



Contexts, Relationships, Writers: Toward a Complex Model of Studying and Teaching Writing

Contextos, relaciones, escritores: hacia un modelo complejo del estudio y de la enseñanza de la escritura

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Abstract

The professionalization of writing studies, through the contributions of pedagogic, cognitive and socio-cognitive, sociolinguistic, discursive, rhetorical or critical approaches, has let us broaden our understanding of writing beyond simple transcription. This progress has implied problematizing the defined object of study, and attending to processes, human activities, social practices, emotions, and identities. Such approaches pose theoretical and methodological challenges. The development of robust research design informed by complex epistemologies about writing is now a central topic in the study of communication and written culture around the world. In this thematic issue, "Beyond the Text: Situated Writing Research", we called for research that would seek to understand context as an integral part of the writing phenomenon, and to develop writer-centric epistemologies and methodologies. The call resulted in seven papers from four countries, addressing literacies from early childhood to adult education. With a common theoretical horizon and renewed methodological designs, these articles identify the forces that structure writing practices and tend to challenge the institutional and evaluative regimes in which writing takes place. Their contributions enrich the advances made by writing studies in the last two decades and allow us to project future directions for development, specifically in terms of applying these research findings to learning inside and outside the classroom.

Key words: situated writing, research design, literacy practices

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Resumen

La profesionalización de los estudios de la escritura, a través de aportes de enfoques didácticos, cognitivos y sociocognitivos, sociolingüísticos, discursivos, retóricos o críticos ha permitido ampliar las formas de comprender la escritura más allá de la transcripción. Este avance ha implicado problematizar la definición del objeto de estudio, y atender a los procesos, las actividades humanas, las prácticas sociales y aspectos emocionales e identitarios. Tales aproximaciones plantean desafíos teóricos y metodológicos. El desarrollo de diseños robustos informados por epistemologías complejas sobre lo escrito es hoy un tema central para el estudio de la comunicación y la cultura escrita en el mundo. En este número temático, “Más allá de los textos: investigaciones situadas de la escritura”, nos propusimos congregamos investigaciones que buscaran entender el contexto como parte integral del fenómeno escrito, y que desarrollaran epistemologías y metodologías centradas en los escritores. El resultado de la convocatoria fueron siete trabajos, provenientes de cuatro países, que abordan las literacidades desde la infancia temprana hasta la educación de adultos. Con un horizonte teórico común y diseños metodológicos renovados, estos artículos identifican fuerzas que estructuran las prácticas escritas y tienden a poner en entredicho los regímenes institucionales y evaluativos en los que tiene lugar la escritura. Sus aportes enriquecen los avances que los estudios de la disciplina han tenido en las últimas dos décadas y nos permiten proyectar futuras direcciones de desarrollo, específicamente en el plano de la aplicación de estos resultados de investigación al aprendizaje dentro y fuera del aula.

Palabras clave: escritura situada, diseños de investigación, prácticas escritas

Writing, as a word-based technology, is an ubiquitous phenomenon throughout the most varied spheres of human activity. It is an individual and cognitive phenomenon, so deeply rooted in literate people that it sometimes seems natural to language. It is also social and collective phenomenon situated in a historical context, a product of our activities as a society. It is a medium that both represents information and embodies identity. It is a technique we learn and a form of creation through which we express our agency in the world. This abundance of planes and dimensions has enabled different epistemologies to take over the study of writing and how it is taught and learned.

Among traditions as diverse as discourse studies, sociolinguistics, rhetorical genre studies, social practice theories, or even cognitive models of the writing process, over the last 30 years a consensus has emerged about the crucial importance of context to the phenomenon of writing. However, this consensus does not necessarily match the approach taken in the study of writing and the teachings derived from it. Coming to terms with the complexity of the written phenomenon and studying it entails focusing on writers, not only to understand the situationality of writing processes, but also to access the emotions and dynamics of participation, belonging, exclusion, learning and identity negotiation that take place in the origin, development and use of writing.

