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Reading and writing in the Social Sciences

in Argentine universities¹

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The scholarship and teaching of writing in the disciplines are endeavors only recently undertaken in Argentine universities. Most related research tended to focus on undergraduates' difficulties to read and write in college. In contrast, the present study has arisen from the relevance to our context of the contributions of North American "writing across the curriculum" (WAC) (Bazerman *et al.*, 2005; Nelson, 2001; Russell, 1990) and "writing in the disciplines" (WID) (Hjortshøj, 2001; Monroe, 2003), as well as English (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 1999) and Australian (Chanock, 2004; Vardi, 2000) "academic literacies" research. WAC and WID emphasize college instruction to promote learning, while academic literacies' studies direct their attention to the institutional power relationships between what teachers and students do, think, and expect regarding written assignments. A further and congruent theoretical root for the present work is an Argentine constructivist approach, the "didactic of language practices" (Ferreiro, 2001; Kaufman, 2004; Lerner, 2003; Nemirovsky, 1999).

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Context of the research

Argentina has 39 public universities and 43 private ones, with 1,304,000 and 279,000 undergraduates respectively (in a country with a population of 39 million). They greatly vary in size from 358,000 undergraduates in the University of Buenos Aires to fewer than 1,500 in the smallest and newest institution (Anuario, 2007). The gross schooling rate for higher education in Argentina was 68.6% in 2006 (Anuario, 2007). Whereas this enrollment rate is the highest in Latin America, the Argentine tertiary system is said to be increasingly inefficient. Estimates are that freshmen's dropout rate is about 50 % and that only 20% of the university students finally graduate (Marquís y Toribio, 2006).

Public universities tend to be the most prestigious ones with the 82 % of the university population. Undergraduate studies are completely free and most departments have not required a placement or admissions test since 1983, the year of the recovery of democracy. While this open tradition of Argentine public higher education has favored the access of many working-class undergraduates, it is also true that this unrestricted entry policy does not guarantee their progress in the studies or their degree completion. Other open access policies, like student financial aid, orientation programs, or students' support services, are rare. Most teachers are part-time teaching assistants and are not well paid; teacher development through university programs tends to be infrequent.

In the Social Sciences and Humanities, reading and writing are usually required but academic literacy skills are not taught explicitly. Undergraduates are asked to read from sources, and to write the answers to exam questions during class hours, or to write ill-defined essays (called "monografías") at home, once or twice a semester, for assessment purposes. Classes greatly differ in size but could reach 50 and even more undergraduates in tutorials (and 300 in lectures). Neither American-like "writing centers", "writing tutors", "WAC or WID programs", nor Australian-like "Teaching and learning units" or "Language and academic skills advisors" exist. Teachers complain that "students can't write, they don't understand what they read, they don't read". Undergraduates' reading and writing problems make headlines every year.

My previous research

Three partially overlapping stages of inquiry led to the current study. The first treated academic writing as a cognitive skill and researched, through draft analysis, how undergraduates' texts were revised during an exam. The second stage proceeded from the difference found between these students' revisions compared to those of French and North Americans' which had been reported in the literature that inspired my study (Hayes & Flower, 1986; Piolat, Roussey, & Fleury, 1994). I realized that this difference was not cognitive but cultural, and attributed it to the dissimilarities of national instructional experiences regarding writing. This gave rise to a comparative study in which I "discovered" realities previously unknown within Latin American literature, such as the Australian teaching and learning units and teacher development programs, and the North American writing centers, writing intensive courses, as well as the WAC/WID and academic literacies contributions. The third line of work was a 6-year action-research project that tried out several reading and writing tasks in Psychology and Education courses to increase student participation in class and enhance their cognitive action over the learning material. I published the results of the latter two lines of inquiry to promote the necessity of reading and writing support in any university course (e.g. Carlino, 2005a; Carlino, 2005b). Nevertheless, more data were needed. The research in this paper aims to provide this kind of data.

