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Writing Centers and Programs: Their Role in Democratization Policies in Higher Education in Argentina

Abstract

Within a framework of democratization policies, universities in Argentina are confronted with the challenge of offering educational support to all students, traditional and nontraditional, to help them enculturate in chosen disciplines and graduate from college. In this collaboratively authored article, we describe some of the conditions and processes that led higher education institutions to acknowledge the strategic role that teaching reading, writing, and oral communication play, to foster not only the students' learning process, but also inclusion and quality for the democratization of higher education. We also describe initiatives carried out by five Argentinean universities to address the development of academic literacies in Spanish-medium curricula, including the establishment of writing programs and/or writing centers on our campuses. We refer to tutoring practices, culturally specific genres and pedagogies, teaching and research initiatives, power dynamics within the different organizational and institutional contexts, and the paramount role of collaboration in shaping future initiatives. Finally, we identify similarities and differences between the five institutional experiences.

Introduction

When I entered university, I came across texts that were very different from what I read and wrote in high school . . . very long and difficult to understand. . . . [T]his generated a lot of uncertainty. . . . But this experience changed my perspective on the role of reading and writing in college . . . and on how I see myself as a student. . . . Now, every time I read, I imagine I have an appointment with the author. . . . I will never forget a phrase that sums up this change: “read as a writer and write as a reader.” —Lucas

Writing was a beautiful experience. I felt I had a dormant writer inside. . . . It was both exploration and discovery . . . an inspiration to project myself into the future. —Martin

This experience taught me that writing is a construction and that everyone can be a writer. —Muriel

These personal reflections by three incoming first-year students on experiences in an academic reading and writing project organized by a writing center at the Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicación (Universidad Nacional de Córdoba) highlight not only the fact that transitioning into higher education and navigating the college experience can generate feelings of uncertainty in students, but also the fact that coping with the enculturation process cannot be done successfully without guidance. The stories of Lucas,¹ Martin, and Muriel reveal that changes related to identity and belonging were triggered while being part of the project put forward by the students' writing center. This is particularly important in our context because students' socioeconomic backgrounds, prior knowledge, skills, and behavior are heterogeneous. What is more, many belong to socially vulnerable groups in which families lack experience in higher education. Thanks to the support provided at the writing center, Lucas, Martin, and Muriel seem to have overcome the strangeness that novice members feel during the process of becoming part of the academic community and have been empowered to face the future confidently. This leads us to firmly believe that writing centers and programs can play a strategic role not only in guiding and supporting the learning process, but also in building self-esteem, fostering self-awareness, and creating a sense of belonging.

During the last decades, within a framework of democratization policies based on principles for promoting quality in inclusive education, higher education in Argentina has expanded (Natale & Stagnaro, 2016; Navarro, 2016), as seen in the creation of universities and in an increase of both traditional and non-traditional student enrollment. However, universities still face challenges despite these policies: high dropout rates and delayed or low graduation rates. Ensuring access, retention, and completion of studies while working with stu-

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

dents from diverse cultural contexts, often in large classroom settings, presents major difficulties for faculty (Ezcurra, 2011). In addition, navigating higher education becomes an enormous challenge for students as they are immersed in a completely new culture, one with its own conventions; mechanisms of intercommunication and participation; and a repertoire of genres whose purpose, schematic structure, and linguistic resources are unknown to students (Moyano, 2018; Swales, 1990). These challenges are particularly evident in reading, writing, and oral tasks—and college students learn and are assessed through reading, writing, and oral activities in almost all the content subjects. Moreover, writing a final project, a dissertation, or a thesis is a new academic process students must go through to attain their degree.

These problems and challenges gave rise to an emerging Latin American field of writing studies. Paula Carlino's definitions of professional, disciplinary, and academic literacies (2005, 2013) have been of central importance as her work led to the establishment of the field, providing the scholarly community with fresh insight into these concepts and stimulating the advancement of a variety of actions in favor of the development of reading, writing, and oral communication in leading Argentine universities (Avila Reyes, 2017; Tapia-Ladino, Avila Reyes, Navarro, & Bazerman, 2016; Navarro, 2017).

As in other parts of the world, the WAC/WID movement that emerged in the 1970s as an attempt to encourage teachers in all areas to assign more writing to their students, and which became one of the longest running educational reform movements in higher education in the U.S. (Bazerman, Little, Bethel, Chavkin, Fouquette, & Garufis, 2005), has been particularly influential in our local context. In the American context, writing centers were created in North American universities as a form of collaborative work toward the development of writing and have now expanded globally (Thaiss, Bräuer, Carlino, Ganobcsik-Williams, & Sinha, 2012). Following this trend, some writing centers have been established in different Latin American countries such as Puerto Rico, México, Colombia, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina with different approaches (Molina-Natera, 2014). In some cases, universities started a writing program and then created a writing center to support the activities carried out by that program. In others, the creation of a writing center was a means of institutionalizing and connecting different projects and activities in progress for some time.

