

63rd Annual Convention Conference on College Composition and Communication.
National Council of Teachers of English, St. Louis, Missouri, 2012.

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Cita:

Carlino, Paula (Marzo, 2012). *Teaching Writing in Higher Education: Who Takes on the Task in Argentina?.* 63rd Annual Convention Conference on College Composition and Communication. National Council of Teachers of English, St. Louis, Missouri.

Dirección estable: <https://www.aacademica.org/paula.carlino/46>

ARK: <https://n2t.net/ark:/13683/p1s1/mFd>



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Teaching Writing in Higher Education: Who Takes on the Task in Argentina?

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Trabajo invitado para la Featured International Session *Writing across the Curriculum in Global Perspective: New Ideas that Bridge Continents*, sesión coordinada por David Russell, 63rd Annual Convention Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, MO, EEUU., 23 de marzo de 2012.

<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Groups/CCCC/Convention/2012/Program/Friday.pdf>

This presentation describes how writing is dealt with in the Argentine universities. It shows a big picture about the ways it is included or neglected in the university curriculum.

Although I focus on what happens in Argentine universities, my research and teaching has been much influenced by the ideas of U.S. WAC and WID, as well as by the UK and Australian Academic literacies approach (together with the contributions of the Argentine “didactic of language practices”). I have been able to conceptualize the writing programs and the teaching practices I surveyed in my country thanks to some of their powerful concepts. In this sense, Russell (1990) warned us about the widespread

“assumption that writing is a single, generalizable skill, learnt (or not learnt) outside a disciplinary matrix –in secondary school or freshman composition- and not related in any discipline-specific way to the professional roles associated with a discipline.” (53)

“which assumes that writing is a single universally applicable skill, largely unrelated to ‘content’ ... a separable and independent technique” (55)

Bellow, I offer a summary of my presentation:

1. In general terms, writing is ubiquitous in the Social Sciences in Argentine universities. Students usually have to write for assessment purposes but receive scant guidelines and less feedback from their teachers. Writing is regarded as a prolongation of a generalizable skill that should

have been previously learnt, a conduit to convey already-formed thoughts, “a textual product rather than an intellectual process” (Carter, Miller, & Penrose, 1998). Writing is seldom supported due to the common belief that it is a transferable ability that should have been learnt in previous educational levels.

2. (The truth is that writing is seldom taught at any level: it is not promoted as a process, nor encouraged as an epistemic learning tool. Writing practices are hardly ever nurtured. Writing as rewriting, drafting and receiving feedback are experiences that students have rarely had. What students have been taught is grammar, spelling, and Literature).
3. In the last 15 years, writing problems of university students have become visible and some degree programs at some institutions began to offer a four-month writing course, usually at the beginning of the studies or as a shorter entry course. Writing courses are often conceived as remedial devices and teach grammar, punctuation, forms of citation, type of discourses (explanation, argumentation, and description), etc. In the last years, some courses have been trying to be more specific, including topics such as: writing for exams, writing essays, writing from readings, etc. However, both types of these writing courses teach a general knowledge with the expectation that students can apply it afterwards to the rest of the courses. I call them “Writing-as-general-skill courses”.
4. We can see a vicious circle between how writing is conceived and how universities deal with it in these “writing-as-general-skill courses”: The most common conception of writing treats it as an autonomous code, ruled by universal conventions and with the normative level (spelling and grammar) appearing as its most visible attribute. As a consequence, it is believed that writing can be taught and learned in ad hoc curricular spaces, dissociated from the spheres in which reading and writing are required for specific purposes. In such spaces, the contents related to writing are generally presented through exercises that break down and transfigure the real literate practices in order to teach them divorced from their situated uses. Then, once dispossessed of its social nature, writing is conceived of as a general ability that can be learnt and taught in a segregated way and transferred to any context. This vicious circle functions as a “comfortable assumption” to place the sole responsibility of its teaching on a writing seminar (Holmes Report of Cornell University in Kathrine Gottschalk, 1997). Additionally, if writing courses are the only responsible of writing, the rest of the subjects do not support

student writing but they also usually neglect the epistemic power of writing and do not promote its use as a learning tool.

5. There are, nevertheless, a few writing courses (e.g., Carlino, 2012; Padilla y Carlino, 2010) which teach writing in a very different way. I call them “writing-in-context courses”. Based on situated learning theories, and on genre as well as process approaches, these courses try to help students for the present and not for the future, that is to say, they teach how to write a specific text for a particular audience, a text that students have to write at the time they are learning how to write it. In addition, being aware that they are promoting academic enculturation, these courses have been designed to help students *take part* in an authentic practice of writing, instead of teaching a declarative knowledge or a decontextualized technique. In these cases, since there is a real text that students need and wish to produce, teachers can give substantive feedback that students welcome. Peer feedback is also organized. You can find an illustration of this in a doctoral writing seminar in which the teacher helps students to write a conference paper with their dissertation work in progress to present in a real scientific conference of their field of study (Carlino, 2012). This course acknowledges and nurtures the epistemic power of writing: writing is promoted both for communicating as well as for advancing the dissertation. To teach writing as a situated practice, teachers need to be experts in the field. They need to be active members of the discourse community the student wish to enter and to have reflected about its writing practices. In these unusual “writing-in-context courses”, writing and learning to write take place at the same time, and context is not a theoretical concept but a pushing setting that informs and constrains what and how to write. Writing is experienced as a practice in contrast to the common courses in which is presented as an abstract knowledge. Students are helped to produce a tangible text whereas customarily they are given a promise: “if you now exercise grammar, punctuation and even text types or modes of discourse, then you will be able to apply this knowledge to your future writing for the rest of the subjects”.
6. Besides writing courses, there are two other initiatives regarding writing in Argentine universities:
 - a. On the one hand, there is one university in the surroundings of Buenos Aires that has developed in the last decade a unique program following the Australian model of “team teaching”, a way of teaching writing in the disciplines. This is an institutional

program developed to foster teaching *partnerships* between a writing teacher and a lecturer of a specific subject matter. They work together to analyze with students the academic texts they are required to write in a given subject. Both teachers work for three semesters, until the subject matter professor is able to do the job alone. This writing across the curriculum program is an exceptional example of writing support across the disciplines in Argentina. It is also outstanding in that it counts with institutional support.

- b. On the other hand, there is another way that some teachers across the disciplines take care of student writing. I call it “interwoven” writing in the disciplines. In a survey study that my colleagues and I have carried out we have developed this concept to describe a teaching model in which writing assignments have the purpose of helping students learn disciplinary contents instead of only being a means of assessment. It has to do with writing to learn approaches and differs from “sewed” writing in the disciplines. These concepts characterize two contrasting ways about how teachers in the disciplines include writing in their classes: as an added or sewed element in the fringes of the course (the teacher asks to write and then assesses student products) or as an integrated or intertwined activity to support students learning disciplinary contents over the entire course (the teacher devotes class time to think about writing and to revise student drafts).

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