TRAINING EXPERIENCES IN READING AND WRITING IN A COLOMBIAN UNIVERSITY: THE PERSPECTIVE OF A PROFESSOR

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This paper emerges from the author's trajectory as a professor and researcher in the Reading and Writing field at a Colombian University. The study features three institutional experiences: teaching reading and writing in a course of professional training; a training proposal for professors; and training for beginning researchers as writers. The reflection on the pedagogic actions and tensions that emerged shows that the initiatives and trajectories of such experiences are derived from professional efforts of teaching and researching. Although these experiences are not necessarily dependant on institutional policies, it is evident that the professional connection between researching and didactic formation strengthens the existence and visibility of initiatives in the context of a South American university.

BRIEF CONTEXT

A review of the research literature on reading and writing in Colombia shows clearly that students need to become academic and professional writers.[1] The curricular policy at universities is for students to attend one or two courses on reading and writing only at the beginning of their education, in order to address unresolved issues that remain from education prior to university. The review shows that the theoretical perspectives that support teaching in these courses comes from the language sciences, specifically textual linguistics and analysis of discourse, as traditional research has come from these areas of knowledge. These courses run from16 to 18 weeks; the textual production of argumentative papers is encouraged, mainly essays. The activities are organized from a psycho-

linguistic perspective: this means that a text is planned, drafts are checked, and the last draft is edited (Rincon, Narváez & Perez, 2009).

In this context stands the Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, which was founded as the Corporacion Universitaria in 1969 with undergraduates in Economics and Industrial, Electrical, and Mechanical Engineering. In the 1980s it opened undergraduate courses in Social Communications and Electronic Engineering. With the Development Plan created in the 1990s, the institution expanded its functions and, from 2003, it holds the academic charter of a university.[2]

The author of this chapter is a professor and researcher from the Languages Department, which was consolidated in 2004 in the Social Communications Faculty. She has recently completed the project entitled "Pedagogy and Didactics of Reading and Writing in Higher Education" as a member of an Education research group. Her duality as teacher and researcher in the university context has allowed her to develop three training experiences: i) teaching reading and writing in the Social Communications undergraduate course; ii) a training proposal for professors; and, iii) training for beginner researchers as writers. This paper presents the characteristics of these experiences, the pedagogical steps carried out, and tensions that emerged. Reflective analysis of these experiences reveals the characteristics of educational programs that exist within the distinctive framework of a Colombian university.

TEACHING READING AND WRITING IN A SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS UNDERGRADUATE COURSE

In the course "Language," a theoretical foundation compulsory for training in Social Communication, it was decided to teach the students to "trust" the theoretical documents and encourage the need to use them in order to directly understand the authors, instead of working with the professor's oral discourse. The experience was developed during 2008 and 2009. It was supported by the teachers' academic background in language science, and their research in reading and writing in college and didactic understanding as a field of action, researching, and theorizing in teaching and learning (Camps, 2001).

The subject is taken between the third and fourth semesters[3] and it can be taken after a course on reading and writing. If the course is passed, students are able to enroll in Semiotics 1 and Semiotics 2. The frequency of class is two hours a week. The course introduces students to a reflection on linguistics as part of the theoretical foundation of human communication and its complexities. It employs the following practices in reading and writing:

1. The reading chapters assigned to the students are accompanied by a guide with explanations which the professor added to the author's ideas. It is an explanatory and supporting resource for reading as an assignment outside of the classroom. For example, a thought in the first chapter of "Nature of the Linguistic Sign" by Ferdinand de Saussure says: "(...) some people regard language, when reduced to its elements as a naming-process only—a list of words (...)." This passage has an addition by the professor which says: "Attention, What is Saussure implying with 'Language is not a LIST OF WORDS'?"

2. The ideas which are read in documents have to be used in the written explanations in cases related with social communication; for example, questions like "how would the pragmatic theory explain the title that the journalist chose for this piece of news?" The analysis of the answers during the class requires a re-read of the documents and also discussion.

3. The written explanations of the cases are supported by literal quotes from the chapters already read. To help students do this, in class, fragments of the documents are re-read in which the intellectual positions of the authors are evident.

4. The explanations written by students are evaluated among those in the classroom. The assignments with successful and problematic features are photocopied and distributed (without including the students' names), listing conceptual strengths and weaknesses related to theory as well as the manner in which to write about it.

5. The lack of understanding and misinterpretation of the ideas during class or in the written explanations are respected. During the revision workshops, the teacher underlines the problematic statements but does not cross them out, and instead asks the students questions that help them clarify and re-write the idea. All the written assignments, including the tests, can be re-written. That is why grading is done early in the process, starting with evaluation indicators previously presented to the students.

6. Re-reading and re-writing give the students the capability to question the authors and propose, on their behalf, possible alternatives.