Supportive global and local networks were built up to connect colleagues and all types of initiatives, such as the International Society for the Advancement of Writing Research, the Red Latinoamericana de Centros y Programas de Escritura—the Latin American affiliate of the International Writing Centers Association—and our local, recently created Red Argentina de Instituciones Lectoras y Escritoras (RAILEES). The overall mission of RAILEES is to democratize higher education by fostering the creation of writing programs and

centers. Moreover, there are other international networking schemes, such as the UNESCO Chairs Programme, founded in 1992, for the improvement of education quality and equity in Latin America (Reading and Writing) as well as in 700 other institutions worldwide, and the Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios de la Escritura Académica y Profesional en el Nivel Superior, neither of which explicitly focus on writing programs and centers.

These advances in the field transformed our view of literacy practices in the disciplines. We gradually changed from conceiving of these literacy practices as generic skills that are acquired and pay off for life, to understanding that they are highly complex socioculturally situated processes that ought to be taught and learned in actual contexts of use. In this regard, during the 2000s, different initiatives were put into practice, such as tutoring systems; compulsory courses and workshops for first-year students; and support for writing final projects, dissertations, and theses. The initiatives were funded, in many cases, by programs launched by the University Policies Secretariat belonging to the National Ministry of Education.

In this scenario, finding a suitable and accurate definition to describe writing centers or programs is a difficult task because institutions seem to adopt context-dependent approaches according to particular needs and scholarship involved. What is more, setting up a writing center or running a program does not merely imply following in the footsteps of other, more experienced, institutions. In our local context, writing centers have gone far beyond an organized space staffed with tutors where students with academic or professional writing problems go for support. More often than not, writing centers have started as a group of competent teachers who commit themselves to carrying out activities that range from guiding students and alumni to organizing professional development seminars and workshops for the teaching staff. The centers generally emerge in a bottom-up fashion; and, when they manage to get institutional support, they grow into a space for dialogue, scaffolding, and collaborative work that strengthens and consolidates the writing practices of the different actors involved. Writing programs, on the other hand, are a systematic set of teaching activities aimed at students to develop academic, disciplinary, and professional writing. These programs are far from being remedial as they are also available for students at all levels of writing proficiency. Writing centers and programs have been a powerful motor for change and advancement of knowledge democracy in local academia.

The first writing programs and writing centers were created in Argentinean universities in the mid-2000s. It is worth mentioning the *Programa de Desarrollo de Habilidades de Lectura y Escritura a lo largo de la Carrera* at the Universidad de General Sarmiento, the Postgraduate Writing Center and the Virtual Writing Center at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, the Writing Center at the Universidad de San Andrés, and the Academic Reading and Writing

Program at the Universidad de Flores (Molina-Natera, 2015). These remain influential and sources of inspiration for colleagues and institutions in our region. The latter will be described later in this document.

Last, but not least, evidence shows that academic, disciplinary, and professional literacy development in higher education has become a priority on the national agenda. The LOGROS Program, put forward by the University Policies Secretariat (Ministry of Education) through the Higher Education Regional Councils, recently launched a call for grants to fund Academic and Professional Writing projects. The proposals had to be aimed at strengthening and consolidating initiatives towards teaching writing across the curriculum and/or the creation of writing centers. Furthermore, the call for proposals explicitly established that “Higher Education institutions are responsible for teaching those writing resources that enable students to learn disciplinary literacy, to construe knowledge, and to use it in new scenarios.”

In this collaboratively written article, we describe initiatives carried out by five Argentinean universities on their campuses to address academic literacies development, start writing programs, and/or create writing centers to solve the problems described above. Through our many voices, we will refer to tutoring practices, culturally specific genres and pedagogies, power dynamics within the different organizational and institutional contexts, and inclusive knowledge policies. Last but not least, we will discuss the paramount role of collaboration in shaping future initiatives and in consolidating writing centers and/or programs. A description of each university’s achievements will serve to depict institutional profiles and trajectories. Readers will notice both points in common and differences among the initiatives carried out by the five institutions. These comparisons must be interpreted in terms of institutional capability, purpose, and target audience of the initiatives.

An aspect to be highlighted is the fact that the existing writing centers and programs show different degrees of development. Those at the Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto and Universidad de Flores have achieved a certain degree of consolidation and respectable status. These centers and programs show continuity over time, multiple articulations with diverse colleges and the central area, as well as collaboration among departments and staff that have helped sustain their actions. In the case of the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, both writing centers described in this article have been recently created, so they are still in a rather developmental stage. Their scope encompasses an undergraduate program and two of the fifteen colleges that make up this long-standing university. The Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos and the Universidad Nacional de Villa María have a wealth of knowledge and experience in terms of gearing professional development for teachers, first-year writing courses, and research that have paved the way for starting programs and/or writing centers on their campuses. Evidence of this can be seen, for

example, in their participation in the LOGROS Program for the advancement of academic and professional writing that aims at starting and/or strengthening writing programs, in collaboration with the other universities in Córdoba, Río Cuarto and Flores.

