

## CHAPTER 14.

# THE PROGRESSION AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE PROGRAM OF ACADEMIC READING AND WRITING (PLEA) IN COLOMBIA'S UNIVERSIDAD SERGIO ARBOLEDA

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*This profile essay describes the evolution and current structure of the Program of Academic Reading and Writing (PLEA) at the Sergio Arboleda University in Bogotá: from its inception in the 1980s as the “Grammar Program” to its current status as a two-semester compulsory course focused on university-level academic reading and writing. It also presents the most important results of the investigation conducted to recognize learning by the students in this first-year course of study, and the evaluation of this Program conducted among teachers of these courses and teachers of other subjects. New aspects of PLEA since the assessment, to extend the reach of the Program to higher-level students and to faculty in disciplines, are also described. The profile concludes by noting the first Colombian national conference on reading and writing in higher education and the formation of REDLEES, the Reading and Writing in Higher Education Network for Colombia.*

## THE BEGINNINGS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

In the second semester of 2004, the directors of the Universidad Sergio Arboleda, with the support of a CERLALC consultant (CERLALC: Region-

al Center for the Promotion of Books in Latin America and the Caribbean), proposed to expand the university language program's initial objectives.<sup>1</sup> Since its creation in 1984, the Program had followed a purely normative approach. Through a resolution of the Rector, a department was created with the goal of working on the issues of university reading and writing. Tutors were contracted to meet these new objectives. They were specialists in Language (10) and Philosophy (1); most had experience working with high school students.

Given that, at the time, there was scarce literature in Colombia about university level reading and writing, the Program drew on pedagogical approaches from various authors who have extensively discussed the topic at the primary and secondary school level. As is the case with many other institutional proposals, the Program's work to address concerns about student performance began with providing a single course of study. This approach has been questioned by many authors in diverse contexts (Carlino, 2005; González, 2010; Russell, 1995; Winsor, 1999); however, in 2004 it was seen as the most appropriate strategy.

The Program kept its original name, Grammar Program, from 2004 to 2006, and was scheduled to offer a course to first-year students from all the university's academic majors. During the first years of the Program's implementation, its main difficulty was finding harmony between the old normative-focused position of the department and the new communications-based approach that timidly showed its inclination towards professional and disciplinary texts.

From 2007 to 2009, this course was called Grammar – Academic Reading and Writing; since 2010: Academic Reading and Writing (LEA). The Department now is called PLEA (Program of Academic Reading and Writing).

It has been compulsory for students and makes up the basic training level of all the university's majors. While students are free to take the course at any point during their professional training in the university, the majority of majors put the course in the list of classes to be taken during the student's first year.

The course is two semesters long, one level per semester, meeting four hours per week (two hours per two sessions). The course uses a workshop format, wherein teachers provide a lecture at the beginning of the session, and then students do individual work in four basic areas: reading, writing, spelling, and formal aspects of language. In some assessment sessions, students work in pairs or in groups to self-evaluate and give each other feedback. Each class has no more than thirty students that come from the different majors.

Given that in Colombia there is an accreditation system (that is, students receive a set number of credits or certifications of approval per course), the LEA course gives two credits for having theory and practice (each academic course can provide no more than three credits). To receive these credits, students must

attend 56 to 64 hours per course level and demonstrate the same amount of autonomous work outside the classroom. This last requisite means that the student must do homework and/or virtual classroom work, or whatever strategy the teacher selects.

At the beginning of the course, the students take a diagnostic test, and low-level achievers' results are used to personalize their assistance. Personal assistance sessions are a Program support strategy that complements class work. Every teacher offers ten hours per week of personalized assistance in an appropriate space to individually help students who need support. In these sessions, the teacher and student work with and revise the student's actual productions. A student can access this personalized assistance by directly asking the teacher, whether in class, via email, or a phone call. The assistance space lasts at least 40 minutes, and each student can schedule as many sessions as he or she likes.

