liked to be able to make the most of the formal and informal spaces for discussion between students and with professors. In some programs, for example Visual Arts, these spaces do exist and are even essential. Public criticism is justifiably part of the evaluation methods: the artistic work is exhibited in public and is commented on by professors and peers. But this spatial and temporal space caused fear because the process often appeared to be delicate and risky: "To show an artistic work is to put everything in front of others, to bare oneself to others" (Leclerc, Le Blond, & Bédard, 2000, p. 36). For both students and professors, criticism is a demanding and rigorous process which implies a commitment and multi-level skills, for example, aesthetic, language, and relational. When the conditions of training and exchange did not foster this commitment, a dynamic of passivity and false relations set in; the tendency was then to withdraw or to stick to kind, but superficial comments: "I make the

effort for myself, for my advancement. I work more at home and I enjoy working in my workshop" (p. 44). In other programs where "image-based management" seems to be increasingly prevalent, to the detriment of training content, the assessment of work can easily become an assessment of the person, and this is what students feared: "It seems that the prof is attacking us, so we have to be on the defensive" (p.41). It is understandable that when a job was perhaps at stake, some students would be tempted to put on a performance by playing on appearances.

The effects of the courses offered to large groups and the elimination of other courses — those offered to small groups and deemed to be formative but financially not viable — also had an impact on teacher-student relations in class. To react against the various sources of dissatisfaction, some students, in particular those in Physical Education, became talkative and undisciplined in class and, in some cases, adopted devil-may-care or unruly attitudes: "Many, many students are there because they didn't know where else to go" (Leclerc, Gagnon, & Bédard, 2000, p. 10); "There is no control by the prof, so it gets out of hand" (p. 11). Lack of discipline seems to be a typical form of expression in courses that do not appeal enough to students or do not correspond to their expectations of "pedagogical performance" or what constituted, according to them, a "good show." Some said that this was their way of protesting, showing their anger, and making themselves heard: "I can't be polite when the class is boring and can't bear to listen without talking for three hours. I get up and leave" (p. 20). Not taking their studies seriously, not doing their share of the work or refusing to put in the efforts required in the courses were considerable sources of frustration for those who deplored this kind of attitude. In order to avoid being targeted, many put up with a handful of troublemakers who set the tone. It would not easy to stand up in front of over 100 fellow students to ask them to keep quiet during the course, said some students.

Increased class size and high selection criteria are part of the fierce competition between programs. According to students in the health sciences, and more specifically in Physiotherapy, the work organization confined them during the first few years of training to being a rote-learning machine which must produce the right answer. Students were disappointed about having to retain loads of details just for the evaluations, while they preferred to understand the logic of what they were learning and remember the essential things: "I had put so much energy into these exams, then they ask questions that make no sense" (Leclerc & Bédard, 1999b, p. 14). Given the unceasing pace and type of objective evaluations, they felt that they had little control over their performance. Thus, the first, fairly common strategy was to keep their problems to themselves and to work without complaining. The norm of endurance was so well internalized that most of the students in the study admitted spontaneously that they had no choice, that the system worked like that and could not be changed, and it was therefore up to them to adjust to it: "I have got to the point that I now plan my free time: 09:15, breakfast, 10:00: ski hill . . . I am sure it's because of school, I didn't do this before. It's all very well to put up with school, but when it starts to affect my free

time, it can be dangerous . . . " (p. 24). At first, this reasoning seemed to be self-evident; the students were so steeped in their experience that they no longer saw how this reasoning influenced their behaviour. Nevertheless, this endurance can conceal a profound weariness and resignation. But what is the margin between physical endurance and mental hardening? When endurance tends towards silent resignation and the ability to drop out becomes an urgent escape, it is reasonable to question whether or not these highly individual survival strategies are detrimental to the health of students, their commitment to their own education, and the quality of their social lives.

In the case of students who do not have to worry about getting a job, for example those in Computer Science where the placement rate is almost 100 percent, it is reasonable to think that there are no such things as anxiety and insecurity. However, they were also anxious about their employability because they feared that they would not be able to get the best job or to choose their employer (a computer firm where they would have more freedom and flexibility rather than a large firm where they would just carry out orders). Some students invested more in their human capital, for example, through projects, internships, or a specialization, and sought to develop a "a value added" (to use their words) while others felt that they must stop racing towards excellence and seek to maintain a balance between life at work and outside work, and wondered how they could achieve this: "What kind of a person am I becoming?" (Maranda, Hamel, & Girard, 2001, p. 8). Thus, there was fierce competition, even a split, over this issue between computer addicts who identified themselves with the computer (and its rational logic) and those who wished to keep a critical distance from the excessive investment to be made. This competition was not only virtual but was also reflected in the number of hours invested in their studies and the marks, because everybody knows that these marks are a decisive criterion in the choice of internships and jobs.

DISCUSSION

Although these examples do not entirely account for the complexity of these situations (to do so would require that all the inquiry reports be consulted), some conclusions can nevertheless be drawn. These conclusions are formulated in terms of hypotheses for discussion which can be taken up in different spaces for discourse. A number of elements related to the context of work organization in a university and the way students react to this context are brought out here, at least for students we met through this research. Rationalization measures applied by the university have led to the deterioration of the quality of training: large group sizes, mass learning style and evaluation, very limited teacher-student interaction, and a climate conducive to unruly behaviour and havoc in class. To be noticed, students developed self-marketing strategies, (for example, feigning passion, or copying personalities). Alternatively, they withdrew into a procrastinating mode or wasted their time. To sum up, job scarcity in certain fields prompted students to opt for so-called winning strategies towards employment. These strategies

often went against their deep desire and undermined their mental health. On the other hand, subtle social pressures were put on students by the university, their parents and employers in order to shape and organize a culture of selection and competition. Students responded to this through individualism, isolation, repression, silence, endurance and over-investment in work (some of our participants had already suffered burn-out). The university and family institutions seemed to have left the students to cope with this problem on their own. The refusal to listen (in a risky way) to their anxiety about the future may be reflected in a denial of their distress, a refusal to deal publicly with the issue of real employment integration or students' place in society.

The ultimate aim of this theoretical and methodological approach is to transform the ideas and difficult aspects of the context, as long as the participants appropriate the process and agree to take action to transform the structures of their ideas. In addition to changes in terms of awareness observed in individuals and within the groups, changes related to work organization have also been reported, for example: discussions based on student experience (in program committees and professors' meetings); efforts made by programs to better inform students on career opportunities in the profession (a document showing the fields in which graduates work was produced by a department); formal discussions about problems related to teaching and learning (in at least two departments); reorganization of courses and timetables to break anonymity and foster a greater sense of belonging (forming cohorts allowing the same students to be together from class to class); student actions forcing educational authorities to consider their realities and needs (a friendly room located in a strategic area has been specially reserved for students in a program to encourage meetings); and challenges to cliques and student rivalry.

Moreover, in terms of professional practice, this type of initiative comes with a desire for increased prevention by counsellors who now go to the communities which request their help in order to deal with specific problems. We are confident that this approach, that is, action research and the psychodynamics of work, has a future in educational settings. Despite the extent of the problems caused by productivity-centred work organizations, or perhaps because of it, these approaches are increasingly required by students who need to reflect on their personal and career choice. Collective reflection may allow them to clarify and change their own defensive attitudes before the latter turn into pathologies. Counsellors in the university and educational institutions also have a role to play in this respect since valuable organizational assessments can be made using critical analysis.

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