Beyond these differences, the initiatives carried out by the five institutions share some common features. For one, they have all focused on two audiences: students and teachers. For students, the initiatives were shaped into either workshops or compulsory first-year subjects. In their first stages of implementation, these actions were limited to remediation but have gradually moved a step forward, introducing academic and disciplinary-specific approaches to teaching reading, writing and oral communication in accordance with the needs of higher education students with all levels of writing proficiency. In this regard, we believe these courses share similarities with required courses in the U.S. as described by Thaiss (2018). Later on, these actions extended to other stages of academic programs, especially supporting students writing their final projects, theses, and dissertations. The initiatives we describe also include academic tutoring, an invaluable educational assistance method that serves not only to accompany and encourage students, but also to collect data about teaching.

With regard to teachers, experience suggests that staff and tutors' professional development has been carried out in a variety of ways, ranging from more traditional courses, seminars, or workshops, to other, more innovative, approaches, such as collaboration and writing experts accompanying disciplinary colleagues in their courses, as reported by the Universidad de Flores. The Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos has a successful initiative designed to meet the demands of local scholars who need support publishing research findings in English-medium journals within the frame of internationalization and scientific-academic cooperation policies.

For an international audience to fully understand the institutional context out of which initiatives such as these arose, we believe it is necessary briefly to describe the Argentinean university governance system and its academic structure. Higher education in Argentina is a heterogeneous and complex system made up of more than a hundred higher education institutions—public, private, and mixed—that are spread all over the national territory to provide scientific, professional, humanistic, and technical training to more than 1,500,000 students. According to the 1995 Higher Education Act, national universities (state-funded) enjoy substantial autonomy, which is codified in their individual charters or statutes. These public universities have the authority to select their own leaders (deans and rectors) and collegial bodies with the participation of professors, students, administrative staff, and alumni. Among the collegial bodies, the most important is the higher council (the *Consejo Superior*, in Spanish) that is comprised of the deans of each faculty and representatives

from professors, students, administrative staff, and alumni. Private and mixed universities also enjoy autonomy, once the National Commission of Evaluation and Accreditation has recognized that they meet its official standards. Education in state universities is free at the undergraduate level while private ones require some form of tuition payment. In order to extend access to all students, most universities do not have selective admission tests.

In the following sections, readers will get a glimpse of the unique path each university has chosen to achieve its set goals according to both the theoretical traditions that have driven its academic staff forward and the institutional mechanisms in policy-making that have rendered these goals possible. We will historicize the circumstances that led to the installation and/or consolidation of writing centers or programs at the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, the Universidad Nacional de Villa María, the Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto, the Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos, and the Universidad de Flores. The first four institutions are the cofounders of the Argentinian association that fosters reading and writing in institutions; the Universidad de Flores joined the network later and is one of the first universities in our country to have created a WAC program, which is still regarded as a successful model and a source of inspiration in our region.

Universidad Nacional de Córdoba: Three Steps Towards Reading and Writing as Situated Practices Across the Curriculum

The Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC), founded in 1613, is the country's oldest public university. It is located in Córdoba, the capital city of Córdoba Province. In 1918, a highly popular series of reforms took place at this university and modernized the Argentinean higher education system that is still known today. The UNC is one of the biggest universities in the country, with 109 undergraduate and graduate programs (122,000 students) and 215 postgraduate programs (9,650 students). It is made up of a central area, fifteen colleges and two secondary schools. At present, the UNC has two writing centers and an academic writing program. The three initiatives seek to respond to the challenges described in our introduction, especially the democratization of teaching and learning in mass contexts.

One of the writing centers was created by the *Facultad de Ciencias de la Comunicación* in October 2018 to strengthen and boost the different functions of writing practices (Bazerman, 2016; Carlino, 2013; Navarro, 2017). The center is based on three working principles: 1) the utmost importance of writing for learning; 2) writing as a complex, situated process; and 3) institutional responsibility to accompany the process (Thaiss, 2018). In full compliance with these principles, the aims of the center are 1) to guide students; 2) to produce didactic materials; 3) to provide training and advice and carry out

collaborative work with other areas and members of the university community and other higher education institutions; 4) to produce knowledge about teaching and learning writing in the field of communication studies; 5) to organize academic and scientific events and produce publications, and 6) to participate in scientific cooperation networks.

This center is in its early stages of development. In the first stage, a set of noncompulsory workshops and courses on writing will be designed for advanced students, together with the development of a tutoring program and the production of teaching and learning resources. In a second stage, the center will expand its activities to reach other areas and teaching staff. During the final stage, efforts will be devoted to providing advice and training to staff and colleagues from other educational institutions. The writing center is coordinated by an interdisciplinary team of professors, specializing in the fields of communication, education, and literature, who are in charge of teaching academic reading and writing to first-year students.