## **CURRICULUM AND OBJECTIVES**

The course's reading work concentrates on the development of reading logs and records, which are questionnaire-style guides with fifteen items and/or questions designed to orient the student in his/her in-depth analysis of the text. The published document titled "How do I make a reading log?" (González, 2004) is used to support this process. Reading exercises are supported by a reading plan, whose required texts are selected by the Program; the list of texts is expanded by the teacher. These texts include essays, journalistic articles, iconic texts, and texts about the students' disciplinary studies. Different types of texts are used to help students learn about different ways to approach a text. The objectives for the two semesters of coursework are listed in the course's syllabus, and seek to enable students to be capable of (1) recognizing the structure of ideas in a text and its argumentative plan; (2) deducing and inferring using textual contents; (3) relating text content to other texts; (4) recognizing their polyphony and contextualizing the text based on cultural, ideological, historical, stylistic, linguistic, etc., elements; (5) assuming a critical perspective of text content; (6) reading with specific objectives, such as research, synthesizing, separating fact from opinion, delving into a topic, or identifying information to organize in a text; and (7) gaining ownership of new terms and concepts.

In the writing section at the first level of the LEA course, the class is focused on the construction of sentences and, from there, on the production of paragraphs. Then it is oriented to the production of summaries and argumentative texts that require a critical position. These texts are produced out of the reading plan that was previously mentioned. Pursuant to a strict institutional disposi-

tion, the class has workshops on morpho-syntactic and grammatical aspects, which do not exceed more than 20% of the course, as outlined in the course schedule and syllabus.

In the second level of the LEA course, the teacher accompanies the students in re-writing exercises to produce an article or essay. They are able to pick from three topic areas provided for the assignment (themes related to their major, social issues and problems youth face). The reading plan provides the students with bibliographic sources and support.

If the student selects the thematic axis focused on his/her major, the teacher suggests seeking out support from professors from within the student's department. However, students rarely do so. As a strategy to link student writing to the topics from students' disciplines, the PLEA teachers encourage students to develop a writing assignment from their major coursework as their LEA course paper. However, this option has not achieved sustained disciplinary work because of two reasons: first, students are assigned very limited writing assignments during their first years in school; secondly, if a project in the student's other class work is identified as useful for the LEA writing process, we observe that the student often does not carry out the stages of writing that the Program teacher demands, because the assignment often has short deadlines, at most two weeks.

Reading in the second level of LEA continues with a similar process, using reading logs and records, which should support the production of the written document during the course of the semester. The syllabus states its goals in writing as follows: (1) produce texts with a clear basic structure: introduction, development, and conclusion; (2) achieve a logical connection between the thesis statement and the supporting arguments; (3) ask problem questions to develop argumentative texts; (4) consult, organize, and use a minimum number of sources for writing, and use standard referencing and citation norms; (5) balance the contributions coming from sources and the student's purposeful intention as a writer; (6) own the process of writing a text (documentation, contextualization, review, correction and rewrite); (7) use punctuation in context; (8) adequately use connectors and other cohesive devices; and (9) review the semantic precision and correspondence between the terms and concepts used, given that the student is entering a new profession and/or discipline and academic culture.

As a strategy to encourage students' independent writing and the dissemination of their work in the course, two anthologies have been created: *Colombia: 21st Century Utopia* (Noguera, L. et al., 2005) and *Colombia: 21st Century Utopia 2* (Ballén, C. et al., 2007) were formed to collect the articles and essays produced by students, as selected by PLEA for publication. The electronic

magazine *Altus* was also created (<http://www.usa.edu.co/altus/index.htm>). *Altus*' editorial committee is comprised of students, who select the texts to be published. Each year, around 1,400 students take the course, and only 40 to 45 (3%) publish their texts.

To monitor students' progress, rubrics were used for students' co-evaluation and self-evaluation. These evaluations were centralized in a personalized oversight called the Student Reading and Writing Registry (RELEE in Spanish). The registry and rubrics allowed teachers to share the students' results, their progress or lack of progress made during and by the end of the semester.

In PLEA's first years, there was very limited outreach to the rest of the university and academic spaces because it was generally considered sufficient to provide support to students in reading and writing in their first year. This perception, as will be discussed further on, slowly changed with time. This change was largely supported by the creation of the research group.

## **ASSESSMENT, ACHIEVEMENTS AND URGENT ADJUSTMENTS**

From 2005 and through 2010, research projects were initiated, motivated by the much-needed reflections that permeated the discussions on these topics in Colombia. These discussions came from literature outside the country, namely from Paula Carlino in Argentina (2005), and from Bazerman (1988) and Russell (1990) in the Anglo Saxon context. The research papers included *College Reading and Writing Practices: Five Majors as Case Studies* at the Universidad Sergio Arboleda (González & Vega, 2010), and *Assessment and Description of the Grammar Program – Academic Reading and Writing (PGLEA)* in Colombia's Universidad Sergio Arboleda (González & Vega, 2011).