Such a task requires moving towards an epistemology that offers the proper models to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon. In the study of writing, it is common for texts to take on excessive protagonism, even when using frameworks that recognize its social character; some authors have called this phenomenon textual bias (Horner, 1999; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Horner (2013) posits that in the American tradition, this attention to errors, organization, format, and conventions could come from the influence of literary studies, focusing on the close reading of texts. In Latin America, the early influence of discourse studies on the study and teaching of written texts may have also shaped a tradition focused on textual features (Tapia Ladino et al., 2016).

However, the region has tended over time to incorporate perspectives focusing on learning and, more recently, on social practices (Navarro & Colombi, 2022). This is likely part of a movement that includes Latin American traditions more closely linked to critical discourse analysis and critical sociolinguistics (Niño-Murcia et al., 2020) and in this way reconnects writing with the network of social relations from which it originates.

Adopting perspectives focused solely on texts risks forgetting the role of their writers. On a scholarly level, this excessively simplifies the object studied; at the applied level, we lose sight of the participants. This omission has consequences, especially for the teaching and assessment of writing, where overlooking writers means divorcing writing from the people and structural forces that shape and explain the forms that it takes. However, much of the research on writing does not omit its context, but rather considers it an epiphenomenon due to textual bias, i.e., complementary data that allow a better understanding of the object: the setting (e.g. school), the grade or age of the participants, or the discipline in which the writing is produced. Some linguistic theories do assign an important role to context, but treat it as a level encoded within a functional system of language. These definitions of context seem insufficient to understand writing in all its complexity and dimensions. Specific methodologies are necessary to access context, not just as an epiphenomenon or through the text, but as an object of knowledge itself when studying writing (Ávila Reyes, 2021).

Thus, in this special volume of *PEL: Beyond the Text: Situated Writing Research*, we set out to bring together empirical research on the development, teaching, learning or use of writing at any stage of the life cycle, with a conceptualization and methodological design that embraces the perspectives of participants as the central, but not the sole, object of study. Therefore, our invitation was to put participants at the center of the study. The result is a collection of seven articles that discuss writing in a variety of contexts throughout the education and life cycle: early childhood, primary school, adult education and higher education, both inside and outside institutions. These contributions, including studies from Chile, Argentina, Colombia, and the United States, together let us analyze the benefits of studying writing beyond the text, and at the same time, to open to our discipline to renewed theoretical and methodological perspectives that enrich the advances of the last 20 years in what we have come to call writing studies.

The texts in this volume build a common theoretical horizon. To describe it, we analyzed the recurrence of authors in the lists of bibliographic references. In six of the seven articles, we found the influence of Virginia Zavala's work (e.g. 2011, 2019) in assuming a critical sociolinguistics framework and defining a sociocultural approach, focused on literacy as a social practice. This approach outlines common concepts, which cross-cut the articles of this volume, such as the dynamics of agency and resistance in those who write. The presence of New Literacy Studies is highlighted by the recurrence of authors such as David Barton, in articles that use the framework of literacy practices. The social character of literacy practices lets us understand that they are subject to power dynamics, resulting in literacies with varying visibility and social valuation (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Hence, the concept of vernacular literacies, understood as literate practices in informal and voluntary learning contexts, plays an essential role (Barton & Lee, 2012). In turn, authors such as Gee (e.g. 2002, 2015), Ivanič (1998) and Street (e.g. 2005, 2017) are cited regarding the implications of the sociocultural approach to reveal the identities of writers. The work of Theresa Lillis (e.g. 2001, 2017) has also been influential in this volume. Her contributions are twofold: firstly, she contributes an important conceptual basis for student writing and the evaluative imaginaries with which writing is studied; secondly, her methodological operationalizations about the use of ethnography as method, methodology, and deep theorizing are featured prominently.

