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Students' and Teachers' Academic Writing and Reading: Colombia in Three voices

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Reading and writing as social practices inhabiting subjects and occupying academic and professional spaces have been the study object of research since the mid-twentieth century in Anglo Saxon countries. However, in Latin America, it was only recently that the interest in finding new responses to the discordance among expectations and institutions, teachers and students, the use of reading and writing generating tensions and barriers in the teaching-learning process started to arise. In this essay, three books are reviewed where Colombia's interest and commitment to reading and writing at the university level are described. Each work has been produced in different years supporting determination and real interest in the area. Furthermore, the three books supply documentary evidence and enable the construction of the history of reading and writing at the university as an introductory conceptualization process on academic writing within the national context. In addition, the research has been carried out through different theoretical and methodological frames.

First, each bibliographical material is presented in chronological order, highlighting theoretical postulates, methodological design, primary results and the

anticipation of research trends they reinforce and follow. It is worth noting that despite the fact that all three texts correspond to the Colombian context, each one emerged in a different year, despite being annual contributions between 2013 and 2015. These publications share the interest for the study of reading and writing, and practices from various perspectives within a socio-cultural position. Finally, the contributions brought by each article are described, as well as a final revision containing the coincidences among the three studies.

Why do we read and write in the Colombian university? A contribution to consolidating the academic culture of the country

Pérez-Abril, M., and Rincón-Bonilla, G. (Coords.) (2013). *Why do we read and write in the Colombian university? A contribution to consolidating the academic culture of the country*¹. Bogota: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Available at <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/colombian/>

Knowing why there is reading and writing at the University is one of the current research lines on academic literacy in Latin America. For more than a decade, Paula Carlino has placed the terms literacy and academic culture in Spanish speaking countries, enabling the possibility of rethinking the use of reading and writing at the University. Thus, the significance of both concepts reflects in the bibliographical material: *Why do we read and write in the Colombian university? A contribution to consolidating the academic culture of the country*. This text results from the research carried out by 17 groups in different Colombian universities, all of them interested in collaborating in obtaining knowledge on reading and writing practices and the dominant conceptual trends that keep them in force.

From the first pages, this material highlights the authenticity of the research process. Readers are introduced to the perspective adopted by positioning reading and writing as practices related to the social and educational situation in the country. Thus, through the analysis of the relation between scientific and academic production crisis with a similar crisis in reading and

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writing in the country, they decentralize reading and writing from practices that are exclusive to the school context. Therefore, they revise the results of a study by Santa and Herrero (2010), where scientific and academic productivity rates in Latin America and the Caribbean are presented, while focusing on Colombia, which appears on the sixth place below countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Chile. Data from the different countries are shown. Although they do not go deeper in this area, it represents a starting point towards positioning this work as a guideline for future research.

At the same time, they revise the concept of literacy stated by Ferreiro (1997) and revisited by Carlino (2005), in order to claim that there is not a unique form and moment for literacy; on the contrary, there is a variety of literacies, since there are different practices of reading and writing that are submitted to specific moments and contexts. In this way, the search for arguments on the existence of a proper academic literacy in Colombian Universities led the authors to revise studies such as ECAES 2004, 2005 and SABER PRO 2011- 2012, both carried out in Colombia and whose results are adjusted to literacy planning and the academic culture. This is so because both studies coincide in identifying the fact that students show variations in the use and command of writing in each discipline, something that confirms the correlation between the characteristics of the knowledge particular of the discipline and reading and writing modes.

On the other hand, the reader is introduced to the understanding of the existence of different literacies, among them, academic literacy. The authors add central planning to the research, that is: *the characterization of reading and writing dominant practices within the Colombian University*. Even when such planning is not new regarding literacy studies, what made the authors think about presenting the book as a contribution to the consolidation of the academic culture? The answer lies in three primary aspects: the first one corresponds to the fact of the book being centered in studying the pedagogical and didactic conditions promoted in the practices of teaching at the university; that is, it is teacher centered and not student centered.