In a parallel fashion, another writing center at the Facultad de Lenguas was launched in 2018, thanks to funding from the Programa de Apoyo y Mejoramiento de la Enseñanza de Grado, to support students writing in languages other than Spanish. This writing center was designed following the principles put forward by Barnett & Blumner (2008), Bruce & Rafoth (2009), Ferris (2009), Hyland (2002), and Williams & Severino (2004), among others; the core principles include student-centered active learning with an emphasis on the formative process rather than on texts, all geared to foster autonomy. This writing center constitutes a literacy-rich environment to support writing in English as a foreign language and aims at developing autonomous and responsible learners through tutor-student interaction. At present, it supports students who are enrolled in English Language II and III, compulsory courses that belong to two undergraduate programs: Translation Studies and Initial English Language Teacher Education. In the future, students from all the language programs at the institution will be welcome. This initiative is currently coordinated by the professors in charge of English Language II and III.

The Academic Writing Program was created at our law school at the end of 2018 to provide a space for systematic reflection on how language is used and exploited in professional discourse. It strives to generate interdisciplinary studies of highly ritualized legislative and judicial discourse, to improve ongoing training and development for undergraduates and teachers, to offer advice to both students and teachers, and to organize scientific events to discuss problems arising and to find creative solutions. An interdisciplinary team made up of a director and two coordinators oversees the program. Implemented in 2005 as a postgraduate program at the Centro de Estudios Avanzados, this program is based on a previous initiative that involved writing and the popularization of science.

Both writing centers and the program resulted from actions that sought solutions for the problems described in our introduction. In the following paragraphs, we present some precedents that contributed to their creation. A direct precedent can be traced to the 1990s when Leveling Cycles (*Ciclos de Nivelación*) emerged, aimed at supporting first-year students studying in different programs. These initiatives seem to share similar characteristics with compulsory first-year courses originally offered at American universities (Bazerman, Little, Bethel, Chavkin, Fouquette, & Garufis, 2005; Molina-Natera, 2014; Thaiss, 2018). Although these Cycles were rooted in a remedial, deficit-based approach focusing on what students did not know when entering university, the program still generated a wealth of experience and research that resulted in reformulating problems, making practices visible, and producing knowledge about the complexity of the first-year experience in higher education. In addition, in 1999, a UNESCO Chair was inaugurated at the Facultad de Lenguas. Designed to promote initiatives that made an impact on teaching, research, and service and to organize relevant academic and scientific events such as the XIII Congreso Internacional Cátedra Unesco (Muse, 2015), the effects of creating this UNESCO Chair also reached other levels of education in our Province.

The 2000s were characterized by a redefinition of reading and writing at the UNC. This was when academic mentoring programs for first-year students were implemented, which strengthened joint actions between colleges and increased publications, new research projects, and contributions to the understanding of teaching first-year students (Biber, 2007; Duarte, 2013). In 2010, another landmark highlights the authorities' concern about academic literacy development: an increased understanding of the complex nature of reading for graduation led to the launching of the Programa de Apoyo y Mejoramiento de la Enseñanza de Grado. And between 2011 and 2013, a professional development experience for teachers took place (Giménez, Luque, & Orellana, 2014, p. 37).

A third redefinition occurred in 2014 as reading and writing were finally undertaken as practices across the curriculum. An unfinished project that aimed at the creation of an interactive virtual environment to strengthen and develop academic reading and writing practices for undergraduates (Castagno & Pinque, 2016) gave birth to major events that account for this new step forward. In 2015, a collegiate venture project began—"Lectura y escritura en la Universidad. Hacia la construcción de redes académicas"—which paved the way for the creation of RAILEES. Another event was the translation and publication of the first edition in Spanish of the "Reference guide to writing across the curriculum," under the title "Escribir a través del currículum. Una guía de referencia" (Castagno, Orellana, Ávila, & Pinque, 2016, p. 28). This material is used by both teachers and students, not only in all the teacher education

programs at the UNC, but also in some of the postgraduate courses and professional development seminars. This reference guide has proved very useful for staff working at Córdoba's Ministry of Education when designing professional development actions for teachers working in other levels of our educational system. This last project, characterized by dialogue and collaboration, has proven important not only for seeing the value of our writing centers and program, but also for making their creation viable and visible (Myatt, 2017).

