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# WRITING AND READING IN ARGENTINE SOCIAL SCIENCE COURSES. UNIVERSITY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS' VIEWPOINTS

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## Résumé

*Écrire et lire dans des disciplines universitaires de Sciences Sociales. Les points de vue des professeurs et des étudiants argentins*

Dans le cadre interprétatif des courants *Writing across the Curriculum*, *Writing in the Disciplines*, *Academic Literacies* et de la didactique des pratiques langagières, cette étude qualitative vise à décrire et analyser les points de vue d'étudiants et d'enseignants sur la lecture/écriture dans trois universités publiques argentines. Les données ont été obtenues grâce à des entretiens réalisés auprès de 27 enseignants et 39 étudiants de 12 cours de Sciences Sociales, des *focus groups*, l'analyse des programmes et des annotations de professeurs dans des examens écrits. Il en ressort que les tâches de lecture et d'écriture sont omniprésentes en Sciences Sociales mais tendanciellement implicites : elles ne sont pas nommées dans les programmes et – bien que fort différentes de celles du lycée – leur réalisation par les étudiants est peu accompagnée par les professeurs, du fait qu'elle mobilise des compétences considérées acquises. Des extraits d'entretiens illustreront comment certaines représentations sur l'écriture, la lecture, l'apprentissage et l'enseignement, liées à des contraintes institutionnelles, expliquent cet état de fait et entrave l'apprentissage des étudiants à l'université.

Within the frameworks of *Writing across the curriculum* (Bazerman *et al.*, 2004; Russell, 1990), *Writing in the disciplines*, *Academic literacies* (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 1999), and the *Didactics of language practices* (Lerner, 2003), I outline a qualitative study carried out together with four researchers and funded by a grant of the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) from Argentina. The study aims at describing undergraduates and teachers' perspectives about literacy practices that take place in Argentine universities.

## Context of the research

Argentina has 39 public universities and 43 private ones. 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 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. 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 widening participation policy of Argentine public higher education has favored the access of many working-class undergraduates, it is also true that this unrestricted entry tradition does not guarantee their progress in the studies or their degree completion. Additional open access and retention policies are rare.

Classes differ in size: while some are quite small, they tend to reach 40 and even more undergraduates in tutorials (and 300 in lectures). Most teachers are part-time teaching assistants. Teacher development through university programs is infrequent. Some degrees at certain universities have an initial Composition course. 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".

## Method

This inquiry has so far comprised 12 Social Science courses in 3 public universities through a multi-method approach. We ran two focus groups with 45 first-year students about the usual reading and writing assignments in high school and in university. In addition, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 27 teachers and 39 undergraduates around four topics: a) differences between university and high school literacy, b) university reading tasks and support needed by students and/or offered by teachers, c) university writing tasks and needed/offered support, d) and types and usefulness of written feedback given by teachers in students' exams. We also analyzed teachers' comments in exams. Finally, we scrutinized course syllabi, in search of any mention of reading and writing. Inspired by Lea & Street (1998)'s 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 hypothesis about the institutional experiences we were surrounded with. We aimed to apprehend everyday, unquestioned practices that appeared as transparent, natural, and apparently necessary in order to make them observable by their actors and stakeholders. The ultimate goal of our study was to open those practices to critique.

## Findings

Reading and writing assignments and essays are ubiquitous in Social Science courses but tend to go unnoticed: they do not appear mentioned in the course syllabi; and they are not sufficiently supported. Instead, they are taken for granted. Teachers and students' perspectives reveal that:

- I. Literacy university practices are new and challenging to undergraduates because they greatly differ from modes of reading and writing required in high school. Reading from various sources and writing about diverse authors' perspectives are typical requirements of university Social Science courses. This defies students' epistemologies, used to treat knowledge as absolute and homogeneous in high school's tasks:

"[University] differs [from high school] regarding the extension of the text and also regarding authors, because every one says something different, and what they say is not absolutely true, but it is arguable. [...]. For example, in high school I had a definition of Literature, and now we don't have any."

(1st year Humanities student)

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. Undergraduates state that high school reading for writing just entails looking for what questionnaires ask and involves transcribing literal portions of text. Instead, in the university, students need to make inferences about the text as a whole and in relation to other texts:

"I get lost because 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)

- II. While "students' problems" are recognized, literacy learning needs are hardly dealt with. Extensive reading is demanded but seldom guided, taken up again or discussed:

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?"

(Teaching assistant, 1st year, Psychology)

Writing is mostly asked for assessment purposes although it is rarely fostered as a learning tool during classes. Teachers in the disciplines do not usually make university-level expectations explicit enough: guidelines are scarce and feedback is minimal (condensed, ambiguous, unspecific, and local).

"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)

Typical marginal comments in students' exams are : "You have to explain why", "Explanation missing", "Concepts missing", "Unclear", "No", "?":

"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)

- III. Most of the interviewed teachers and students think that reading and writing in the disciplines should not be an object of instruction within the university. They base this idea on common-sense assumptions about reading, writing, learning, teaching, and university students, as detailed below.

*Reading* is thought of as extracting a pre-given meaning from a text. Undergraduates are supposed to be already equipped with this general ability. Likewise, *writing* appears as a surface medium of communication to convey previously made thoughts. It is rarely considered a method to develop substantial meaning relevant for a field of study. In this approach, the idea of disciplinary teachers' taking care of writing is understood as correcting grammatical errors because writing is viewed "as a textual product rather than an intellectual process" (Carter, Miller & Penrose, 1998). Within this framework, literacy is regarded as the prolongation of transferable skills long ago "learnt outside a disciplinary matrix" (Russell, 1990).

There is an additional belief behind the claim that it is not the subject teachers' duty to deal with academic literacy. Both teachers and students hold a restricted model about the instructional process and its object. *Teaching* in the Social Sciences is conceived as lecturing to explain concepts, which does not

entail scaffolding students in literacy activities. *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 communicating some information and undergraduates receiving it. Other class dynamics are frequently seen as a waste of time.

Finally, another belief invoked for disregarding students' literacy considers that undergraduates are or ought to be autonomous (Chanock, 2001).

- IV. There is a small proportion of teachers who do address undergraduates' reading and writing and give different kinds of support, sometimes being aware that these tasks help students learn disciplinary content. However, they tend not to acknowledge that their support is related to literacy improvement. They just take it as a way of teaching their subject.
- V. Some interviewees attribute teachers' disregard of literacy practices to institutional limitations (class time, teachers' workload, and lack of teachers' knowledge to "teach" academic literacy).
- VI. While these institutional constraints need to be reconsidered, the pervasive assumptions referred to in III) also hinder teachers' taking care of writing and reading in their subjects.

## Discussion

The present study shows that, at least within our non probabilistic sample, Argentine universities neglect undergraduates' reading and writing to learn. Certain unsupported assumptions about reading, writing, teaching and learning, together with institutional limitations, would justify this scene, which hinders disciplinary learning. Our findings are relevant to discuss retention policies, and could be understood in line with the "Didactics of language practices" approach, developed for primary education (Lerner *et al.*, 2003), which calls for debating whether and how the usual tacit knowledge involved in literacy practices should be an object of instruction across the university curriculum.

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