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The inevitability of teaching writing: An interview with Charles Bazerman

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Abstract

In this contribution we firstly refer to the actions that have been taken in the Argentinean state higher education system to foster the development of academic literacy, and that have paved the way for the consolidation of a field of action and thought that has gradually situated academic reading and writing at the center of the learning process in academic contexts. Secondly, we present an interview with Charles Bazerman that was carried out during his visit to the Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos in 2014. Dr. Bazerman refers to the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement as a powerful approach that addresses writing development from all the disciplines, to the role of genre and to how technology is changing the way we teach writing.

Keywords: higher education; academic reading and writing; academic literacy; writing across the curriculum; languages for specific purposes.

Resumen

En este trabajo nos referimos a las acciones que se han llevado a cabo en el sistema universitario público argentino para promover el desarrollo de la alfabetización académica y que han contribuido a la consolidación de un campo de acción que ha situado gradualmente a la lectura y la escritura en el centro del proceso de aprendizaje. Seguidamente, presentamos una entrevista con Charles Bazerman realizada durante su visita a la Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos en 2014. El Dr. Bazerman se refiere al movimiento *Escritura a través del currículum* como un enfoque potente que impulsa el desarrollo de la escritura desde todas las disciplinas, al rol del concepto de género y a la manera en que la tecnología está cambiando la forma en que enseñamos a escribir.

Palabras clave: educación superior; lectura y escritura académicas; alfabetización académica; escritura a través del currículum; lenguas para fines específicos.

SINCE THE 1990s, in Argentina there has been widespread concern over how the diverse student population entering university reads and writes. In fact, in higher education, undergraduate students learn and are assessed through reading and writing activities in almost all content subjects. Furthermore, at the graduate level, writing a final project, a dissertation or a thesis is one of the most important academic processes students must go through to achieve degree completion. Consequently, this growing interest has led to a number of actions within the Argentinean state university system aimed at facilitating the process of enculturation of students into the target discourse community and at reducing dropout rates. In this sense, Applied Linguistics has played a central role in the development of these actions through the pioneering work of Elvira Arnoux who paved the way for the creation of workshops aimed at helping school leavers to enter tertiary education (Arnoux et al., 1998), for the publication of manuals (Narvaja de Arnoux et al., 2002) and for reflection upon the teaching-learning process involved in academic writing (Arnoux, 2006; Arnoux et al., 1996). Another leading voice who has sparked interest in reading and writing in Argentina and Latin America is Paula Carlino who created the GICEOLEM¹ at the Instituto de Lingüística (Universidad de Buenos Aires). This researcher reported the different actions taken in Argentinean leading universities (Carlino, 2006) and, since then, many other initiatives have followed (Alzari et al., 2014; Amieva, 2014; Añino et al., 2012; Arnoux, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2015; Carlino, 2013, 2014; Pipkin Embón & Reynoso, 2010).

These actions are often referred to as remedial as they tend to keep the development of academic skills on the margin or outside the curriculum instead of being situated as an integral part of it (Carlino, 2012). Furthermore, workshops for students and teachers are usually generic in content and do not recognize the varying requirements of the disciplines (Skillen et al., 1998). However, although many of these initiatives have been carried out with little or no institutional support, this joint effort of teachers and researchers has paved the way for the consolidation of a field of action and thought that has gradually situated academic reading and writing at the center of the learning process in Argentinean academic contexts.

The Contribution of Foreign Languages Courses to Academic Development

Foreign language courses have been offered for over half a century in the higher formal Argentinean education system (Klett, 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Martirena et al., 2005; Vila Zarco, 2004). The first university to include a reading and translation test into its curriculum was the Universidad Nacional de La Plata in 1943 as students needed to read career-related reference books in French, English and German. More than a decade later, in 1959, foreign language courses were created at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras belonging to the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Nowadays, similar courses

are offered at almost all the national universities and, although they have been given different labels and whether integrated or not into the curriculum, they are generally focused on the teaching of a single skill—reading comprehension. Their main objective is to equip undergraduate students with the necessary tools to become competent and critical readers in the target language and to enable them to have non-mediated access to specific bibliography required by the humanities, social sciences and science and technology curricula.