The study

Research questions and Method

What are the undergraduates and teachers' perspectives about literacy practices that take place in Social Sciences courses? How do teachers respond to students' written assignments? To answer these and other questions, a team of four researchers besides myself² have begun a qualitative inquiry, funded by a grant from the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina. The study has so far comprised 10 Social Sciences subjects in 3 public universities through two focus groups with 45

² Graciela Fernández, Viviana Estienne, Emilse Diment and Silvia Di Benedetto.

freshmen after which they individually wrote about “What are the usual reading and writing assignments in high school? and “What do you find new in university literacy tasks?” We also carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers and 21 undergraduates (see Appendix A). An original device found helpful at the end of some interviews was showing the interviewee a set of cards with written accounts of hypothetical classes showing different kinds of writing to learn and learning to write support. Students and teachers were asked whether they resembled their own classes, whether they found them useful, and, in case they were not frequent in their experiences, why it happened. Alternatively, in other interviews, we requested them to show us an already assessed exam or essay, and inquired about the meanings they gave to the teachers’ written feedback on students’ work. In addition, we examined syllabi searching for what was said about reading and writing for each course.

Inspired by a Lea & Street (1998) research design, we have not intended a representative sample of the whole universe, but a corpus of perspectives in which to explore and specify our initial hypothesis about the institutional experiences we were surrounded with. We aimed to apprehend and objectify everyday practices that appeared as transparent, natural, and even necessary, to make them observable by their actors and stakeholders. The ultimate goal of our study was to open them to critique.

Findings

Reading and writing assignments are ubiquitous in Social Science courses but tend to go unnoticed: they do not appear mentioned in the subjects’ syllabi and they are not explained by the teachers. Instead, they are taken for granted. Teachers and students’ perspectives reveal that:

- I) Literacy practices in Argentine universities are new and challenging to undergraduates because they greatly differ from modes of reading and writing required in high school.
- II) In spite of I), teachers in the disciplines do not make college-level expectations explicit; guidelines are rare and feedback is minimal.
- III) Most of the teachers and students interviewed think that reading and writing in the disciplines should not be an object of instruction within the university.

- IV) Within a small proportion of interviewees, we found a contradiction: while it is generally claimed that literacy instruction is inappropriate for university, at the same time there are a few teachers who do address undergraduates' reading and writing without acknowledging that this helps them to improve their literacy.
- V) Some of our interviewees attribute teachers' disregard of literacy practices to institutional limitations.
- VI) While institutional constraints need to be reconsidered by stakeholders, the pervasive assumptions referred to in III) also hinder teachers' taking care of writing and reading in their subjects.

I will quote some interviewees to illustrate our findings³.

I.

College literacy practices are challenging to students because they greatly differ from modes of reading and writing required in high school. Undergraduates state that high school reading for writing demands just looking for what questionnaires ask and transcribing literal portions of text. Instead, in college students need to make inferences about the text as a whole and in relation to other texts:

Student: -...in high school, you don't have to read, [instead] you are asked to answer questions.

You are given a questionnaire and teachers ask you to answer it.

Interviewer: - And how do you do it?

S: - Oh, the old story of the questionnaire! It is very silly: 'Let's see... this answer is... here' (she points at some part of a text)

I: - And what about college?

S: - No. Not in college. In college, you are supposed to read.

(1st year Education Student)

"I get lost because [in college reading] the inferences you need to make, extract, are not written anywhere [within the text] [...]. So, it's sometimes difficult to know whether they are right".

(1st year Psychology student)

³ The interviewees' comments as well as the interview questions have been translated from Spanish into English for this paper.

College writing from sources confronts students with a new way of reading that requires them to compare different points of view about the same issue and to take into account the relationships among authors' stances. There are no absolute truths, i.e., facts to rehearse like in high school, but several claims and arguments for each topic:

“[A question posed by the teacher] asked, «*What does Althusser add to Marx?*». Oh, so, I've only just known that I have to study Marx and Althusser together, because they complement each other, but I had seen them separately. With this question, I already know that I will be asked about their relationship, but without it, I don't know.”

(1st year Education student)

Teachers' accounts agree in that undergraduates get lost when reading from college texts. What they do not know is that students were used to surface reading in high school assignments and that probably they try to read for university but, without understanding, some give up:

“Students have too many difficulties to see what is important in the readings. They especially find it very difficult to extract what is relevant for the subject”.

(Teaching Assistant, 1st year, Sociology).

I: - What do undergraduates do when they read?

Professor: - Nothing, students do nothing when they read, nothing and nothing. Students don't read.

(Full Professor, 1st year, Sociology)

II.

