



Artículo Original

Academic reading and writing at the university: Writing centers at a glance¹

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● Abstract

This text corresponds to a reflection derived from our ongoing research project: *“Academic Reading and Writing Center at the University of San Buenaventura, Medellin branch⁵”*. In this regard, we present the initial phase of the research process in its current state. This first advance includes a brief review of some research projects on reading and writing in college that have been developed in some national and international contexts; likewise, it presents a brief approach to the history of the writing centers that have emerged in response to this problem at the higher education level. In this process we also address some of the conceptual categories that make up the central part of the discussion. Finally, we present some of the initial conclusions reached by the research team at this point in the process.

Key words: Writing centers, reading and writing in the university, academic literacy.

1 Este artículo es una reflexión derivada de la primera fase del proyecto de investigación en marcha: “Centro de Lectura y escritura académica en la Universidad de San Buenaventura, seccional Medellín”.

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Lectura y escritura académica en la universidad: Una mirada a los centros de escritura

● Resumen

Este texto corresponde a una reflexión derivada de un proyecto de investigación en curso: *“Centro de Lectura y Escritura Académica en la Universidad de San Buenaventura, sede Medellín⁶”*. En este sentido presentamos la fase inicial del proceso de investigación en su estado actual. Este primer avance incluye una breve reseña de algunos proyectos de investigación sobre lectura y escritura en la universidad que han sido desarrollados en algunos contextos nacionales e internacionales. Igualmente presenta una breve aproximación a la historia de los centros de escritura que han surgido en respuesta a este problema en la educación superior. En este proceso, además, se direccionan algunas de las categorías conceptuales que conforman la parte central de la discusión. Finalmente presentamos algunas conclusiones iniciales alcanzadas por el equipo de investigación en esta etapa del proceso.

Palabras clave: Centros de escritura, lectura y escritura en la universidad, alfabetización académica.

Leitura e escritura acadêmica na universidade: Uma visão aos centros de escritura

● Resumo

Este texto corresponde a uma reflexão derivada de um projeto de investigação em curso: *“Centro de Leitura e Escrita Acadêmica na Universidade de San Buenaventura, sede Medellín⁷”*. Neste sentido apresentamos a fase inicial do processo de investigação em seu estado atual. Este primeiro avance inclui uma breve resenha de alguns projetos de investigação sobre leitura e escritura na universidade que não são desenvolvidos em alguns contextos nacionais e internacionais. Igualmente apresenta uma breve aproximação à história dos centros de escritura que não surgido em resposta a este problema na educação superior. Neste processo, ademais, se direcionam algumas das categorias conceituais que conformam a parte central da discussão. Finalmente apresentamos algumas conclusões iniciais alcançadas pela equipe de investigação nesta etapa do processo.

Palavras Chave: Centros de escritura, leitura e escritura na universidade, alfabetização acadêmica.

⁶ “Centro de lectura y escritura académica en la Universidad de San Buenaventura, seccional Medellín”.

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● Introduction

This text corresponds to a reflection derived from our ongoing research project: *“Centro de lectura y escritura académica en la Universidad de San Buenaventura, seccional Medellín”*. In this regard, we present the initial phase of the research process in its current state. This first advance includes a brief review of some research projects on reading and writing in college that have been developed in some national and international contexts; likewise, it presents a brief approach to the history of the writing centers that have emerged in response to this problem at the higher education level. In this process we also address some of the conceptual categories that make up the central part of the discussion.

In this sense, we start from the recognition that at the university level, educational processes are mainly confined to the area of reading and writing, a subject quite familiar to those who are part of the academic world, either as students or teachers. The university's everyday life, for example, is inconceivable without these practices; from mere information to the conceptual development and evaluation are based on reading and writing.

For this reason, reading and writing are the issues on which we must focus. Most of our efforts materialized in undergraduate curricula (all have at least a literacy course) and massive skills tests that certify the performances in this area (Saber, Saber PRO, ICFES, entrance exams, and the teacher hiring process, among others). We also find research that wonders how college students read and write. This is due to low academic levels of students entering the undergraduate that affect their academic developments.

From this perspective, within the context of the related elements is where the question of the place of reading and writing in the formative processes of the university students arises. This implies not only to account for the place of these processes,

but also of conceptions that we have about how they develop.