The implementation of these foreign language courses at the tertiary level is generally based on theoretical issues and research related to the teaching of languages for specific purposes (LSP). Their target populations are adult non-native speakers, a fact that encompasses different pedagogical implications from the initiatives described by Carlino (2006). Although these courses have been influenced by the successive reigning methodological approaches for the teaching and learning of foreign languages, university teachers have gradually designed in-house materials and developed specific approaches for their courses (Bertazzi et al., 2003; Blum & Di Benedetto, 2012; Devicienti, 1970; Klett, 2007; Ramírez de Perino, 1994; Sahian & Lindholm, 1976; Suarez Cepeda & Salomon Tarquini, 2007). Some have also compiled bilingual dictionaries to cover the terms of particular subject fields (Pérez de Pereyra & Aguilar de Espinosa, 2002).

As it can be seen from records of conference proceedings and other publications of the field², LSP teachers have shown interest and have become involved in the study of different aspects of the reading comprehension process, in translation matters, in the relationship between reading in L2 and writing in L1 and in the writing process itself (Bertazzi & Mallo, 2005; Domínguez et al., 2005; Dorrnzoro, 2003a, 2003b; Gentile, 2006; Klett, 2004; Mulone, 2015; Noceti, 2015; Pasquale, 2006, 2007; Pérez de Pereyra et al., 2015; Reynoso et al., 2009; Rosa & Waigandt, 2006; Venticinque et al., 2007; Wahl, 2015).

Academic Development and the Writing Across the Curriculum Movement

Thanks to a joint effort of five Argentine national universities—the Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento, the Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras belonging to the Universidad de Buenos Aires and the Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos—Professor Charles Bazerman visited Argentina in June 2014.

Dr. Bazerman is a leading expert on writing across the curriculum (WAC) and has contributed significantly to the establishment of writing as a research field. He is also known for his work on genre studies and the rhetoric of science. He has authored over 18 books and edited over 20 collections including: *A Rhetoric of Literate Action* (2013), *A Theory of Literate Action* (2013), *Reference Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum*

(2005), *Writing Skills Handbook* (2003), *Reading Skills Handbook* (1988), *Traditions of Writing Research* (2010), *Genre in a Changing World* (2009), *Writing Selves/Writing Societies* (2003), *What Writing Does and How it Does It* (2004), the *Handbook of Research on Writing* (2007) and *Textual Dynamics of the Professions* (1991).

As part of his visit to Argentina, Dr. Bazerman travelled to Entre Ríos to participate in the *Jornadas de capacitación sobre lectura y escritura en la universidad* that took place in Oro Verde on June 18 & 19, 2014. Over 70 teachers and researchers belonging to the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, the Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto, the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, the Universidad Autónoma de Entre Ríos, the Universidad Tecnológica Nacional (Facultad Regional Paraná) and the Universidad Nacional de Entre Ríos attended the meeting. Twenty-two presentations³ on writing were given as part of the programme that also included Dr. Bazerman's plenary conference *Writing in Higher Education in the Americas: A personal journey into data* and other more informal opportunities to talk to the guest of honor. Charles Bazerman was kind enough to grant us the following interview on our way to Paraná from Oro Verde.

Diana Waigandt: What is Writing Across the Curriculum?

Charles Bazerman: Writing Across the Curriculum (or WAC) in the United States is based on a long history of writing instruction and writing expectations in university courses, but which was renewed and given programmatic focus starting around 1970. The US higher education WAC movement was also influenced by parallel developments in British Secondary Education, developed by James Britton and his colleagues in the late 1960's. WAC in the US has taken on a number of different forms and has a number of different consequences.

It was initially an attempt to encourage teachers in all areas to assign more writing so that students would get more practice in writing. Those of us who were teaching writing said if students just write in our writing classes they will not write very much and they cannot develop much as writers. The students, as well, will see writing as just something that you do in an English class and not something that you need to do through your whole career.