Even though “students' problems” are recognized, this does not imply that their learning needs are taken into account. On the contrary, teachers in the disciplines tend to ignore the improvement of student literacy. Neither do their classes include reading and writing as tools for conceptual learning. Expectations are not explicit, oral or written guidelines are rare, and feedback is scarce:

Interviewer: -Does your subject works with any reading guide?

Teacher: -No! [...] giving them a reading guide, no way! It makes no sense, [texts] are clear. If they don't understand them, I want students to tell me “this is not clear, would you explain it to me?” “

(Teacher assistant, 1st year, Psychology)

“In all courses, you are required to structure texts [when you write], to be clear, but this is what you are asked for, but teachers don’t explain anything [about how to achieve this]. [...] Teachers don’t tell you how to include quotes or references; you are supposed to know it already or to find it out by yourself.”

(1st year Fine Arts student)

Undergraduates’ writing is mostly required for assessment purposes but it is not considered a learning tool. This is evident by the scarcity of guidelines and also by the minimal teachers’ feedback that students receive afterwards. Both situations are considered “normal”, although some students complain because they perceive the learning opportunities they are missing:

“Usually, the exam always comes back with a check mark and a grade. Very rarely does the teacher guide you through her/his assessment. [...] What they do is to underline what is wrong [...] She either makes a check mark or underlines [your work], and [in the latter case] you know that it is wrong but you don’t know why, whether it’s unnecessary, it’s the opposite, or what”.

(3rd year Law student)

“We don’t receive much feedback but we do get those marginal comments «incomplete» or «concepts missing». Of course, they don’t specify...”

(2nd year Social Work student)

Unspecific and ambiguous written feedback of this sort, interchangeable among student papers, serves more to justify the grade (Hjortshoj, 1996; Mosher, 1997; Sommers, 1982) than to help undergraduates’ elaboration of meanings, or understanding mistakes and learning how to overcome them. In the previous quote, the use of «of course» denotes that this kind of feedback is a general instituted practice that everybody knows (and expects) to happen. In spite of this habitual experience, students’ wording and intonation subtly criticize it as teachers’ carelessness:

“This is the only [teacher] who clarifies each item [each question asked], how many points it is worth. That’s why I’ve brought it with me, because it makes the grade explicit. But it has nothing. I mean, there’s nothing written [no feedback from the teacher]”.

(4th year Psycho-pedagogy student)

Besides the interviews, we examined a corpus of syllabi from Social Sciences courses. These tend to consist of a list of disciplinary topics paired with the required readings, the course's objectives and, occasionally, the intended methodology that teachers would implement in their classes. They also specify the number of assessment tasks of the subject. Most syllabi do not mention literacy at all. Nevertheless, student writing is implied when assessment is noted and reading is suggested by the word "Bibliography", which precedes the reading list. A rare example of a syllabus where writing is explicitly named just says:

"The evaluation of the course will be through an individual written exam during class time [...] and an assignment consisting of an individual conceptual synthesis, written at home."

(Psychology Syllabus)

III.

Most of the teachers and undergraduates interviewed think that reading and writing in the disciplines should not be an object of instruction. Some commonsense assumptions appear to justify this claim.

The first one views reading as extracting a pre-given meaning from a text. That would be the reason why there is no apparent need to address it. It is presupposed that students have already this general ability. Instead, if reading were recognized as a process of co-constructing meaning through the interaction between the text and the reader's disciplinary purposes and knowledge, teachers could make explicit these latter, which are unfamiliar for undergraduates. Likewise, writing appears as a surface medium of communication to convey already made thoughts and does not comprise the elaboration of substantial meaning relevant for a field of study. In this approach, taking care of writing would be emphasizing textual features at the sentence level and correcting errors because writing is viewed "as a textual product rather than an intellectual process" (Carter, Miller & Penrose, 1998). Within this framework, it is unnecessary to continue learning and teaching to read and to write for college because both activities are regarded as the prolongation of generalizable skills previously "learnt outside a disciplinary matrix" (Russell, 1990). For these reasons, teachers like the one in

this transcript made it clear that they did not consider writing instruction to be part of their job:

Interviewer: -Do you think it's your duty to teach them to write [in your discipline]?

Teacher: -No!

I: -Why not?

T: -Because I have to teach them the discipline... They should have learnt [to write] better in high school [...]

I: -And how do you think they could have learnt to write a text of the quality you have told me that you require?