The second research project analyzed the Program's curricular and guiding documents, and included structured and semi-structured interviews with PLEA department members and with faculty from five other departments. Semi-structured interviews were used with 90 students in their ninth and tenth semesters from those departments to learn about their perceptions of the course they took and their own processes. We also analyzed student performance during and after their participation in the Program by comparing test results. Researchers compared the students' performance in levels I and II of the course with the results they achieved on a test similar to the Colombian government's required test for all students graduating from the university. The research also gathered tests of different types and from different courses for the analysis.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF THE FACULTY IN CHARGE OF DEVELOPING THE PLEA**

The faculty in charge of the course emphasized the following in their narratives: (1) the absence of a clear position within the university's institutional policies, given the directors' continuous intervention; (2) that other professors from different departments are not interested in reading and writing issues, despite the frequent discussion and exchange spaces promoted by PLEA; (3) that students are not interested beyond "getting a certain grade" because the courses are seen as "a burden or obligation;" (4) that students see few transformations during such a short course; and (5) the small or null transfer of LEA contents to other areas.

PLEA teachers generally value their work in the Program as being positive. They state that the faculty is well-suited to the task given their knowledge and continual improvements in their work on the topic. Many of the faculty members compare their experience with the Universidad Sergio Arboleda to previous jobs and they see glimpses of improvement, new lessons learned, "evolving processes," and "interesting experiences."

## **PERCEPTIONS OF THE FACULTY FROM THE FIVE DEPARTMENTS**

In general terms and among other topics, faculty members from other departments believed that some students (from the ninth and tenth semesters) show notable progress in communications, while others—the majority—still demonstrate serious difficulties in reading and "composition." Despite a continuous demand for reading and writing exercises assigned by professors, and the high standards placed upon students, the results are not satisfactory. These faculty members questioned PLEA's effectiveness, and consider several reforms and complementarities necessary.

Furthermore, several faculty members stated that they were unaware of the Program or doubted its usefulness. Faculty members expect students to be able to read, defend an argument, and continually improve their ability to interpret texts. They state that developing these skills in students is the responsibility of PGLEA teachers, and not the teachers within the majors. These professors rarely participated in discussions on reading and writing, in extension courses or other calls made by PGLEA with the Academic Vice Rector's support, to provide information and pedagogical support.

## **PERCEPTIONS OF LAST SEMESTER STUDENTS**

Student perceptions are the most abundant data that were gathered about the Program. The initial categories used to classify the perceptions and analyze

the data were the following: weaknesses, strengths, opportunities, and threats<sup>2</sup> to PLEA; PLEA's quality, utility, and applicability; changes in reading and writing after taking PLEA; and contributions and suggestions.

It should be clarified that what some students mention as positive, other students classified as negative, and vice versa. This has made us reflect on the criteria, strategies, methodologies and concepts used in the course. Despite the clear intention of unifying criteria at the time (2004-2006), each teacher guided his/her course using his/her own vision about students' needs and the functionality of reading and writing.

When looking at the positive ratings given by interviewed students a full four years after having taken the course, the students marked positively:

- The relevance and quality of the Program components and contents (grammar, spelling, reading and writing, selections from the reading plan). These areas were considered sufficient for a complete and structured Program.
- The coursework was not only useful for the Department's courses, but also for other academic spaces and even professional work. Many students interviewed are already part of the workforce.
- Many stated that they formed habits after taking the Program that include checking information, referencing, and being aware of plagiarism.
- A generic improvement in "comprehension."
- Improvement in "composition" (they do not distinguish between composition and writing), spelling, coherence, use of connectors, use of paragraph types, and text structures (using those terms).

In contrast, another group of students mentioned negative aspects or weaknesses of the course:

- They easily forgot what they had studied in the Program and they did not develop the habit or ability to enjoy reading and writing. Being in the process of finishing their capstone projects, some students express that they are not able to use any of the strategies from the Program and that they did not use skills learned in the Program in other classes.
- Program contents are too generic and not specific or applicable.
- Some topic areas were similar to what they studied in high school.
- The course's timeframe is very short.

## **TRANSFORMATIONS UNDERTAKEN**

Building and consolidating a program to strengthen university students' reading and writing, with a clear integration into the institutional academic

dynamic, was a risky bet in Colombia in 2004. At that time, the Universidad Sergio Arboleda's proposal was a pioneer in its type, intention, and level of administrative disposition. This Program is perhaps a representative sample of the obstacles that need to be avoided or overcome in the country and its institutions to be able to consolidate an academic culture that supports writing processes.