Universidad Nacional de Villa María: Institutional Policies for the Consolidation of Programs and Writing Centers

The Universidad Nacional de Villa María (UNVM) is a young university, founded in 1995, in Córdoba Province. One of its most salient characteristics is that more than 80% of its students are first-generation. This fact highlights the impact Argentinian policies of democratization and expansion of higher education have had on the makeup of the student population, as well as the enormous challenge this institution has been facing. In the case of the UNVM, we will focus on research and pedagogical practices concerning academic writing development. These practices arose from context-specific particularities and were drawn up by the Central Academic Secretariat and the *Instituto de Investigación*. Studies by Lizarriturri & Schweizer (2014) and Lizarriturri (2013) describe the diagnostic survey administered to first-year students of the different programs offered on three UNVM campuses: Villa María, Córdoba, and Villa del Rosario. In 2011, 477 reading comprehension and production protocols, based on linguistic-psychological models and theories, with a socio-cognitive orientation, were evaluated. The results showed the difficulties students encounter when producing summaries, a genre considered one of the best strategies to assess reading comprehension. The analysis of these reading and writing protocols also allowed us to observe that a high percentage of the students uses writing only as a technological communication tool, without recognizing its linguistic-discursive and epistemic functions. The lack of consideration of these functions inhibits metalinguistic and metacognitive reflection, the drawing of inferences (lexical, semantic and discursive-pragmatic), and complex mental operations, such as analysis, synthesis, generalization, and abstraction.

As a result of these studies, the Academic Secretariat organized a compulsory academic reading-and-writing workshop, still offered to students in the first year of the different degree courses. In spite of its short duration (only a month) and the large class sizes (about 100 students per class), this workshop implied an institutional policy change in relation to the importance given to writing in higher education.

In order not to fall short, the UNVM has continued working to ensure the right to education for all students. During 2014–2015, two new research projects, “Writing as a didactic strategy for university teaching” and “Didactic configurations in teacher training at the UNVM,” were conducted. These projects demonstrate a meaningful transition from qualitative research to action research. Besides considering writing as an important didactic strategy for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge, the study of specialized genres was the target in a few subjects from the *Profesorado* and *Licenciatura en Lengua y Literatura*. Notably, research sites were outside of the writing program: in a bachelor’s degree in audiovisual design and production; in *Profesorado en Matemática*; and in a common subject of the three UNVM teaching programs. The study involved working on writing instruction, problem-solving, exams, lectures or research papers, key schemes, bibliographic records or abstracts, explanatory accounts, and didactic narratives. Examples can be found in publications by Lizzarriturri & Giammarini (2018b; 2020).

From 2016 onwards, the *Instituto de Investigación* established strategic lines of research and programs for writing development. Consequently, the following projects were presented as GIDED (Grupo de Investigación y Desarrollos Didácticos UNVM): “Didactic configurations for teacher training in academic writing” and “Writing as a didactic strategy: working with specialized genres in different instances of educational training.” Both are considered in the subsequent research programs “Teaching Configurations for Initial and Continuing Educational Training” (2016 and 2017) and “Educational configurations in higher education: teaching and learning strategies that promote disciplinary understanding” (2018 and 2019). At this stage, research and teaching perspectives converge on the epistemic, communicative, and symbolic functions of writing, as well as the characteristic writing of discursive-textual genres of academic disciplines. These projects were influenced by the contributions of the WAC movement (Bazerman, 2012, 2016), the Didactics of Writing (Lizzarriturri & Giammarini, 2018), and writing proposals mediated by new technologies. Moreover, the year 2016 constitutes an inflection point for our institution because the UNVM started to participate jointly with the National Universities of Córdoba, Entre Ríos, and Río Cuarto in the *Misiones Inversas VI* project. The RAILEES network also turned out to be a fruitful interinstitutional tool for exchange, with the implementation of conferences and organization of professional development courses for teachers.

In sum, these research initiatives and actions show the path followed at the UNVM; we began with questions about the meaning and scope of writing as a communicative and cultural, sociocognitive process-product in the first-year experience across the disciplines, then moved on to the development of proposals for the implementation of writing as a didactic strategy in the disciplines of the professional curricula of the different programs. Finally, the

focus has been on the specialized or professional genres in diverse educational environments within the framework of interinstitutional networks and policies. At present, our challenge is to work on the development of a writing program.

Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto: From a Local Writing Center Towards a Formal Writing Program

The Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto was created in May 1971 by the National Executive within the Taquini Plan that sought to adjust higher education to respond to regional needs, situating higher education as an answer to a strong regional and local social movement involving all the social sectors (Moyetta, 2015). The UNRC is made up of five colleges that share the same campus. This has contributed to community cohesion and to the implementation of common policies, especially in issues such as academic literacies development. Thus, the UNRC has encouraged initiatives to support students and to facilitate their enculturation into the different disciplinary communities. By admitting heterogeneous student populations, with various types and levels of cultural capital, the institution, with a democratizing spirit, assumed the challenge of stimulating inclusion and housing diversity while maintaining educational quality. Actions aimed at strengthening reading and writing practices have played a key role, and the UNRC has fostered the design of didactic materials for reading and writing, both for students (Vázquez & Novo, 1999; Galvalisi, Novo, & Rosales, 2004; Vélez, 2005) and for teachers (Novo & Rosales, 2007; Rosales & Novo, 2014). Furthermore, our institution has stimulated the design of research projects and teaching improvement programs with a strong emphasis on these topics (Astudillo, Jakob, Novo, Pelizza, Prámparo, & Tarifa, 2014; Jakob, Novo, & Astudillo, 2014; Vázquez, 2014).