T: - I suppose they already know what a good text is.

I: - And where could they have known it from?

T: - [He laughs] Very good question.... From previous subjects, because this is a second year course... I think they should have writing courses... with specialized, Literature teachers.

(Teacher Assistant, 2nd year, Work Relations)

It is interesting to notice that this teacher changes his ideas during the course of the interview. He first assures that it is not his duty to address students' writing because he assumes that writing should have been learnt in the previous educational level. Then, the interviewer reminds him about another part of the interview when the teacher had specified the properties of what he considered a good text *for his discipline*. At this moment, the teacher laughs because he suddenly realizes that nobody has ever taught his students about it. Consequently, he recognizes that undergraduates have some learning needs that he believes he could not address in his instruction and he suggests that other courses, with specialized teachers, do so.

The second belief invoked for disregarding students' literacy considers that undergraduates are or ought be autonomous (Chanock, 2001). Being adult is equated to being knowledgeable, in an equation that, by virtue of the first assumption, age warrants familiarity with what are supposed to be previously learnt transferable reading and writing skills:

“I believe they are university students, and that’s why they are responsible for what they decide to do. [...] I don’t guide them [in their reading] because I understand they’re university students and they have to decide for themselves. [...] I leave them alone because I want them to make their own [reading] journey and that they decide for themselves”.

(Teaching assistant, 1st year, Psychology)

Even the students assume that they are old enough not to receive reading guidance:

“The teacher goes and lectures [...] She/he says: «read these texts», and that’s all, it’s up to you. [Undergraduates] are mature and, frankly, [the way you read] depends on you”.

(1st year Fine Arts student)

We see a third underlying belief behind the claim that it is not the university teachers’ duty to deal with reading and writing. Both teachers and students sustain a restricted model about the instructional process and its object. Teaching in the Social Sciences is conceived as merely lecturing to explain concepts. Accordingly, teachers’ role does not consist of scaffolding (guiding and responding to) new activities so that students can progressively acquire them. Learning is seen as passively internalizing a pre-given meaning rather than assuming risks through taking part in literacy tasks. This also means that the object of instruction is looked at as a piece of information or as a body of declarative knowledge. Tacit or procedural knowledge, as implied within unfamiliar disciplinary literacy practices, is not taken into account. Similarly, undergraduates tend to expect that classes be organized around teachers orally communicating some information and undergraduates receiving it. Other class dynamics are frequently seen as a waste of time:

[The interviewer shows a card with a written account of a class where students work in pairs with their written drafts.]

S: - Make a draft and work it with a peer, revise it between the two, and then within the whole group. This would be helpful, yes, at least to discuss about the topic. It would be good if classes were smaller, if there wouldn’t be 80 students in a class. [...]

I: - Do you think this is not done because classes are too large?

S: - Yes, if we were 20, [there would be] 10 drafts to revise [during the class]. *So, when will the class start?*

(2nd year Literature student; italics are mine)

In the previous quote, the student acknowledges that intertwining writing with oral discussions and receiving feedback is very difficult in large classes. But she also demonstrates that she would not consider it a class because what she expects is listening to the teacher:

“I’d love working in small groups with peers, say two, three, and being able to discuss a lot of things for college. Instead, *in class, I go to incorporate knowledge*. [...] It would be nice [to work in groups], but I’m very used to working alone and... I like to work alone [...] I go to class, and *I want to take notes*, and then I will go to study them.”

(2nd year Literature student; italics are mine)

IV.

We found an apparent contradiction between saying and doing in some interviewees. While both teachers and undergraduates generally claim that teaching reading and writing is inappropriate for higher education and should not be an object of instruction, at the same time there are a few teachers who do address students’ literacy, as it appears both in students and teachers’ accounts:

“Sometimes, for instance, we work with these steps towards the hypothesis [hypothesis = elaboration of a written idea that unifies an analysis of some arts work]. We do it orally among the whole class, [...] and then we tell students that in groups they write the hypothesis and read them aloud. And perhaps other group justifies them or other group asks them questions or we talk about why that hypothesis is right or wrong [...] They bring a written paper from their home and what we do in class is that: read everybody’s written papers, and discuss them”.

(Teaching assistant, 2nd year, Media History).