With respect to research design, the articles presented here highlight the use of talk-around-texts (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 2008), accounts of experiences, questionnaires, ethnographic tools, and emic approaches (Lillis, 2001) as some of the central strategies to methodologically codify the contexts of writing and attend to the voices of

participants in the writing processes. Additionally, the work of Anne Haas Dyson is seen in methodological aspects such as interpretive and intersubjective frameworks in the study of writing (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) and thick descriptions in school contexts (Dyson, 2013).

The following sections discuss the contributions of the research in this special issue, in terms of the kinds of knowledge made possible by an enriched approach to writing such as the one we have attempted to concisely outline. We then project future directions for development, in particular the application of these research results to learning inside and outside of schools.

This volume

The call for papers for this special issue did not indicate any thematic restriction other than the research focus on participants: we called for research on writing at all ages in a variety of educational and non-educational settings. In fact, we did not list any bibliographic references in the call, in order to prioritize works that would just highlight writers, rather than certain theoretical trends. However, the texts usually chose a social practices framework: the word “practice” and its variants appear more than 200 times throughout all the articles. Also, these articles identify the forces that structure writing practices, and tend to challenge the institutional and evaluative regimes in which writing takes place.

As a result, deficit narratives are challenged through different strategies across this special issue. For example, Dávila and Abril-Gonzalez (this volume) challenge the sociodemographic classifications that usually pigeonhole participants; Concha and Espinosa (this volume) are interested in studying writing practices that are not subject to regulation or evaluation; Eisner (this volume) addresses the ideological dimensions that classify recontextualized texts in adult education; Uribe et al. (this volume) question the negative self-perceptions of writers in university contexts. However, while the articles unveil deficit discourses associated with literacy practices in different environments, the agentic role of the writers, teachers or companions also stands out. With varying degrees of agency, these participants act in their contexts and help counteract deficit thinking. Indeed, “agency” is another theoretical concept that transversally appears in the articles of this volume.

As such, writers emerge as subjects of knowledge, not only because of their identities as writers (Dávila and Abril Gonzalez, this volume; Montes et al., this volume), but also as producers in vernacular contexts (López, this volume) and as participants in acts of literacy mediation (Eisner, this volume; Taboada, this volume) In our view, these emphases are made possible only by repositioning individuals as the protagonists of the written acts that mediate their life experiences.

The first article in this special issue, by **Denisse Dávila** and **Paty Abril-Gonzalez**, explores the influence that multilingual family members have in validating their children’s emerging identities as writers and communicators. Their epistemology seeks to challenge the deficit discourses often associated with families from historically marginalized communities, such as underachievement or low income. In light of the theoretical concepts of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and the Pedagogy of *Acompañamiento* (Sepúlveda, 2011), the authors discursively analyze what children and guardians said about their multimodal compositions during a virtual early literacy program for families living near the U.S.-Mexico border.

The article from **Soledad Concha** and **María Jesús Espinosa** is framed around a writing plan inspired by a community model of writing (Graham, 2018) implemented in Chilean classrooms. The results of an interpretive analysis (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) invite us to question the exclusive use of writing in the classroom as a test of school learning, with fixed and standardized structures, which students may master but do not necessarily feel part of.

The intersubjective and inductive analysis of the experiences of Chilean students using writing journals at different school levels allows us to reclaim the potential of writing in school as a form of enjoyment, as well as a means of authentic expression, relief, motivation, and personal development.

The study by **María Beatriz Taboada**, from the National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina (CONICET), gives a voice to secondary school teachers in Language and Literature. Based on a sociocultural framework and using a model of co-labor research (Gandulfo & Unamuno, 2020), Taboada assumes an ethnographic approach (Rockwell, 2009) to survey the tensions faced by teachers in advanced literacy using narratives, autoethnographies and field notes: between the social protagonism of writing and what is actually taught in school; between situated and schooled conceptions of writing; and between curricular objectives and pedagogical decisions. The article concludes by urging for agreements to align the conditions, practices and pedagogical decisions of teachers with institutional guidelines and complex, social and situated conceptions of writing.