The process achieved in the students the capability to identify misinterpretations in their writing; through the re-reading of their texts and chapters with two purposes: one, to make clear the inconsistencies in their drafting and, the other, to defend their explanations with literal quotes, they became conscious of the conceptual process achieved.

This experience shows that in the practice of reading and writing for conceptual learning, chaos and confusion are conditions typical of a discontinuous process in the clarifying of thinking. For this reason, the effect can be exhaus-

tion and a desire to abandon the task (Carlino, 2006; Castelló, 2007; Perry, 1996). This explains some of the opinions expressed[4] by the students that show, on the one hand, the recognition of writing as a necessary and constitutive step in the process of comprehension of what was read. One student stated that in this subject they wrote because "writing an idea is much more complicated than saying it;" on the other hand, given that degree of difficulty, some of the students recognized the conflictive emotional dimension of the process: "it is boring but at the same time interesting since one goes through moments of intense desperation, rage, and relaxation."

For some students, in addition to realizing that reading and writing helped them to understand the way they were learning, the effort made was related to their development as academic individuals, as expressed by one of the students: "yes, I have learned, since I have understood a theorist's writing and how to take it apart and explain some phenomena from those perspectives. That is good for, in the future, facing other more complex theoretical positions that help me to progress in a study area."

However, for others, the experience did not have any relation to their identity as professionals: "regarding the way of reading and writing, I think that it is good, but I do not believe that to write in this way for a social communicator is the most appropriate." Effectively, this last student was right, if professional writing (Morales & Cassany, 2008) is understood as the process and the written products inherent to the performance of the professions; in the case of social communicators, for example the journalist writing news, opinion articles, or chronicles, writing practice differs from the academic genres such as reviews and scientific articles.

TRAINING UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

The command of discipline by university teachers is a very important condition; however, it is not sufficient for the practice of teaching in higher education. The graduate and research background the teacher holds is a plus and might contribute, but it does not suffice in preparing teachers to design and respond to reading and writing assignments (Narváez & Cadena, 2009).

Consequently, a research and training project[5] was developed. It included a program of teachers' training about academic reading and writing in the university context. The research teachers also designed and led this experimental program; they conducted it as a study using educational action research methodology.

An open call for teachers interested in the training and study within the institution was made once the proposal was completed. The response was from a

group of teachers who belonged to the schools of Administrative and Economic Sciences, Engineering, and Social Communication. The teachers attended the activities during their private time for the duration of two months. The objectives of the proposal were:

1. To understand that academic reading is a process of constructing meaning from the documents assigned to support the learning, and the reading process shows specificities that are not addressed during the students' previous educational stage.
2. To question the idea that a large bibliography and numerous reading activities will by themselves increase the quality of the specialized learning and knowledge of a specific field.
3. To recognize that the assigned papers for academic reading in university learning are specialized texts due to the complexity of their structure and the conceptual content which characterizes them.

The educational program showed the necessity of recognizing the value of academic reading as a practice interwoven with questioning and the oral and written conversation. For this reason, some activities were designed to place the teachers as beginners in the field of academic reading, as they tried to understand readings outside their disciplinary or professional areas.

During the first month of work, we conducted a guided group reading activity with discussion about two documents. The first document[6] presented a perspective opposed to this educational experience, in which university students' difficulties with reading and writing were blamed on "doubtful" training from basic education. The group expressed opinions about these assertions, some positive, some negative.

Subsequently, a second document[7] was assigned. It showed the position defended in the experience and argued in support of explicit attention to reading and writing skills in the university. In order to analyze both arguments, we asked the teachers to complete a conceptual map during a workshop. Subsequently, the teachers were asked to write about how they used the reading in their subject and to compare their practices with the arguments identified. Finally, participants were assigned to compare the positions of the documents with those of the participants and to discuss why and how readings of non-field-specific texts had been used.

The teachers who participated in the study identified the reading conditions that were useful to the "foreigners" in a specific field:

1. while the amount of reading diminishes, the time devoted to discussion increases;
2. students need to become aware of opposing arguments presented in the literature;

3. there should be guides with explicit questions that help the re-reading and conversation, as well as the contrast with personal experiences;

4. there should be direct confrontation with beliefs of the "foreigners" in the field.

The analysis of the collected audio and video data, as well as the building up of field diaries, showed that the planning and development of the first stage of the study influenced the teachers' beliefs, but that they still did not know how to transform "what is done" with the reading in the classroom; in other words, the teachers seemed to agree on the fact that there was "something" that had to be changed in the development of their subjects. However, they did not know how to do it. Therefore, this two-month study with eight in-class hours should be extended and needs support by institutional policy to make time in the teachers´ working schedules; policy should also ensure that other activities can be carried out that contribute to transformations in the classroom, not just conceptually.

THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS AS WRITERS

As part of the program "School of Student Researchers" at the Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, educational experiences organized in three modules are being developed. One of the modules is academic reading and writing, which lasts 22 in-class hours and is developed in 11 two-hour sessions, a session per week, all during an academic semester. The students participate in this program voluntarily; it bears no addition to the enrollment fee, they may belong to different undergraduate -night and daytime- academic programs, and they may be in different stages of their professional training. The module offers the participants activities which allow them to put forward some of the reading and writing processes related to the formulation of a research problem (Narváez, 2009). Practices of reading and writing are developed in the following activities:

1. Identifying the academic quality criteria to be used for creating bibliographies.

2. Comparing introductions of various scientific articles in order to help students develop writing models for the proposal of a research problem.

3. Critically and meticulously revising each paragraph of scientific article introductions published in indexed magazines in order to anticipate reading and writing processes that precede the writing of a research problem.

4. Performing workshops in close reading of academic documents. This analysis is carried out in three ways: identifying the author(s)'s arguments; recognizing their attitude, audience, and purposes; and criti-

cally commenting to highlight ideas that were interesting and difficult, whether or not these are shared with the author.

Our study of this training thus far shows that those students who have already begun enrollment in research groups in order to carry out actual projects get more out of these structured activities than do those who have not yet become involved in their own research.

WHAT DO THESE EXPERIENCES SHOW?

The first experience, teaching reading and writing in a Social Communications undergraduate course, was based on the ability of a professor to recognize students as academic individuals in their training. For that reason the collective practice of reading in depth was introduced, rewriting was encouraged, and the teacher was obliged to co-evaluate so as to grade the learning. In institutional contexts in which the amount of information conveyed is evaluated as primary indicator of teaching quality, maintaining this type of experience is a challenge, as it decreases the number of issues to be addressed in a course, but increases the amount of time spent focusing on understanding and teaching the difficult construction of meaning through writing. Documenting these efforts, however, is a way to defend their presence and impact.

To support these kinds of experience, study should focus on how these activities lead to understanding the contents in a course and to knowledge in reading and academic writing. Such studies would be useful also in the process of university teacher training to help foster such enhanced learning. Also emerging from our study of this first experience is the value of considering the curricular distinction between courses that deal with the training of writers as academic professionals or scientists and those that focus on the written practices and genres of interaction with enterprises or companies. In one case, research genres would be the focus (e.g., research projects, presentations, posters), whereas the second case would feature business genres (e.g., technical reports, projects for bids, executive letters).

Regarding the second experience, the training of teachers in different subject areas, our study found remarkable power in the consolidation of collegiate teams. The interaction between teachers of disciplinary and professional fields and the language teachers was essential to our discussion of the diverse teaching practices with reading and writing. Otherwise, we could not have analyzed what is viable, possible, and pertinent in these diverse university classrooms. However, to keep these efforts will depend on the strengthening of institutional

policies that treat as a priority the training of university teachers in an interdisciplinary way.

From the last study, the education of young researchers as writers, it is evident that training in the skills of reading and writing as part of the research process in the university setting is necessary. However, the impact of such training will differ depending on the public who would be the target, and so different kinds of training are necessary. One case is researchers who already belong to scientific and technical communities;[8] another is junior researchers. The analysis of this last study with undergraduate students shows that impact is greater when participants are linked to actual research processes in which academic writing is imperative.

In short, these three experiences have arisen from the initiative of the author of this chapter and colleagues more than from any institutional policy that favored them. They were made possible by the conjunction between two features of their own professional training: on the one hand, an interest in research in academic writing and, on the other hand, the interest in the didactic field as a discipline that studies relations between teaching and learning in specific contexts. The intersection of these two interests enabled the development of these rare experiences, which often are not supported in the context of South American universities.

NOTES

1. The original paper was written by the author in Spanish. Professors Edgar Meza and Hector Rivillas have translated the article into English. They belong to the Languages Institute at Universidad Autónoma de Occidente.

2. Taken from the Universidad Autónoma de Occidente Web page: http://www.uao.edu.co/

3. In Colombia, the majority of the undergraduate academic programs are developed in 10 semesters.

4. To explore and analyze, in part, the impact of the progress of the work, an anonymous written survey was given to all the students who participated in the experience. They were requested to answer in writing three (3) questions, as follows: "According to your own reading and writing experience in this subject, answer: 1. What did you read and write in this subject? 2. Do you think you have learned "something new" about how to read and write in college? What is that useful for? 3. What is your opinion about the way reading and writing is done in this subject? Is that way of doing it useful for a social communicator? Justify your answer."

5.   The research project, carried out in conjunction with Professors Sonia Cadena Castillo and Beatriz Elena Calle, was named "Interactions and conceptions constructed from digital communication, within an experience of formation of teachers about academic reading," and was financed by the Administration of Research and Technological Development in the Universidad Autónoma de Occidente.

6.   Lizcano, D. (2006).

7.   Carlino, P. (2003).

8.   Frequently Colombian universities offer courses, for professors, about scientific publications.

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