Students greatly appreciate when they receive this kind of teacher’s support and feedback because it helps them to understand what is expected from them:

I: - Do you find that receiving or not receiving written feedback from the teachers makes any difference?

S: -Yes, it's quite different. Because [...] if you just receive a mark, but you're not told what's wrong in your work, where you have failed or what [the teacher] expects ... so, you can't..., I mean, it's like a guide when the teacher writes on your paper and explains”.

(2nd year Social Work student)

“There are courses where you're given a reading guide, which is quite helpful because you know a bit more about what you have to pay attention to [in the texts] and what you skip.”

(1st year Psychology student)

Even if students appreciate this infrequent literacy support, they assert it is not writing or reading instruction. Likewise, teachers who offer it do not acknowledge that this helps students to improve their literacy. They just take it as a way of teaching their subject. This apparent contradiction can be understood if we take into account the unsupported assumptions mentioned in III about the nature of literacy, of undergraduates, and of the object of teaching.

V.

Students and teachers were asked why they believe that most teachers in the disciplines do not address literacy tasks within their subjects. They attribute it to institutional constraints: a) scarce class time and teachers' paid time, b) too many students per class, and c) lack of teachers' training.

VI.

While institutional limitations need to be taken into account by stakeholders, the widespread assumptions referred to in III also prevent teachers from including writing and reading in their subjects. These beliefs “*can have motivational force* because [...] they not only label and describe the world but also set forth goals (both conscious and unconscious) and elicit or include desires” (Strauss, 1992, 3., emphasis original, in Curry, 2002). However, they pass unnoticed, because of their commonsense status that has rendered them “natural”.

Discussion

This research was born to promote a local debate and justify, with empirical data, the need for literacy teaching across the disciplines in Argentine and Latin American universities. Nonetheless, its theoretical roots, grounded in the North American, Australian, and English contributions, encourage a wider dialogue as well. The present study suggests that Argentine universities neglect undergraduates' reading and writing to learn the disciplines even more than in the English language world. Some widespread ideas behind this situation tend to be similar: an unsupported conception of literacy (Bogel y Hjortshøj, 1984; Carter, Miller & Penrose, 1998; Creme & Lea, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Russell, 1990), and a questionable notion of undergraduates' autonomy (Chanock, 2001, 2003). Our study offers a further exploration of the prevalent beliefs about the nature of reading and instruction. This set of unsupported assumptions, also labeled discourses (Gee, 1990; Ivanic, 2004), myths (Creme & Lea, 1998), implicit models (Lea & Street, 1998), approaches (Lillis, 2003), and tacit theories (Gee, 1990), "lead to particular forms of social action, [...] decisions, [...] choices, and omissions" (Ivanic, 2004, p. 124). Together with factual institutional constraints, they prevent teachers from responding to students' educational needs and disempower (Gee, 1990) or handicap "non traditional" students, for whom the confusion for not receiving guidance is maximized (Lillis, 1999). Our results also strengthen the constructivist "didactic of language practices" approach (e.g., Lerner *et al.*, 2003), which claims for teaching (as sharing and making explicit) the required literacy to take part in school and society, instead of blaming students for what they do not know yet.

Appendix A: Basic questions around which interviews were conducted**Students**

1. How did you **read** in high school? / What were the reading assignments you had?
2. How do you read in college? / What are the reading assignments you have now? What do you find difficult while reading in college? Give me an example.
3. Do your teachers support your reading? How? Why?

(The same for **writing**)

1. When you write an assignment, an exam, etc: What is **teacher feedback** like? Show me an exam or essay already assessed.
2. (With the view of an exam or essay already marked) Why do you think your teacher ticked / underlined / wrote this? Do you find it helpful? Why?
3. Before the exam or written assignment, how did the teacher tell what you had to do?

Teachers

1. How do your students **write** in college? / What are the writing assignments you give them? Do you work with them in class? How? Give me an example.
2. What do they find difficult while writing in college?
3. Do you give them any support for writing? Describe.
4. Do you think taking care of students' literacy is part of your job as a discipline teacher? Why?

(The same for **reading**)

1. When you assess your students writing: What is your **feedback** like? Show me an exam or essay already assessed.
2. (With the view of an exam or essay already marked) What do you ticked / underlined / wrote this for? Do your students find it helpful? Why?
3. Before the exam or written assignment, how did you tell the students what they had to do?

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