The fourth article, by **Laura Eisner** from the National University of Río Negro, moves towards the context of an adult secondary school. The remarkable use of different forms of data collection let the author provide evidence on how teachers' pedagogical decisions constitute agential action and critical questioning of hegemonic literacy regimes (Blommaert, 2005) in this kind of education. The study arrives at this and other valuable contributions using a thick description of literacy events (Dyson, 2013) to reconstruct the textual trajectories of a set of printed materials and understand their movements upon entering the classroom, particularly in the moments before and during the development of the class.

The fifth study, by **Karen López**, presents a design inspired by the principles of digital ethnography (Hine, 2015) that accompanies the everyday life of six first-year university students for 12 months. The contrast between vernacular and academic digital literacy practices lets us recognize young people as active writers and readers inside but also outside academia (Trigos-Carrillo, 2020). The identification of diverse practices in digital media, their forms of interaction, and the configuration of discursive identities online offers a rich basis for guiding pedagogical decisions that build bridges with repertoires of vernacular literacy and facilitate the transfer of these practices to academic contexts.

Fernanda Uribe, Pablo Lovera and Federico Navarro write the sixth article of this special issue. It is an effort to survey student experiences around writing and its teaching at the intersection between subjectivity and culture, between the structural and the biographical (Morandi et al., 2019). The study develops focus groups with a cross-sectional design across six disciplines and three formative stages. The results show that the teaching of writing continues to be relegated to the hidden curriculum (Schleppegrell, 2004), which reaffirms the need for institutions to provide systematic support that accompanies the development of academic writing, addresses self-stigmatization, and prevents student dropout. A consensus emerges that the educational instances for the learning of academic writing are not consistent with the high expectations of teachers and institutions, and of the centrality of writing in their education.

Finally, the results of the study by **Soledad Montes, Catalina Figueroa Arce, Hans Klener, Julio Vera, Ítalo Tamburrino and Pablo Gómez** insist on overcoming the reductionist idea that canonical student genres, such as the undergraduate dissertation, should only account for the mastery of certain academic and disciplinary conventions. The authors problematize the construction of identity (Ivanič, 1998) and disciplinary membership (Wenger, 1998) during thesis writing in undergraduate students in Chile, and urge choosing a complex (Russell, 2013), procedural and situated view of this stage, which involves emotional and personal challenges. While questionnaires found that these experiences tend to have more negative than positive nuances and are often associated with frustration, loneliness and stress, the interviews enabled inquiring about the source of these indicators. The authors found that these perceptions are permeated by negotiations and searches for identity, involving biographical circumstances, the quest for an authorial voice, and tensions with imposed academic conventions.

Towards a writers' pedagogy: future directions

By focusing on writers and writing companions, the research in this volume articulates methodological proposals for accessing and understanding the context and relations of power that structure the expectations and discourses surrounding the practice of literacy in different moments of writers' lives. These proposals and the kind of knowledge they make possible respond to a common ontology, that is, to a certain way of understanding writing that can have a broad impact on the traditional ways that educational institutions deal with the dynamics of participation, learning and teaching of literacy.

Including the participants' perspective allows for rethinking deficit narratives across educational levels, often used to justify the teaching of writing, as well as challenging the institutional practices of mystery (Lillis, 2001), which relegate the expectations and teaching of writing to the implicit level. But how to go about this task is often unclear. While making the teaching of writing explicit is a valuable step forward, it may still be insufficient. The mere teaching of hegemonic expectations about the use of written language must be transcended and we must advance towards teaching writing from a liberating perspective, one that broadens the rhetorical and expressive repertoires of student-writers and lets them choose to participate with agency in diverse forms of literacy.