The second aspect is related to their positioning when identifying “*outstanding pedagogical practices*,” a concept they propose when referring to the practices of teaching reading and writing that are related to successful situations, so considered because they help students as accompanying systems and access routes to the academic culture of the discipline. Accordingly, they propose discussing the disagreement between students and teachers by trying to find uplifting data instead of a deficit explanation. The third aspect lays in the way they suggest a position of complementarity of different perspectives and actions developed in the curricula of undergraduate and graduate courses on teaching and learning, and the use of reading and writing. Documents on these actions are analyzed through 40 investigations where the authors claim that until today most perspectives limit the teaching of reading and writing to a unique moment, that is, the development of basic skills.

Considering what was previously mentioned, it becomes clear that the objective of characterizing reading and writing practices in the university results a complex and ambitious endeavor, however, in the second chapter, the authors solve this by presenting a historical review of three concepts. First, they refer to the academic culture, second, to language didactics, and third, to reading and writing practices. Each concept emerges from a polyphonic history constructed with contributions from different disciplines – Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, etc. – moreover, each one includes the development of an extensive internal discussion among perspectives. Thus, while going through the book pages, the reader would perceive the complexity of the topic. Through systematic information, the reader feels a voice that presents the perspective that is built, but he/she is also introduced to the understanding of its epistemological origin.

Then, how to understand academic literacy from a historical revision? The authors start to explain how culture includes the study of mediations and cultural practices that the subjects perform as members of a community. In this way, talking about academic culture implies the study of interactions mediated by the use of reading and writing in a particular community: the University. On the other

hand, didactics is included in academic culture through its institutionalization, that is to say, by recognizing teaching practices – learning that is registered in institutional documents that demand the exercise on the part of the teacher and the student. Therefore, the concept proposed on “*outstanding pedagogical practices*” is relevant when referring to activities developed in school contexts that promote and regulate the teaching-learning processes through the use of reading and writing.

It is worth noting that what the authors propose as “*outstanding pedagogical practices*” means how this concept is constructed and formed. Then, using a teachers’ case study in chapter five, the authors present coincidences found in descriptors, analytical categories and thematic axis in relation to the idea of the function of reading and writing and the way they are related to the research, exposing too the importance of a teacher as a model in his/her role of reader and writer. Such coincidences permit the assessment of the existence of “*outstanding pedagogical practices*”, characterized by the form in which teachers share the use of reading and writing as a kind of knowledge located in a discipline and the way they simultaneously demand, guide and keep the students company when writing and reading specific texts.

In accordance with what has been said, as a whole, this material reaffirms the fact that there are researchers interested in understanding what happens with reading and writing at the university. The text describes how institutions assume the position of introducing spaces that support students in their process of reading and writing academic texts, highlighting students’ experience as foreigners interested in becoming part of the academic community that assigns them a role of reader and writer that is unknown to them. It challenges and encourages institutions, researchers, teachers and foreign students to rethink and transform the use and function of reading and writing. Above all, this material reconciles the disagreement between teachers and students by combining teachers’ efforts in the construction of “*outstanding pedagogical practices*”, a concept the authors bring to the consolidation of the academic culture.

Following a research path on reading and writing at the University

Estupiñán, M. C., & Dagua, C. M. (2014). *Following a research path on reading and writing at the University*². Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira, Research, Innovation and Extension Department.

In educational policies – the formative process carried out in institutionalized educational contexts – reading and writing have become didactic instruments as well as teaching and, research objects. Concerning the University, based on its teaching and learning objective, it is possible to identify heterogeneous texts with specific functions and uses according to the discipline observed. The book *Following a research path on reading and writing at the University* results from a research project that anticipates the elaboration of other future bibliographical materials. It is oriented to present a selection and revision of texts produced in reading and writing at the University. Texts context of production and validity cover the period 1990-2012 in Spanish speaking countries. Through this work, the authors explain their interest in compiling a data base to serve as tool of documentary type to guide students and teachers as well as researchers in the emergence and follow-up of research projects, preventing time consumption in unnecessary reproduction of knowledge or its fragmentation.