Some faculty members' and directors' strong resistance to change has forced the Program to maintain some of its traditional contents during its development. The course's name (Grammar—Academic Reading and Writing) from 2007 to 2009 shows the mixture of the two tendencies (normative and oriented towards academic literacy). In 2010, the name of the course has been simplified to Academic Reading and Writing.

In this scenario, it must be recognized that the presence of a reading and writing program, such as the one described, gives a different value to these processes. It reveals reading and writing and saves these processes from becoming unnoticed mechanisms. The fact that research, observation, assessment, and self-analysis are part of this work justifies that initiatives such as these exist; any other way would not be worthwhile. However, due to the results of this evaluation process, the Program has recently undergone some significant changes: The initial group of eleven teachers was modified. Currently there are thirteen full-time teachers and two part-time. The seven language specialists have been joined by two specialists in literature, two specialists in communications, one philosopher, a lawyer, a psychologist, and a systems engineer. The intention behind these changes is to promote a cross-disciplinary view of the program.

Spaces for dialogue have been created to discuss the risks of understanding reading and writing as just an instructional plane. Often these processes are mere activity without theory behind them, and they end up mirroring the practices used in previous educational spaces, which moves them away from real production situations and instead prioritizes artificial practice.

Working within one specific Department continues to be the best strategy for consolidating an academic culture in the Universidad. This process has helped keep the discussion alive. Using the Program's space as an operations center, members come together to think through the alternatives necessary to overcome the dominant approach that believes a single course such as LEA is sufficient (what we call a single-department approach), instead of working throughout the institution to address reading and writing skills learning. For this reason, we have carried out alternative actions since 2006, some within the institution and others with the participation of communities outside the university, as a strategic mechanism to make the topic visible and to position the discussion, but which are not solutions themselves. These actions include:



- Constant review of methodological strategies used in the classroom. This review has included spaces in which the Department professors share materials and experiences they have in class.
- Expanding personalized work spaces, so that not only first-year students have access to personal assistance sessions, but also more advanced students and professors. The goal is to continue evolving the space into a writing center.
- Two courses held for teachers: *Writing for Publishing* and *Project-based Class Work*, to bring them closer to reading and writing processes.
- Publication and sharing of research work on the topic, made by a group of the PLEA teachers, under the leadership of the PLEA director.
- Support of pedagogical campaigns against plagiarism, and strategies to reinforce reading and writing skills for State exams.
- Personalized assistance tutoring to students to review their capstone projects for graduation, when they request it.
- Creation of virtual classrooms with 33 supportive workshops that are designed to support the individual tutoring work with online assistance.
- Forums held with high schools as an institutional outreach project with the goal of moving forward the dialogue between secondary schools and universities.
- Development of extension courses to train high school teachers and other universities in orienting reading and writing processes.
- Creation of two elective courses that are academic spaces built to support the writing processes of students working on their capstone projects, as well as the research processes of research groups, using “research nurseries” (more than 50). These spaces reflect advanced students’ need and desire for a work space.

## FORMATION OF THE REDLEES NETWORK

As a strategy to initiate a broader discussion on the national level, in 2007, an invitation was sent to sixteen institutions, and with the support of the Colombia Association of Universities (ASCUN), the First National Conference on institutional policies to develop reading and writing in higher education was held in the Universidad Sergio Arboleda. The universities that participated in the meeting formed the Reading and Writing in Higher Education Network (REDLEES, from its name in Spanish), with the objective of promoting institutional policies for the development of reading and writing in higher education. PLEA’s participation in the academic network has contributed to

strengthening of our discussion and enrichment of the Program, thanks to an exchange of experiences and research.

Precisely, following from the results of this research, members of REDLEES were invited to participate in an inter-institutional investigation: Initial training in reading and writing in the university: from secondary education to academic achievement in higher education, which will continue through 2012.

For us, the most important strategy implemented so far has been the recent work of an inter-disciplinary group of twelve professors from different majors that come from eight of the twelve schools in the university. The group's goals include thinking together about the basis of institutional policy for reading and writing in the university, and working together to develop classroom strategies.

## NOTES

1. Research carried out by Blanca González and Violetta Vega, faculty researchers at the Universidad Sergio Arboleda.
2. SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) used in organizational planning. (See <http://www.quickmba.com/strategy/swot/>.)

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