In this direction, the inclusion of vernacular and youth practices from outside the school could promote that the discursive repertoires that students bring with them and that shape their identities be validated and valued in the classroom. Nonetheless, the mere valuation of these alternative discourses might also be insufficient (Zavala, 2019). It is also necessary to understand these discourses as valid and complete ways of constructing knowledge through lived contexts. The participant perspective offered in this special issue lets us reclaim the desires of writers, which are materialized in aspects such as voice, agency, a sense of ownership of their written discourses, and the identity of the participants.

In this last section, we trace new pedagogic perspectives that emerge from the joint approach of this special issue. Writing studies must continue to dialogue with traditions that let us structurally change the ways we address literacy learning in school and include new ways of being in writing. There are several theoretical contributions generated by educational research that are supported by a social justice framework to understand the value of diverse knowledge and to advance to new ways of teaching literacy in the classroom. Although not all of these contributions are recovered in the texts of this volume, we propose below a brief overview to move the limits of school teaching towards all significant contexts in writers' lives.

In this direction, the concept of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) enables the problematization of the traditional interpretation of Bourdieu's cultural capital, which usually structures the teaching of literacy in an academic or school settings. Academic and schooled literacies are assumed to be forms of valued cultural capital, but they often respond to white, middle-class cultural expectations and are associated with a fairly narrow range of linguistic resources. Community Cultural Wealth includes, for example, linguistic capital, which involves intellectual and social skills acquired through communicative experiences in more than one language and style, and allows us to understand that students arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills. In turn, the concepts of family capital and navigational capital highlight the usefulness of resources from households of different social classes, educational levels and racial backgrounds, as well as the ability of students to thrive in institutional contexts that may be hostile to them. In complement, writing across communities (Guerra, 2008) applies these principles to the writing classroom: communication crosses the natural and human worlds in which we live and the skills deployed can be transferred between one and the other. Teachers must then become cultural mediators who create the conditions for learners in the classroom to invoke their prior communicative knowledge. Consequently, students become both global and local citizens,

that is, they participate in a broader social life while being skilled communicators in their immediate worlds of reference. This proposal gives special value to paying attention to so-called student incomes (what students bring to school), rather than learning outcomes (mandated by the curriculum) when organizing teaching.

Another perspective that recovers family knowledge as a starting point for building classroom knowledge are the so-called funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005). The assumption is that people are competent: they have knowledge that has been built throughout their lived experiences, and bringing this knowledge into the classroom builds links of trust, which create a healthy relationship with the school context and result in better student performance (Pérez-Isiah, 2021). Funds of knowledge work as mediators for the development of school skills, although the school often restricts their use and limits what students can intellectually demonstrate.

These expanded notions of student knowledge are positioned as an alternative to the deficit narratives on which literacy teaching is often based. Therefore, the school is not tasked with improving students' reading or writing skills, but with enabling them to read and write in a variety of contexts. In this regard, the concept of extracurricular writing (Gere, 1994), allows learners to have multiple, non-formal learning spaces such as "living rooms, nursing homes, community centers... kitchen tables, and... rented rooms to write down their worlds" (Gere, 1994, p. 76). By focusing on our institutional place as teachers of writing—particularly in university curricula—we have overlooked the learning of writing outside the curriculum, which is indeed comprehensive and complete learning. Far from advocating the deprofessionalization of institutional writing instruction, Gere argues for a democratization of teaching, one that mitigates the dichotomy between what happens inside and outside the classroom. Using the same logic, perspectives such as writing beyond the curriculum (Parks & Goldblatt, 2000) involve creating projects guided by university writing courses and held in the communities surrounding the university. We could imagine, for example, students in writing courses serving as technical writers for social organizations or volunteer community managers for groups that need to produce written messages to achieve their goals.