Thus, a bibliographical base is of the essence in every research project and any situation searching for an approximation to an object of knowledge. Said this, in chapter one, the authors start to draw up a scenario that invites the reader to reflect on the importance of the written text for science dissemination that derives from a research process and refers to the academic production of reading and writing at the University. Then, the authors start to outline how diverse research knowledge is, and highlight the importance of such textual variety; this is a means through which individual agreements are established permitting a dialogue among academic communities. They explain such dialogue is the result of the way in which each community validates the text and its contents when subordinated to structural and discursive

form in compliance with the communicative situation. Being acknowledged by the members of an academic community, these texts are the parameters that will enable the conception of a text as a meaningful unit, an aspect that has made authors such as Swales and Parodi delve into the concept of textual genres and linguistic features that characterize such texts.

Then, when answering the question: How is everything just mentioned transferred to the field of reading and writing at the university? It is possible to identify a first feature of this material and locate it in the first two chapters. Such peculiarity refers to the way in which a historical itinerary is made while explaining how reading and writing were internationally acknowledged as the necessary practices in the subjects' formation and their circulation in society. But above all, they are described as a means through which social and cultural memory is constructed and maintained. Right away, the University is established as one of the recognized scenarios where a particular written culture is originated. Experts from different disciplines have been called to identify and provide an answer to what the authors refer to the "crisis in the academic production". Thus, the historical revision ends by stating how in Colombia the complexity of the topic has inspired the construction of networks, associations and research groups that brought space to congresses, lectures, meetings, and forums devoted to the promotion of written and spoken dialogues, both dependent on the features of the discursive textual registration.

In chapters three and four, the second feature of the material is developed. It refers to the relevance of the approach on documentary-bibliographical approach and the validity of the concept "text" designed by Halliday for the retrieval, organization, and analysis of texts. Therefore, the importance of the systematization of documents that share interests on a study object is reinforced, since this is proposed as another element that strengthens the registration in the form of a text. In addition, the reader may ask himself how the concept of text occurs; the authors propose the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach, understanding this as a language and semantic unit with social meaning, in a way highlighting what is

produced and the way it is produced, giving the text a particular value as product and process within the specific academic and social context. In this case, the context refers to Spanish speaking countries and their interest in reading and writing in the university.

Moreover, it is precisely in the intermediate sections where the objective of the document phase of the research project is not only shown as feasible but also necessary, especially because it is the academic community where the complexity of the object of research (reading and writing in the university) has increased as well as the interest in delving into its uses and functions. Accordingly, there is an undeniable quantity and variety of texts resulting from academic production, at present. As a starting point, 200 texts compiled as the corpus for analysis are presented. Such texts had been chosen because they mainly share three characteristics: first, they are texts to be published and have a place in teaching and professional academic contexts, so they correspond to the scientific and didactic subgenres. Second, there are coincidences in the objective and perspective herein adopted; third, they share minimum structural components of a scientific article common to the whole academic community (introduction, method, results and discussion).

Last, in chapter five and the section called conclusions and projections, the authors not only reveal the results of the pathway followed and the theoretical perception adopted, but also show the systematization of a vast amount of information that even when not explored extensively, help to establish categories that function as guidelines to a map for novice teachers and students as well as experts. This map proposes the location and five possible access routes to knowledge related to reading and writing at the University. Each category presents subcategories, and hereto, it seems necessary to plan a revision of the five basic categories. The first one is built on the relation among *reading, writing and course curricula*, the second recognizes the conceptualization, use, and function of the *reading practices*, and the third one follows the same rationale of the second one, but focusses on *writing practices*, the fourth introduces the relation among *reading, writing and ICTs* and finally, the fifth category gathers works that position *reading and writing as a social interaction*.

Therefore, this material titled *Following the research path on reading and writing at the University* shows that outlining and identifying the traces on the research pathway is possible when constructed as from the recognition of a text as the element that lays the foundations of the beginning and end of every research. Thus, the central element of this work is the fulfilment of its objective, becoming a temporal tridimensional tool because it includes the *past* to identify topics explored, in its amplitude and scarcity, the *present* and visualizes the *future* in the research area. It is also a useful text for teachers, researchers and students interested in the field, whether novices or experts. This is so, because of the way in which the book is textually and discursively structured, resulting in its being included within the same genre in which the bibliographic corpus revisited by the authors is. That is to say, it is possible to classify this book within texts with didactic purposes that guide students in the process of understanding the topic, but it is also possible to place it as a dissemination text that contributes to aspects to be integrated to the expert's dialogue.