So, then, we should talk about what challenges, regarding reading and writing, are intended for training at higher education. In that respect, we must begin by saying that in different educational places, where there is concern about the communication of what occurs inside different disciplines, it is common to find a number of issues related to reading and producing academic text styles. Some of which might be considered problematic situations that affect primarily students, regardless of the level at which they are (basic level, undergraduate or graduate); in other words, problematic situations that consider different fronts ranging from no habits in relation to the practices of reading and writing, to low levels of awareness regarding the proper use, or at least academic use, of reading and writing.

In addition, there is another problem that could well be considered one of the most outstanding, and it is related to the improper use of citations by mainly undergraduate students. This last point brings forth the problem of academic writing from textual competence to another dimension that might be called ethics, but that does not mean only writing but also reading, the latter assessed from the students' abilities to discriminate the information they face. That is, the reading is affected by the little ability shown by students, from different levels, in establishing clear criteria that allow them to select relevant information in each specific case.

Overall, the present text is an approach to some of the issues that in the national and international arena are being addressed around the processes of reading and writing in college, and the proposals that in these areas are set, for instance, the reading and writing centers, which are the basic component of this research.



Regarding reading and writing in college...

While analyzing the reading comprehension and writing in higher education, we found several studies (Cassany, 2010; Parodi, 2008; Bach & López, 2011; Saporiti & Rodríguez, 2011) that have established, from different fronts, some considerations about it.

Saporiti and Rodríguez (2011, online) agree with the ideas of Carlino (2005) related to academic literacy. They say that in academic literacy and throughout the training seen as a path at the higher level, teachers must be present for students to be fully integrated into all aspects that distinguish or characterize higher education from all other levels.

In that sense, as a condition for support in the educational background of students, teachers must be adequately prepared and encourage their students to ameliorate students' academic literacy and also to motivate them to produce and publish their research, experiences, etc.

Meanwhile, Cassany (2010), who has spoken of literacy from a sociocultural perspective, says that this concept takes into account the problems related to the use of code and written genres, knowledge of the function of discourse and roles they as the reader and the author assume, social values related to the corresponding discursive practices, etc. To Cassany, the orientation of research on literacy should go beyond the purely linguistic and psycholinguistic approach and incorporate a sociocultural perspective. This perspective should adopt a more global perspective and be interested in the interlocutors, their cultures, their social organizations, and institutions to which they are connected.

Within this sociocultural perspective, according to Cassany (2010), we can situate more specific lines of research, such as multiple literacies, which refers to the fact that today we read many texts

in short periods of time; biliteracy, which refers to the strategies that are used when writing in a second language; and criticality, which refers to critical reading, critical thinking, and adopting a critical perspective. This to the extent that the different socio-cultural contexts in which literate practices are carried out influence the perceived range of distance between internalized literacy practices in academic education and skills needed in professional activity:

Los distintos contextos socioculturales en que se llevan a cabo las prácticas letradas influyen en la percepción de la distancia observada entre las prácticas letradas interiorizadas en la formación académica y las necesarias en la actividad profesional (Cassany, 2010, p.10).

Likewise, Bach and López (2011) propose a study of the relationship between academic communication and labor practices, arguing that university education should prepare future professionals to perform its tasks; that raises the question of whether the language training received is ideal or not. If students and teachers of higher education have a high communicative competence to solve these tasks, or if they have developed throughout their studies the minimum core capacities to face, in a quick and decisive manner, the appropriation of the specific skills needed to solve the written tasks required in the working life (pp.128-129).

This is because the education in the XXI century, received by professionals in each field, is becoming more specific and technological. It incorporates more communicative elements, generating awareness of the importance of professional communication skills to manage professional, academic, and social areas appropriately. In this regard, Parodi (2008), when speaking of the relationship between discursive practices and work contexts, says it is important to recognize disciplinarity as a relevant feature in language use and as a way of approaching the conscious use of similarities and differences of gender in different areas.