So writing instructors on a number of different campuses started contacting teachers in other departments to find out whether they were assigning writing and what kinds of writing they were assigning. We would encourage them to assign more writing and we would talk with them about how they might give more effective assignments so that they would get better results. We also tried to give them ideas about how writing might help connect students with their subjects and how teachers could find out what the students were thinking through seeing what students wrote. We engaged in dialogue with instructors in different fields and had seminars to help support them to use more

writing. In the dialogue we found out that writing in their fields was very different from what we imagined and varied from area to area. So that led to investigations of disciplinary writing practices. We also found that when teachers introduce more writing, their teaching changes. As they understood more what students were doing, they started to see how the writing could help students develop their thinking. So, WAC became actually a way of developing teaching through the university and changing the nature of teaching.

Also as we discovered more about writing in the different disciplines our teaching of writing changed. This was the same time as writing centers were being developed at universities, helping students with their assignments in an individual way. Students would then start bringing in writing from the different disciplines, such as their assignments for History and Geography. So the writing centers started to engage with Writing Across the Curriculum. In a number of universities the writing centers became the heart of Writing Across the Curriculum. So there are many ways in which there have been connections made between writing and different departments and the campus as a whole.

In the volume that I worked on with some of my students, the [Reference Guide in Writing Across the Curriculum](#), we've collected many of the resources and the different kinds of programs that have been developed. There are many books written on WAC by people who've tried many different kinds of initiatives. There is an annual Conference on Writing Across the Curriculum where people would get and share ideas. There is a conference that has actually just occurred down here in Argentina. There is a journal now called *Across the Disciplines* and there's the WAC Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse has many resources for writing across the curriculum. So WAC has become a very wide movement, not just in the United States but internationally. In universities in many countries, like in Argentina, students study only within different faculties so any writing support that is provided has to be in the disciplines, in the faculties. So it is that aspect of writing teaching that fits best with many universities globally.

DW: Do you think it is possible to integrate current genre approaches to the teaching of reading and writing?

CB: Genre approaches to writing actually have grown out of the teaching of reading and writing in the different disciplines. So, it is not a question of integrating genre with WAC; North American and ESP approaches to genre were born out of reading and writing in the disciplines. Swales' ESP version of genre came out of his experience in Aston University in Birmingham, helping in that case second language students write scientific articles. He was trying to give them a model for how they could structure their ideas and build their ideas more, starting with the article introduction, which was the first great success of that model. The article introduction highlights the relation of

reading and writing because the article introduction is the place that brought together the literature. Scientists in their article introductions need a strategy to talk about their reading that sets up what they have to report in their own research. So research article introductions developed a structure which Swales investigated and used to teach to science and engineering students. And so his version grew out of practical teaching of reading and writing in disciplines.

The U.S. tradition also came out of teaching writing. As we investigated writing in different disciplines, it was clear that students wrote in many different genres, in many different ways, that were different than what we were teaching in writing classes. At that time we were not thinking about genres in what we were teaching. But when we started to see different genres in scientific papers, in reviews of literature, in historical narratives, we realized that in writing classes we were teaching specific essay genres. So we started to become more aware of genres in our own fields as we started to try and support teaching genres for other fields.

When I personally started to research the difference between writing in different fields, I would see that there were many, many differences and I had a hard time to think about all the differences until I started to think about genre as an organizing concept. Several years before her well-known paper was presented, I had a long conversation with Carolyn Miller. In that conversation I realized her concept of genre was what I needed to help me understand what was going on in these different fields. Genre provides a way of teaching and a way of researching and organizing our understanding about the differences of writing in the different fields. So genre is already integrated into WAC and grows out of it.

DW: So they are perfectly compatible, those different approaches...

CB: Yes. Genre approaches are integrated, already as I said, into teaching reading and writing. But there are different approaches and each highlights different aspects. So the Swales' approach provides good models for students to begin writing in different areas. His research method provides ways of identifying typical patterns that are used in different areas and those patterns can be introduced to the students. Students can then see not only that they need to have those parts but that there is also a logic to the parts and organization and that logic has to do with the thinking and the argument of that field. So it is a very good way to introduce students to disciplinary writing.