Academic writing and University education's identity. A socio-cultural approach

Alfonso Vargas Franco. Vargas, A. (2015). *Academic writing and University education's identity. A socio-cultural approach*³. Medellín: ITM Fund

The university is an educational scenario that even when a preferable age range is established does not deny the entrance of people whose ages surpass it. Thus, it is possible to identify socio-cultural heterogeneity among students; this heterogeneity arises from the difference in ages and the diversity of educational contexts. The book *Academic writing and university education's identity. A socio-cultural approach* proposes a research centered on making the place of the mature University student visible, through recognizing elements of their life history related to formative experiences in reading and writing. In the same manner, the transit of the mature student along the university context is presented identifying how they solve writing tasks required during their formation and above all, the relation between the educational trajectory before

and after entering university is analyzed. Therefore, the author shows a single case study where five outstanding aspects are identified: the first is related to the student's age (mature student); the second refers to the socio-cultural sector – where the student comes from (identity), the third one describes the pedagogic device used (peer revision); the fourth aspect is the epistemological perspective adopted (new literacy studies), and the fifth is the methodology used (single case study).

The author's objective is to revise and establish a dialogue among different perspectives oriented towards the study of academic writing, two of them being the *Academic Literacy* and the *New Studies on Literacy*. It is worth noting that both views coincide in discussing the position adopted by those approaches that focus on understanding reading and writing as processes subordinated to the development of the subject's cognitive skills. This work takes up and emphasizes the perspective on the concept of *critical literacy and new studies on literacy*. The rationale to adopt this point of view lies on the recognition of its being inclusive and dialogic, while Academic Literacy is considered a perspective that opens the discussion towards thinking about the literate/illiterate dichotomy. Thus, the concept of literacy is clarified permitting the debate on the idea of functional illiteracy under where mature students are located. This is because during and after graduating, they found it complicated to write academic texts, whether in professional or academic environments.

Then, the approach for the development of identity follows. The relation between knowledge production and academic publishing is presented, both situated within geopolitics according to what theorists such as Canagarah state. Also, the author claims that the studies and postulates on *academic literacies* may position reading and writing as social practices present in the disciplines, and the correspondence with the studies as from geopolitics can be observed. Based on the above mentioned, the author claims that this weaving makes one think of the social and educational impact of the education policy where the objectives and guidelines of the academic formation presently adopted by the universities are created. That is the way in which this work presents the interconnection

among a diversity of theoretical perspectives and the underlying concepts to construct a position that supports the importance of understanding the social nature of the professional and personal identity of the university student.

Finally, through an extensive revision of the single case study, the author creates a scenario where the question *what does the single study case on reading and writing as research methodology from a socio-cultural perspective provide?* is answered. The answer is based on three aspects: the first one refers to how information about the life history of the subject is retrieved; that is, the subject's life history is seen as a way of accessing the meaning and value that the person attributes to his/her past experiences, understanding which situations overlap in the present and why they are projected in the construction of the future. A second aspect refers to the exploratory character of a case study; it is through it that a trend may be established to access information as from a particular experience of an individual regarding his/her personal conditions and the context. The third aspect lies on the possibility of using a single case study to analyze in detail specific situations, moving away from establishing generalization; that is, the history of the subject is respected, and the relations that are built as from searching for conditions and specific tasks.

On the other hand, the reader may observe three particularities in the study. The first one is the fact of its being a work whose scenario is located in Colombia; the second, is related to peer revision as a didactic strategy, and the third lies on the teachers' identity models as a contribution to the initial phase of the teacher's training. The first recognizes the way Colombia is structured as a society, as from the production and reproduction of knowledge that imply reflecting on social diversity within the same context and specifically the university educational system. The second states peer revision as a pedagogic strategy whose advantages in the subject's learning process are determined by the social character of the activity; that is to say, it is an activity that focuses on the demand of interaction with others where meaning of individually assigned activities and products are exchanged, negotiated and agreed upon.