Another relevant research project entitled, “*What is reading and writing for at the Colombian University? A contribution to the consolidation of the academic culture of the country*”⁸, (PREOO439015708-COLCIENCIAS), in which fifteen research groups from public and private universities are involved, whose principal investigators are: Mauricio Pérez April and Gloria Bonilla Rincón, is highly important. The research presents the description, characterization, analysis, and interpretation of “the reading and academic writing practices on the Colombian university, in order to propose policy guidelines about it.” In this research we were interested in the contextual view on the processes of reading and writing in the field of higher education and its impact on academic achievements in the country.

In the Colombian context, this research from Gutierrez and Flores (2011) entitled “Teaching writing at college: knowledge and practices of teachers and university students.” This study, which was conducted in an education department at a private university (in the study, the college is not specified) in Bogota, aimed to explore the knowledge and practices of teachers and students, regarding teaching writing at the university and the creation of an academic writing program to respond to these understandings and practices.

As for the theoretical aspects, the research follows the notion of knowledge that the teacher has per the Kemmis and Carr perspective (1989), in order to establish the impact the knowledge and definitions that teachers have of writing in terms of how they guide scriptural processes of students in the practical field. Similarly, the study takes the concept of academic literacy proposed by Carlino.

Regarding writing, this is assumed from the perspective of Writing as a Process (Flórez and Crow, 2005; Elvira Arnoux Narvaja, Mariana di Stefano and Cecilia Pereira, 2002), and connects this idea

of writing as a process and academic literacy to the concept of writing across the curriculum. This writing concept agrees with Marinkovich & Moran (1998), in that the possibility offered by the writing practice of learning the content of what is studied simultaneously allows the internalization of specific communication patterns from each discipline: “*hacer propio el contenido de lo que se estudia al mismo tiempo que permite internalizar los patrones comunicacionales específicos de cada disciplina*” (Marinkovich & Moran 1998, p.141).

Regarding the methodological aspects, qualitative research was raised and the population consisted of teachers and students of the Education Department at the aforementioned University; among the techniques and instruments considered in the investigation were selected semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation and discussion groups. The findings and conclusions of the study indicate the conceptions that the teachers have about writing at university level. They are concepts that do not necessarily understand writing as a process, because as indicated by the same authors, the study shows that the use of writing addresses the expression of knowledge and learning content verification. Writing is encouraged by requiring written texts and assessing learning content but without teaching them how to write the required texts:

El estudio demuestra que el uso que se hace de la escritura se dirige a la expresión del conocimiento y a la verificación del aprendizaje de contenidos. Se fomenta la escritura al exigir y evaluar textos escritos mas no enseñando a escribirlos (Gutiérrez y Flores, 2011, p.158).

As for the idea of academic literacy and the conception of writing across the curriculum, the study shows that the understanding of the logic and purpose of the disciplines does not necessarily ensure the deployment of the writing processes that transcend the verification of learning. This is because the study mentions that although

8 Spanish title: ¿Para qué se lee y se escribe en la Universidad Colombiana? Un aporte a la consolidación de la cultura académica del país.



teachers of different disciplines claim that the question of writing in college is not the exclusive concern of teachers in communication processes, the creation of specific writing course for students to progress in these processes is proposed as a solution or strategy for solving writing problems.

On the other hand, three aspects stand out from the main conclusions of the study. The first refers to the fact that university teachers still retain conceptions about writing levels of students that correspond to a popular knowledge about these processes. In that sense, teachers still use expressions like “college students cannot write” or “they should write better,” and other statements that shifts the responsibility of the state of the writing processes of students to previous school levels.

The second aspect refers to the fact that although teachers recognize the importance of cross-curriculum writing processes, in the classes, they do not provide a place for writing and no references are made to the writing practices or the language of the discipline they teach. And finally, the third aspect relates to the fact that most teaching practices of the faculty members correspond to a transmissionist teaching style, where the speech or exposure of the teacher is predominant, decreasing the possibility of writing from the disciplines.

In summary, it is important to note that a significant percentage of research include among its purposes the generation of an applied nature proposal to work on the problem diagnosed during the research process; however, it is noteworthy that these proposals relate mainly to methods of intervention (activities) or course designs that strengthen reading and writing processes of college students. Others are training programs in the field of academic literacy.

Background and approaches of writing centers

The writing centers have a relatively recent history. Regarding the North American context the background to the writing centers are found in the 70s (Carino, 1995, p. 103). However, setting prior experiences to this period is a bit more complex.