The approach that I tend to use emphasizes the social interaction and the role of the function of writing in specific situations. It allows students to make more flexible choices as they understand the logic underneath the genre practices. They see that genres change and genres become containers for their meanings. It emphasizes meanings and transactions and helps students understand the social situation and their

communicative impulses. Genre is a way of packaging meaning, making it work and making it recognizable to others. It can work well in combination with the Swales approach and a number of people combine both approaches as you do here. I think one of the characteristics of the North American approach is that it puts the individual students' communicative impulse, what they have to say, at the center, and puts it within a social situation, whereas the Swales' approach puts the general textual patterns within a stabilized social situation at the center and then the students fill the pattern with their communicative impulses.

DW: In what way do you think technology may change the way we teach and learn to read and write?

CB: It is not a question that it may change. It is changing. It already has changed. As the technology becomes more available, that is the world in which people are now communicating in science and in business, in law. All writing is now occurring in electronic environments even though people may still use paper and pen for very personal reasons. They may use paper and pen in early parts of their processes when they are more free form in their thinking, but everything gets transcribed at the end into a digital form, and most composing now actually happens in digital form. We have many kinds of software to facilitate writing, and processes and thinking about writing and putting knowledge together. Also most information we now get comes to us in electronic form. We were just talking a few minutes ago about digital libraries here in Argentina--there is a National Digital Library, which now makes accessible to you all the publications in the world. In order to be in touch with all of knowledge you don't have to go to a big building in a place which has a lot of money to collect so many books. You can do it right from your desktop.

Even if you go to a McDonalds now, the clerk at the front processes electronic information which is communicated to the kitchen in the back, and the order also is integrated with the billing, accounting, and inventory systems—it's all integrated information. So this is the way the world writes now. And it's going to be more and more the case now that technology is becoming cheaper, becoming more varied and more sophisticated.

So the question is how this is going to change our teaching? What are our students going to need to know to be able to write with the technology, and how can this technology help our teaching? One thing that you probably have experienced is that revision has become easier but also the ease of revision has added new challenges. So in the old days every time I would work on revision I had to copy the whole text. I could make a few marks on the existing draft, but then I had to copy it all over again. In some ways actually this was good because I had to pay attention to my words many times.

Every time I typed the text again or wrote it again I had to think through these words. On the other hand, it took a lot of effort to do that. So now it is very easy to revise it and print it out and think about it. On the other hand the text looks so neat I am tempted not to think very deeply about the words. I have to make an effort to concentrate on each detail. Nonetheless, it is very easy to make changes, and very easy to rearrange and reorganize parts. It is also very easy now to bring in information from the outside. If I am writing and I say 'Oh, I need to check some facts.' Rather than having to go to the library I go to Wikipedia or Google, or if I need a scientific article I can connect to my library and download the article.

So we live and write in a much richer information environment. In the old days if I was writing a paper which had a lot of resources then I had to take notes in the library or I had to borrow the books. I could only stack so many on my desk. There would be a great mess, they were so many. Now they are all in my computer and on the Internet and I can draw on them all at once.

The good part is the richness of the information and the possibility to think about all this information. The bad part is that sometimes there is too much to think about and maybe it is too easy just to copy and paste, so you don't think about the materials you are using. We have to learn new ways to make ourselves to think more deeply about the information. But also there is software that helps us organize our thinking. There are all these new formats for communicating rapidly--I can communicate around the world through e-mail, I can write blogs, I can write web pages and use hypertexts. These are all new forms which raise new issues about how to write well, how to create in those environments, how to use multimedia.

One of my students became very interested in how to communicate with students through multimedia. So, she responds to student papers through voice notation while she creates a video of her marking students' papers. The students see the annotations, her cursor moves, her underlining, but also the students hear her comments. She found out that this is a very effective way of getting students' attention and helping them think about revision.

So there are just so many new possibilities. Of course we still want people to think about organizing large essays, to develop thoughts and develop knowledge, but even this is being done in different ways and is being shared in different ways.

Who knows in ten years or in twenty years what the technology would be and how to use it educationally? Yes we must confront this and we must be optimistic about creativity and not just say: oh the old ways, they have gone...! People said the same thing when the printing press came along, they said the same thing when radio and television came along, but I think, actually, now people are smarter than ever before because we think with the technologies. Are you familiar with the cyborg? A cyborg is a mix of

machine and person. With cyborgs we are excited about the machine enhancements of our strength or memory, but the cyborg always has a human part; that human part must become smart enough to use all the extensions that the machines offer us. We are learning to use our intelligence more creatively, sometimes to do more fundamental things because the new machines can take care of the more mechanical parts.

