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# On the Teaching of University Writing in Latin America

*Natalia Ávila Reyes and Federico Navarro*

During the last 20 years, the teaching of writing has grown worldwide as a dynamic field of international academic practice and research, as attested to by the emergence of disciplinary societies, conferences, and publications (Ávila Reyes *Multilingual Contributions*; Bazerman et al. *Conocer La Escritura*; Thaiss et al.). In the spirit of building an integrative vision of the contributions of teaching and research in writing in Latin America, this article offers an overview of what “writing studies” mean in the region.

This account is informed by previous research data of disciplinary development, but it is still inevitably partial. Latin America is a complex territory, diverse in its languages and intellectual and cultural heritage. Educational needs and opportunities, as well as socioeconomic contexts, also vary across the continent. Our positionality as scholars trained in linguistics and education and working at research universities in Chile determines a certain limitation in our perspective that may leave out valuable programs and traditions of which we still know little.

Hence, this paper builds on common nodes that have shaped the original contributions to Latin America’s university-level teaching of and research on writing. On the one hand, we will report on the particularities of university systems in the region, as teaching and researching writing are situated and respond to institutional needs and opportunities. On the other hand, we will explore the central role of language and discourse studies in the disciplinary development of the field and outline the current state of scholarship with particular attention to the production of writing knowledge and theory.

## **Massification, inclusion, and disciplinarity in Latin American universities**

The university system in Latin America ranges from teaching universities to large research universities with international influence; from small, regional institutions to metropolitan campuses with hundreds of thousands of students. Yet within this diversity, we can highlight four commonalities that help to characterize our institutional particularities. First, enrollment expansion and diversification in the region have been ongoing processes for the last 40 years (Brunner and Miranda). In some countries, the growth in private provision of higher education has been the primary mechanism for coverage; in others, the establishment of public universities in historically unattended geographic locations and an increase in funding opportunities (or the devel-

opment of special admissions programs) have been instrumental for enrollment diversification (Chiroleu and Marquina; Santelices et al.). This expansion, akin to other regions globally (Hoskins and Shah), has foregrounded questions around student writing. Moreover, this growth has been concomitant with reforms that advanced accreditation and accountability imperatives as well as student-centered teaching (Ávila Reyes et al.), all essential factors in the emergence of stakeholders' interest in university reading and writing (Tapia Ladino et al.).

Second, undergraduate curricula are organized as discipline-based programs in most universities—General Education courses or leveling (propaedeutic) programs exist only in some institutions. This organization challenges the adoption of institutional responses to the teaching of writing, which may either be present at the beginning of university studies or scattered across programs. Thus, teaching writing in undergraduate education ranges from first year writing courses (Pereira) to writing courses specific to each discipline (Ávila Reyes et al.); from collaborative interventions specific to each domain (Montes and Vidal Lizama; Moyano and Natale) to tutoring programs or writing centers (Lovera Falcón and Uribe Gajardo). As a result, there is no single model or policy around university writing, and institutions are often slow to embrace institutional models and draw attention to writing outcomes (Navarro et al. “Lectura”).

The third institutional factor is the time to degree in undergraduate programs. Despite reforms and homologations, undergraduate programs last between four and six years, usually leading to specific professional qualifications. Thus, writing has become relevant for the timely completion of studies and student retention because many obstacles to graduation lie in writing final, complex assignments. Therefore, research on final degree projects is widespread in Chile and the region (Calle-Arango and Ávila Reyes; Navarro et al. “Panorama Histórico”).

Fourth, many of the region's most traditional and influential universities are public. Additionally, a great deal of Latin America's university enrollment is tuition-free. This feature also varies from country to country—while Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico offer a free higher education model, other countries such as Chile and Colombia have implemented fee remission programs at the national level. Thus, expanded access to higher education has foregrounded writing as a factor of learning, persistence, and graduation, which has advanced the academic development of the study of writing.

### **Disciplinary Origins and Evolution: Language and Discourse Studies**

Following Donahue, we reject the idea that university writing is underdeveloped in places other than the North. We instead seek to acknowledge scholar-

ship from other regions that, while not taking the same form as composition studies, responds to well-developed traditions of knowledge. Provided that not all foreign models are helpful for addressing local needs of writing teaching and research (Lillis), we need to account for the traditions that made it possible to generate local research responses to the issue of university writing in Latin America. Most practitioners and researchers come from language, linguistics, or applied linguistics units. However, other educational spaces, such as education, psychology, communications, or even speech therapy (Bazerman et al. “Intellectual Orientations”), have also responded to campus writing needs over the last 20 years. Around the turn of the century, the first scholarly developments of university writing hybridized northern theoretical frameworks (mainly WAC/WID or academic literacies) with linguistic, discursive, or cognitive theories, which were the traditions previously dealing with written communication in the region (Ávila Reyes “Locales”; Ávila Reyes “Postsecondary Writing Studies”).

It is, therefore, inaccurate—and unfair—to believe that Latin American scholars just “imported” writing theory or applied it wholesale. The main disciplinary influences in foundational works on writing were psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, text linguistics, discourse analysis, and cognitive psychology (Ávila Reyes “Postsecondary Writing Studies”). Similarly, most publications from 2000 to 2015 addressed the study of texts as linguistic products of different stages or disciplines. Although less frequent, pedagogical experiences and interventions were also among the most addressed concerns (Navarro et al. “Panorama Histórico”).

Today we can see the emergence of a clearly defined group of Latin American scholars whose work has been consistently devoted to the study of writing. They are mainly based in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, write in Spanish or Portuguese, and constitute a local conceptual core. In recent special issues of local journals, one out of every three research articles is an empirical study of literacy practices; meanwhile, learning and cognitive processes have almost disappeared, especially in the most recent volumes (Navarro and Colombi). The increase in studies that understand literacy as a social practice should not come as a surprise; the Latin American critical tradition has roots both in Paulo Freire’s work and in the more recent heyday of Critical Discourse Analysis in the 2000s.

In sum, writing studies in the region are undergoing a steady process of professionalization. Organizations such as the Latin American Association of Writing Studies in Higher Education and Professional Contexts (ALES) or the Latin American Network of Writing Centers and Programs (RLCPE) have created spaces to advance knowledge production and join international conversations about writing.

## Conclusions

The institutional characteristics and the disciplinary origin of writing studies shape a field specific to our region and epistemic heritage. We see the centrality of language in writing pedagogy—understanding it as a repertoire of expressive resources, that is, a functional perspective—as among the main potential contributions of Latin American writing studies to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Likewise, emancipatory perspectives on writing and diversity in higher education result from critical theory, deeply rooted in the region; they also open avenues to resignifying writing in increasingly diverse higher education contexts. We are grateful for this space in the WWA section of *Composition Studies* to offer a glimpse of the possibilities for scholarly communities to begin a two-way academic exchange, on equal grounds, understanding Latin America as a valid producer of writing knowledge and practices.

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