Since the inception of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* in 1977 and *The Writing Center Journal* three years later, documenting writing history is not difficult. Articles in these journals enable to writing center scholars to construct a reasonably detailed history back into the early 1970s, when open admission initiatives precipitated the growth of writing centers. While this rich data certainly helps centers of today to locate themselves in relation to the past twenty years, little has been said about writing centers before that time. (Carino, 1995, p. 103).

In this regard, Waller (2002, online), in his article “A Brief History of University Writing Centers: Variety and Diversity”, identifies three precursors of American college writing centers: the literary society, tutoring services and the composition classroom.

Waller explained that although there is no direct connection between the literary societies of the eighteenth century and the nascent writing centers in twentieth century, forms of work described in the dynamics that characterized these literary societies were echoed in subsequent definition of the writing centers. For instance, the literary societies, were led by the students and were characterized by going against the model work in the university context; “like the literary society, the writing center is student-centered, where students work with peers or with faculty in a collaborative way” (Harris, 1995, quoted by Waller, 2002).

So then, the writing centers developed subsequently in the university, assumed the characteristic

features of the literary societies to teach writing, such as student-centered and collaborative peer work. The tutoring services, meanwhile, arise primarily with a remedial sense; in 1950, colleges offer tutoring funded by the government for athletes and veterans of World War II. Similarly, in 1960, following the opening in admissions, universities also began to offer this service for low-income students entering in college with a lower level of preparedness of the expected. This service was free for students who met the conditions set by the government (Waller, 2002).

According to Harris (1988), most of the writing centers arise with a remedial purpose focused on helping students with difficulties or deficiencies in the writing process:

The large majority of writing centers at the college level were started in reaction to the “literacy crisis” of the mid- 1970s and the subsequent “back-to-basics” movement. Initially conceived as a means of providing supplementary instruction for inadequately prepared students, writing centers were too often viewed from the outside as little more than remedial services or “fix it” clinics where students memorized comma rules and mended fragments.

In this sense, Waller (2002) notes that because there were multiple reasons for creating centers to help students write correctly, these centers have been known by many names, of which highlights three: “lab or laboratory, clinic, and center”:

Where the term clinic seemed to conjure up medical and psychological connections, the term laboratory evoked scientific ones. Initially containing the positive images of experimentation, especially when combined with the new process approach to writing, the term turned pejorative as the laboratory became the place to do what classroom teachers did not want to do – grammar.

In any case, it is evident here a conception where the writing process is understood from an

instrumental plane separated from work within disciplines. From these perspective, writing is a task which must be assumed by other in the area of language teachers.

Overall, it seems that this view still prevails today in the writing centers proposed in most university settings in the national and international context. These spaces, generated in response to the problems in the context of the processes of reading and writing, mostly have focused from a remedial perspective that emphasizes on filling gaps and attending technical demands around reading and writing in college. The notion of epistemic value which belongs to a conception of writing as a process, and that it must appear when we want to talk about academic literacy, have been relegated to the background.

● Conclusions

This first analysis about the processes of reading and writing in college and the alternatives promoted in this context allows us to reach the following initial conclusions at this moment of the research process:

- According to the current research, the problems related to reading and writing in the university context are confined mostly to an exclusionary look where they are conceived as external practices which are not part of disciplines. In these cases, writing practices are not related to the content learning.
- Reading and writing like important means in the constitution of academic cultures go beyond of an instrumental conception in which these processes are reduced to levels associated with the acquisition of language skills. In this sense, reading and writing are fundamental tools that allow students to access and actively participate in the consolidation of academic communities.



- Writing centers, generated in response to the reading and writing problems, have oriented from a remedial perspective which emphasizes on filling gaps and attending technical demands around reading and writing in college.
- At this point in the investigation, according to the reflections derived from the analysis of the positions and approaches that solve the complex problems of reading and writing through actions with a remedial sense, we raised the question again about the relevance of a "Writing Center" in the context of the University of San Buenaventura.

And in this line, we consider important to review more consistent alternatives to our understanding of this issue. Also, it is necessary to take in account the analysis of the characteristics of the realities of the subjects who perform these processes and institutional context in which they develop.

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