Looking back at our most significant milestones, we recognize several transformations coinciding with the different perspectives on academic literacy developed and adopted in Argentina from the last decades of the twentieth century to the present (Carlino, 2013; Natale & Stagnaro, 2016; Navarro, 2017). We will describe three of the most salient initiatives that have paved the way for the creation of a writing program that will reach students in programs at all the colleges.

A major milestone was the 2004 creation of the Center for Research and Teaching of Reading and Writing (CIELE) at the Faculty of Human Sciences. This center promotes awareness among university faculty of ways to help students build discipline-specific knowledge, understand and take on disciplinary discourses, and support their disciplinary learning through understanding and producing texts (Berardo & Travaglia, 2020). The CIELE has organized a wide range of activities, including, 1) seminars, courses, and workshops for teachers, researchers, undergraduate and postgraduate students, alumni, and

professionals; 2) academic events, such as conferences, symposia, meetings, and book and journal presentations; 3) advice to teachers and students; and 4) collaboration in the design and organization of institutional activities for first-year students. The CIELE has also contributed to the formulation and development of several policies and plans.

For example, in 2014, the University's academic administration (*Rectorado*) approved a postgraduate diploma program (*Diplomatura Superior en Lectura, Escritura y Pensamiento Crítico*). The courses for it confer teachers from diverse disciplines a degree of competence in key issues, such as discourse analysis, methods and didactics, and critical thinking, in order to facilitate the integration of reading and writing in their courses through the design of in-class activities. Three cohorts have proven the program's popularity. This diploma program was especially designed to help professors, those in charge of both admission and the first-year courses of the different programs, with the following areas: attention to the epistemic and situated nature of reading and writing practices, the involvement of teachers from different disciplines in literacy development activities, and the challenge of democratizing a university open to new populations. Compulsory for obtaining the diploma is the preparation of a literacy development project implemented in one of the subjects. The quality of the proposals has encouraged another initiative aimed at promoting the creation and implementation of projects in all of the colleges.

Consequently, in 2016, *Rectorado* launched a new call for projects concerning reading and writing in the disciplines in the first year: the PELPA projects. The scope of the call has been gradually broadened to include all the subjects in the curriculum. The call's salient feature is that projects must involve an advisory committee of reading and writing specialists to support teachers during the formulation and the implementation stages.

The initiatives described are consistent with our belief that the development of academic literacies concerns not only students and teachers, but also, above all, institutional responsibility (Carlino, 2013; Natale & Stagnaro, 2016; Navarro, 2017). This institutional responsibility must be undertaken as a political pedagogical project aimed at "the education of scientists and professionals but, at the same time, of critical and engaged citizens, that is, of human beings capable of interpreting, producing, enunciating, and transforming written language" (Vázquez, 2010, p. 20).

Our initiatives, however, are limited in two ways: first, they focus solely on entrance and first-year activities, thus, not dealing with genres advanced students need to master; and second, the initiatives are endogenous, i.e., developed by and for members of the UNRC. We are trying to overcome these drawbacks through the involvement of CIELE members in RAILEES and through the implementation of a project aimed at strengthening writing in the disciplines, with special attention to students writing capstone projects.

These latest initiatives have been included in a joint project (LOGROS – EPA Program) with other universities that belong to RAILEES. The UNRC plans to prepare teachers and students to carry out a pilot experience aimed at the creation of a formal writing program that will certainly enrich and systematize our institutional actions in permanent dialogue and interaction with the other universities of the network. All in all, the valuable experience gained by the CIELE, a college writing center, has laid the basis and will serve as the motor that will keep a formal writing program running at the UNRC.

Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos: Teaching Academic Literacies Across Languages

Founded in 1973, the Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos (UNER) is a relatively young national university made up of nine colleges and a central administration (*Rectorado*) situated in different towns of the Entre Ríos Province. Also created within the Taquini Plan, it considers education as both a right and a public good. In this regard, initiatives to help our students surmount academic challenges and to prepare our academic staff range from peer-mentoring programs in the core disciplines for the former to continuous professional development for the latter. In this scenario, reading and writing have enjoyed a relatively privileged place on our university's agenda. Institutional and inter-institutional ties have been promoted and strengthened throughout the years. The most significant actions are described in the following paragraphs.

In 2001, the Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación became part of the UNESCO Chair in Reading and Writing Studies. Within this framework of activities, a postgraduate seminar on “College Reading and Writing” was taught by scholars from the University of Buenos Aires and from UNER. This ambitious two-year project, aimed at disciplinary and language teachers, was fueled by the need to consider the cross-curricular nature of reading and writing. A fruitful consequence of this experience was the publication of *Prácticas de lectura y escritura académicas* (Pipkin & Reynoso, 2010).