The third particularity is the emphasis on the importance of the experience of peer revision in the initial steps of teachers' training. Peer revision potentializes disciplinary education while including the subject in a community of dialogue, but also provides the knowledge on a didactic route that could be further implemented in his/her future profession. It is the interconnection between the experience of the role of a student as a teacher, and the teacher's role of tutor where the author introduces analytical elements on how the professional identity emerges. This is based on how education experiences become knowledge valued and reproduced afterwards. Thus, the effects of commentaries made about the text by students and tutor are emphasized since they are regulatory elements at the moment of rewriting the text. Therefore, peer revision is considered a strategy that requires scaffolding through which the domain of written culture of the student and the future teacher is potentialized.

Summing up, *Academic writing and university education's identity. A socio-cultural approach* presents different perspectives for a first analysis oriented to explain the encounters generated through considering writing as a practice of socio-cultural nature. It mainly describes such elements through a case study and the introduction of the exercise of peer revision on a population considered of risk or neglected within the university environment; there is a possibility of discovering significant writing experiences.

Thus, by revising the meaning of such experiences, we may understand how the student forms his identity, and why they feel discouraged or afraid when facing a writing task. We need to rethink certain didactic writing situations that require the interaction with others, question and propose transformations in courses curricula at the university, and finally envisage future courses of actions in front of the challenge that represents any discipline and especially the initial stage of a teachers' training course. For all these reasons, this is a text that challenges the expert reader to think over and question paradigms and invites the reader that is for the first time interested in the topic, who may benefit from the assistance that may come from another expert when sharing and establishing a dialogue following the concepts and ideas herein mentioned.

Encounters with three voices

Speaking of encounters assumes the existence of coincidences in the three texts presented in this review, coincidences in forms of methodologically thinking and intervening that also propitiate dialogue and cooperation. Therefore, the three pieces reviewed in this document add up to localize Colombia as a country that is active and interested in the research of reading and writing in the university context. One of the encounters refers to the way the three works conceive positions whose conceptual bases fall into the category of reading and writing as socio-cultural practices. Another contact is related to the detailed description of the methodology adopted in each work, that is, not limiting the contribution only to reflections on the object of study; on the contrary, they foster the dialogue on the methodological design of the study of reading and writing at the University. Lastly, an encounter that reveals one of the immediate interests of the country and consideration of the teachers' role as a central element in teaching and learning reading and writing, starting to question, rethink and propose formative processes to train teachers and their role when planning the curricula.

Even when Colombia is presented as the core study context of research and contributions, all three works bring new topics to the dialogue on reading and writing at the University. The work *Why do we read and write in the Colombian university? A contribution to consolidating the academic culture of the country* principally contributes to the concept of prominent pedagogic practices, a concept that is centered on the teacher and successful experiences, not on the student and failure experiences. *Following a research path on reading and writing at the university* brings a bibliographical historical tool that enables the recognition of a broad and constant interest maintained on the topic along the years, focusing on work agendas at national and international level. Finally, *Academic writing and university education's identity. A socio-cultural approach* contributes with a case study that highlights the need and possibility of managing teachers' training processes through the study of life histories and the construction of teaching/learning scenarios such as peer revision.

To conclude, from the role of the university teacher and researcher, it seems pertinent to acknowledge and thank the journal, its editors and team members organizing this issue devoted to academic writing within the disciplines. Undoubtedly, spaces to discuss the topic are necessary, spaces that may come to favor the generation and maintenance of a dialogue on the academic production moving around Latin America, advocating the construction of bases to keep the practices of reading and writing at the University updated and relevant as an interest and responsibility shared at international level. From what was mentioned above, we may add that the introduction of reviews combining more than one bibliographical work presumes the extra challenge of thinking about common points to turn differences into spaces of dialogue to encourage the creation of networks that will be useful as framework. Last, our gratitude to the authors of these materials and the colleagues who gave me access to the materials and shared reflections that made this review possible.

Notes

1. Title in Spanish: ¿Para qué se lee y se escribe en la universidad colombiana? Un aporte a la consolidación de la cultura académica del país
2. Title in Spanish: Tras las huellas de las investigaciones sobre lectura y escritura en la Universidad.
3. Title in Spanish: Escritura académica e identidad en la educación superior: Un enfoque sociocultural.

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