The knowledge of writers can also be considered through the use of diverse and intermediate writing in the university classroom. Strategies such as the use of journals to address the construction of academic knowledge; playful and fictitious interviews with scientists to address the disciplinary topics being studied; or the re-mediation of academic texts in other genres, whether written or multimodal, mediate between cultural worlds in the classroom (González-Álvarez, 2021). These kinds of pedagogical proposals have also been referred to as third spaces, which literally designates a hybrid space that mediates between two other spaces: the cultural and linguistic worlds to which students belong and the discourse of school (Assaf, 2014). In the context of the Chilean social outburst, we described different ways in which university students self-managed third spaces, for example, connecting their schoolwork on basic sciences with issues such as police repression (Ávila et al., 2022). Underlying the theory of third spaces is a model of learning in which hybridization generates cognitive clashes that enable zones of proximal development. We believe that the outcome of these clashes and developments is building agency and awareness of the linguistic resources that are relevant to each of these contexts. In agreement with Guerra (2008), the need for teacher mediation is reaffirmed. We might add that teachers should name these linguistic resources, they must make this rhetorical knowledge explicit so that it can be used deliberately and transferred across contexts with the writers' agency (Ávila et al., 2021).

On the issue of identity and agency, several studies have reported a kind of estrangement among students when using bibliographic sources, as if they were reproducing or using words that they do not feel to be their own (Lillis, 2001; Zavala, 2011). In the desire to project their own voice emerges a resistance to quoting others. For many students, the constitutive intertextuality of the academic environment is experienced as the obligation to reproduce what authorities say. Thus, students seem to perceive citation practices, so fundamental in academic and highly regulated contexts, as a resource that excludes the expression of their voices and subjectivities, instead

of a basis for empowerment and a critical and informed position. Nonetheless, specific strategies can be put in place to teach novice writers to mark their authorial identity, through linguistic resources such as metadiscourse, appraisal, and the agentive use of citation verbs (Montes & Álvarez, 2021). The explicit teaching of linguistic resources does not seek to model a normative academic repertoire, but rather to highlight the possibilities of taking ownership of writing as an author and introducing opinions and attitudes about the sources.

A last aspect to bring to the classroom a writing perspective such as the one we have tried to formulate in this text, is evaluation. Under the framework of social justice, the place of evaluation can be rethought by creating antiracist assessment ecologies (Inoue, 2019). Traditionally, evaluative practice has focused on products and imposes imaginaries of correctness that respond to racialized norms, or are mediated by social class or other structuring forces. In an antiracist evaluative ecology, students participate in aspects such as defining the purposes of the assessment, in order to create an evaluative product that also serves their own learning goals; or creating the rubric, so that students can make themselves part of the writing standards that the class will build. As the metaphor suggests, the different elements of this ecology are interconnected. This is to account for the complexity of writing: a rubric can be thought of as an articulation of expectations, which becomes part of the feedback processes or guides what students will ultimately learn in the ecology.

In this introduction, we have attempted, firstly, to trace the onto-epistemological trajectory of our call to study writing beyond texts and of the seven responses offered by our peers and the possibilities for writing knowledge that they have opened. Secondly, based on the nature of writing outlined by these articles, we have attempted to offer future directions for building a structurally different teaching of writing in formal learning contexts throughout all stages of life, including aspects linked to students' prior knowledge, curricula, teaching strategies, linguistic content, and forms of assessment that reposition the agency of student-writers.

Epilogue

The articles in this special issue, ranging from ethnographies to mixed-method studies, articulate a complex approach to writing. This approach does not deny the linguistic and cognitive nature of the written phenomenon, but it provides context, social relations and writers a protagonistic place for a research and teaching of writing that is sensitive to diversity, democratizing, and fair, and that consequently results in greater opportunities to participate in writing for all. Thus, a complex perspective on writing must always be situated.

Finally, among the projections we can offer for writing studies in Latin America is the importance of studying writing outside of school. Despite the consensus in these articles on the importance of studying the diversity of literacies, we received almost no proposals for articles on writing in non-formal learning contexts, or indeed, outside learning contexts. Nevertheless, we believe that this special issue can contribute to the advancement of Latin American writing studies in this and other new directions.

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