DW: You came to Argentina to collect data personally. Has this journey been successful?

CB: There are two kinds of data. One is my personal data, my experience and my richness of knowing about different academic worlds and of course that has been a great success. I've learned so much about the people, the educational issues, the responses to local situations, and the educational initiatives. Also we have a project called ILEES, where we are trying to collect in a more organized way the experiences and intellectual developments in the teaching of writing in Latin America. And I made contact with people and more people are going to be, I hope, responding to [our survey](#) and reporting the developments on their campuses. We will find more ways of understanding the networks that are here developing in Argentina. I've also been communicating with some scholars I've been working with before, and our discussions are going forward, including my longstanding discussion with Paula Carlino, who is a tremendous force for change.

Yes, it has been a great success in that way as well.

DW: And what is your message for Argentinean scholars struggling to publish, struggling to teach?

CB: The first message, the big message, is, it is worth the struggle. The teaching of writing here is now starting to blossom. It is not just a single seed or two but there are many seeds and they are growing. Publication opportunities within the country and within the region are starting to grow. That is one thing that is needed: to develop more opportunities for people to share ideas and to share their research in the region. There are also more opportunities for people to have experience teaching so that is something that will feed on itself, that would help to grow. The more teaching there is, the more people will value it. And the more institutional place and support it will have because it is just so important and so useful. So that will grow, I hope the research will grow, along with the opportunities to communicate.

There are also many international opportunities, more and more congresses in the region and internationally to participate in. I will mention of course in 2017 in Bogotá there will be the International Society for the Advancement of Writing Research, which is the biggest group of people globally to talk about writing research. In the meeting we

just had in Paris, we had twelve hundred people from about seventy countries. Of course it's lovely to be in Paris but it is also lovely to be in Bogotá and it is much nearer to here so I encourage everybody to join and come with us and connect with the colleagues from around the world.

And also, do not get frustrated with short term problems, because it takes a long time to develop a profession with full institutional strength. In the U.S., the field of teaching of writing took many decades to develop, and we are still working to build the field. Over time things get better. Things change, sometimes they do not look so good. Sometimes there is some frustration, but in the long run, there is an inevitability to the teaching of writing. It will grow and if you look back every few years you will say 'We have come very far.'

Conclusion

The actions undertaken in the Argentinean state higher education system that have gradually situated academic reading and writing at the center of the learning process in academic contexts present a challenge and an opportunity to educators in higher education. The challenge is to develop context-based approaches that best respond to local situations with full institutional support. The opportunity is to continue building an Argentinean and Latin American field of teaching writing based on the many findings of existing research traditions, through cross-disciplinary dialogue and international networks. Charles Bazerman in describing the WAC movement presents how educators in the North addressed similar challenges by developing a powerful approach to support writing development from all the disciplines. This movement emerged out of concern for quality education in Britain and the United States and has spread across borders to reach international status. The many opportunities to communicate and to forge alliances with colleagues and institutions from around the world outlined during the interview could lay the groundwork for faculty collaboration, for the establishment of common agendas and for an increased recognition of the importance of writing in modern societies.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Grupo para la Inclusión y Calidad Educativas a través de Ocuparnos de la Lectura y la Escritura en todas las Materias. Available at: <http://sites.google.com/site/giceolem2010/>
2. Jornadas de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras en el Nivel Superior (2003, 2005,

2007, 2009); Primeras Jornadas de Lectura y Escritura del Litoral (2006); Jornadas Internacionales de Enseñanza de Inglés en las Carreras de Ingeniería (2005, 2010, 2012); Revue de la S.A.P.F.E.S.U. (Sociedad Argentina de Profesores de Francés de la Enseñanza Superior y Universitaria 1994, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007)

3. The book of abstracts can be downloaded from http://www.bioingenieria.edu.ar/referencia/eventos/libro_resumenes_jornadas_bazerman.pdf

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