As a result of our deep concern with educational quality, equality of opportunity, and permanence, the different colleges have gradually introduced subjects aiming at the development of reading, writing, and oral communication in their study programs. As an example, since 2004, *Comprensión lectora y producción escrita* is a compulsory annual subject for first-year students in all the programs at the Facultad de Ingeniería. The Facultad de Ciencias Agropecuarias started a module for prospective first-year students, which turned into part of a compulsory—but not eliminatory—one-month admission course for all the programs in all colleges as of 2012. These initiatives sought not only to guide and support the learning process, but also to build self-esteem and create a sense of belonging among first-year students.

Research and teaching improvement programs have also been stimulated. In this regard, we have studied the incidence of the systematization and conceptualization of discourse mechanisms in highly argumentative texts among undergraduate students learning reading comprehension in foreign languages (Reynoso, Sforza, Rosa, & Waigandt, 2009). Other teacher-researchers explored the effect of rhetorical awareness on titles in scholarly writing (Noceti, 2012). Another interdisciplinary team delved into the use of writing as a problem-solving activity to foster reflective thought for vector-calculus learners (Waigandt, Carrere, Perassi, & Añino, 2019). The findings have fueled evidence-based practices for both Spanish-medium instruction in the disciplines and for teaching other languages for specific academic purposes.

In contrast with many other regions of the world, in which much of higher education is taught in English—even when English is not the local language (Arnold, Nebel, & Ronesi, 2017; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014)—in Argentina, education is provided in Spanish. However, international English-medium publications are increasingly part of official evaluation criteria. UNER has supported advanced students, scholars, and researchers in both face-to-face and online courses and seminars. Furthermore, English-language teachers have provided one-on-one support with article editing (Waigandt, Noceti, & Lotheringer, 2019). These actions led to the recent creation of the Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Area at the Facultad de Ingeniería to support researchers writing and submitting different types of articles and projects both in Spanish and English.

Networking and collaboration have also been a priority on our university's agenda. UNER has participated in several joint projects, such as "*Lecturas y escrituras en educación superior. Hacia la construcción de redes académicas*," which resulted in the formation of RAILEES. Two years later, the RAILEES founders designed the "Writing Programs in Higher Education" project funded by the Fulbright Specialist Program. The "Writing Programs in Higher Education" project involved the visit of Dr. Christopher Thaiss, in 2018, to five national universities where he met administrators, academic secretaries, and pedagogical advisors to discuss the implementation, sustainability, and challenges of writing programs.

This valuable experience led UNER to take part in an ambitious joint project within the LOGROS Program for the advancement of academic and professional writing. In the call for proposals, the University Policies Secretariat (National Ministry of Education) explicitly established that "Higher Education institutions are responsible for teaching the writing resources that enable students to learn disciplinary literacy, to construe knowledge and to use it in new scenarios." Our project, "Developing and Strengthening Academic and Professional Writing in RAILEES Universities: Towards Institutionalization as an Academic Policy," is another important step for advancing the network a

quantum leap further and for consolidating or starting writing programs and/or writing centers on our campuses. This funded project is an important opportunity to continue working together, to combine our strengths and resources, and increase our capacity for negotiation. The project has also opened up new possibilities for exchanging experience, for sharing and co-producing teaching and learning materials, for co-organizing professional development activities, and for eventually shaping and institutionalizing writing programs and/or writing centers on our campuses.

Universidad de Flores: Negotiation between Teaching Partners

The Academic Reading and Writing Program (PROLEA, for its acronym in Spanish) started in 2013 with a pilot test at the Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences at the Universidad de Flores (UFLO), a private university in Buenos Aires. PROLEA was designed as a set of systematic activities across the curriculum whose main purpose is to teach students to read, write, and edit texts used to assess learning in different disciplines in specific degree programs. The underlying assumption is that using language in written texts allows students to re-elaborate concepts and re-construct knowledge learned (Bereiter & Scardamaglia, 1987; Halliday, 1993; Vigotsky, 1998). After a two-year performance evaluation, the program was officially opened and gradually expanded to reach the entire population of students across the different degree programs: psychopedagogy; physical activities and sports; health, safety, and environmental control; administration; certified public accountant; environmental engineering; law; and architecture.

To ensure the democratization of knowledge, PROLEA is organized within the disciplines, in one subject per year in each degree program. This guarantees that students work with diverse disciplinary academic and/or professional discourses. Consequently, students get acquainted with the distinguishing characteristics of various genres and learn to write texts accordingly. In this situated learning process, re-elaboration is a key strategy that enhances disciplinary content learning (Bereiter & Scardamaglia, 1987). Moreover, through explicit teaching (Bernstein, 1990), students learn how to deal with new genres, which helps them become independent writers.

These goals are achieved thanks to teaching in pairs: a language specialist and the disciplinary professor work together regularly, purposefully, and cooperatively. The language specialist is in charge of guiding the students to recognize genre characteristics and organize content accordingly, using accurate academic language resources to create meaning. The professor deals with aspects related to the disciplinary field and helps learners to use language to construct proper knowledge in the subject. The teaching partners follow a locally made pedagogy based on the teaching-learning cycle designed by the

Sydney School of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin, 1999; Rose & Martin, 2013). The cycle was modified by reorganizing its stages to propose a deconstruction, construction, and editing sequence (Moyano, 2007). The deconstruction stage deals with identifying the main characteristics of the genre (schematic structure, relevant linguistic resources to construe meaning, and goal accomplishment). At Universidad de Flores program, the construction stage is limited to reflection on how to distribute the selected meanings across the schematic structure of the genre and which relevant resources are needed in each stage of that structure. The editing stage is oriented to teaching the students how to revise the text they have produced, especially taking into account the genre characteristics recognized in the model text analyzed in the deconstruction stage, until a final version is reached. Each stage is first performed jointly (students with the guide of the language professor), then in small groups, and, finally, independently, in order to gain autonomy. Scaffolding removal can be done only after the sequence has been carried out several times. Each new genre requires orientation from the teacher.

This pedagogical proposal is sustained by genre theory (Egins & Martin, 2003; Martin, 1992; Martin, 1997; Martin & Rose, 2008) and the developments for discourse-semantics in the frame of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2008). It also considers the theory of learning in this tradition, which suggests learning is a knowledge construction process mediated by the use of language resources (Halliday, 1993). From this point of view, the linguist Michael Halliday (1993) proposed a learning theory, in which language is considered to be the most sophisticated semiotic system produced by humans, a resource for construing an image of the world, and the means for knowledge construction through the processing of experience (Halliday, 2004; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Martin, 2007).

This approach is key for the democratization of teaching and learning in mass contexts if we take into account that scientific knowledge development has implied not only the creation of technicality in the disciplines, but also the development of both linguistic resources for the production of abstract discourse and discourse-semantic resources for appraising the world construed by discourse and for building a dialogue between different social positions related to it (heteroglossia) (Halliday & Martin, 1993; Hood & Martin, 2005; Martin & White, 2005; Wignell, 2007). This set of non-transparent features constitutes an insurmountable challenge for many university students. Understanding how students learn “specialised symbolic structures of explicit knowledge” that belong to the sphere of the disciplines’ intellectual construals, differing from everyday linguistic practices (Bernstein, 1999), and teaching them how to use these resources to produce meaning through language entail developing students’ knowledge production abilities (Halliday, 1993), which can help increase retention rates.

In addition to the synthesis of different critical aspects of PROLEA introduced above, it is important to highlight this program's impact on the development of students' abilities to write academic and professional texts through the democratization of specialized language and learning resources. Across the curriculum, students gain control not only of disciplinary discourses and of a group of academic and/or professional genres, but also of a procedure to approach new genres, along with some linguistic knowledge to describe resources.

Conclusion

In Argentina, there exists a growing interest in writing centers and writing programs in higher education contexts. Certainly, our universities already host programs that support students and faculty in academic writing. In this collaborative article, we have described different initiatives that have taken place at five universities in three different provinces including their trajectories and institutional profiles. But mapping our work onto the U.S.-based terms "writing center" and "writing programs" is complicated. The growth of centers and programs in Argentina has resulted from the convergence of multiple phenomena, but most notably, the challenges to democratize education at this level through inclusive Spanish-as-first-language-medium teaching and the emergence of a specific field of studies in Latin America that has highlighted the complex and situational character of academic literacies. In fact, these concepts are a key factor in academic development and require learning scientific and professional genres. In this regard, the Argentinian field acknowledges the valuable contributions of American, Australian, British, and other traditions. Lastly, the field's growing interest in writing centers/programs is also influenced by a sense of institutional responsibility, a commitment to teaching academic and professional reading, writing, and oral communication—the indissoluble ingredients of disciplinary and professional knowledge.

The experience shared by these five universities highlights the importance of negotiation and collaboration to grant sense, visibility, viability, and value to the actions taken to develop these types of communication. In general terms, the initiatives described in this article are oriented to fulfill the following functions: to inform; to advise; to promote; to produce specific knowledge about academic, disciplinary, and professional literacies; and to foster professional development. In other words, these initiatives allow classroom experience to be reused in other spheres and then transformed into innovative practices embedded in discipline and professional epistemologies. Our context-shaped initiatives denote a complex and gradual transformation in relation to the key role that reading, writing, and oral communication have played in mass teaching contexts in the frame of curricular and institutional policies

that challenge institutions to offer inclusive education. In Argentina, we have noted that the increase in writing support is rooted in the goal of democratizing higher education. Democratizing higher education resulted in the creation of programs to support students writing in the academic disciplines, including programs to support teachers working with students on their writing, as well as one-on-one support and workshops to support students, and even the professional writing of faculty. All in all, we believe that democratization goes far beyond free admission.

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