

CHAPTER 29.

**THE UPS AND DOWNS OF
THE INTERDISCIPLINARY
WRITING CENTER OF
THE INTERAMERICAN
UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO,
METROPOLITAN CAMPUS**

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This profile describes the eventful history over twenty-five years of the Interdisciplinary Writing Center of the InterAmerican University of Puerto Rico. The Center, the first in Puerto Rico and committed to developing students' writing in both Spanish and English, flourished for several years, closed, then re-opened in 2008 to a new mandate. The authors analyze persistent attitudinal challenges the Center continues to face, even as it has succeeded in its mission of reaching students across disciplines.

The Metropolitan Campus was founded in 1962 as part of the InterAmerican University of Puerto Rico (IAUPR, founded in 1912), a private, co-educational nonprofit teaching institution with a Christian heritage and an ecumenical tradition. IAUPR was accredited in 1944 by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, thus becoming the first four-year liberal arts college to be accredited outside the continental limits of the United States. At present, our campus serves an average of 10,600 students, who are enrolled in one of four faculties: Sciences and Technology, Education and Behavioral Professions, Business and Economic Administration, and Humanistic Studies. It offers all levels of study from certificates to doctoral degrees.

During the 1983-84 academic year, our university initiated an innovative general education program that included a composition course in Spanish, our first language. IAUPR was the first university in Puerto Rico to require a composition course in our native language. Specifically, this course allowed

our university to meet the following goal of this General Education Program: “To develop a person capable of communicating with propriety in Spanish or English and of using the other language at an acceptable level” (General Catalog, 2007-2009, p. 106). Composition courses in L1 had never been part of the college tradition in Puerto Rico, because it was assumed that students who were admitted to them already knew how to write well in any discipline. By doing this, our institution expressed concern about our students’ written communication skills. From that moment on, the Vice Presidency of Academic Affairs of IAUPR also promoted writing across the curriculum. Later on, and after Christopher Thaiss was invited in 1988 to offer several workshops to faculty from across the disciplines, our institution approved a policy that stated:

Writing will be part of our curriculum and should be used intensively so that it becomes a means of expression and a learning tool in all of the disciplines. Its use will facilitate the development of thinking skills while being used as a teaching and learning tool. This is based on the idea that knowledge and language are inseparable. In other words, what is known should be communicated in written form [Authors’ translation] (Academic Excellence, 1988, p. 7).

It was in the Metropolitan Campus that this policy was accepted very enthusiastically by both of us as Directors of the Spanish and English Departments. Therefore, in 1990 and 1992, we organized, together with a group of professors from the Spanish and English Departments, the First and Second Conferences on the Teaching of Writing, which served as vehicles for faculty development. Both were key activities in acknowledging the importance of composition courses in our first language and the need of incorporating writing across the curriculum, not only in our university, but also in all institutions in Puerto Rico. During this period some of our guests included Peter Elbow, Paul Connolly, James Gray, Daniel Cassany, and Robert Tierney. We also received scholarships to take post-doctoral courses in the teaching of reading and writing, including seminars in the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College in New York. All of these initiatives made us more aware that there was a need to supplement what the university had done up to that moment and to consider alternatives that would strengthen our General Education Program. It was at that time that we began to consider the development of a Writing Center for our campus.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERDISCIPLINARY WRITING CENTER

In the summer of 1992, and with the sponsorship of the Vice Presidency of Academic Affairs, we began a research project that allowed us to develop a writing center model for our campus. Our research included visiting several centers in universities in the United States to observe their functioning, as well as to interview the directors. We visited the Writing Centers at Lehman College in CUNY, New York University, SUNY at Albany, the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Texas at El Paso, and the University of Miami. In 1993 we also visited the Writing Center at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. The reading of *A Guide to Writing Programs: Writing Centers, Peer Tutoring, and Writing across the Curriculum* (Haring-Smith, 1985) helped us choose these centers. Other factors we took into consideration when selecting these centers were their prestige, and that they were located in universities that had some similarities with ours; for example, the student population. Since many of them had Hispanic students, we were able to get information on how they taught writing in both L1 and L2.

The visits allowed us to gather information about where to locate our center and how to train the tutors and other personnel who would be working there. Because we interviewed directors and tutors and studied the organization of the centers, we also gathered much more information about the roles of Writing Centers. In addition, all of the directors shared with us hand-outs and other official documents that guided us in developing our own materials. All of the information collected and the work of Muriel Harris (1982) and Stephen North (1984) served as guides when we finally developed our model.

The mission of our Writing Center stated that we would help our students improve the quality of their written work by means of one-to-one tutorials during the writing process in both languages, English and Spanish. These tutorials would be given by trained undergraduate students. Other group orientations and workshops would be given to provide students with techniques to help them discover their own writing processes. In addition, our model of the writing center included a faculty-training component.

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

Our Writing Center was inaugurated in 1994 with the visit of Toby Fulwiler. The Center was assigned to the Dean of Studies office to make it clear

that tutoring was available to students in all disciplines and not only to students taking Spanish and English courses. It had a director who was a full time professor of the Spanish Department and who had completed post-doctoral studies in the teaching of writing, plus two part-time coordinators, one for English and one for Spanish, who were in charge of the tutors. During the first three years all services were offered, and the number of students tutored increased year by year. The few graduate students who sought services received tutorials given by the coordinators, who had master's degrees in the teaching of Spanish and English. It is important to point out that the Center was a stronghold of both the writing process and writing across the curriculum. In other words, in the Center we were aware that the teaching of writing had to be transformed, so we organized professional development activities to help professors incorporate writing in their courses.

The Writing Center, the only one of its kind on the island, was open until 2000, when the administration indicated that for budgetary reasons it had to close. However, we have to indicate that very few faculty members and administrators understood its mission. Usually it was confused with the Spanish and English Language Laboratories that had been in operation since the 1970s on our campus. These were set up for basic level students to do remedial work to improve their writing skills. As a matter of fact, at the beginning of the 1990s, the teaching of writing as a process was hardly known in Puerto Rico, especially among the Spanish professors. Of course, this situation made it harder to incorporate writing across the curriculum.

Gradually, the budget for tutors decreased, provoking the reduction of one-to-one tutorials. At the same time, the direction of the Center fell into the hands of part-time Spanish or English faculty who only worked six hours a week and had no academic preparation in the field of writing. Basically, it was the responsibility of a "specialist" in the development of writing skills who was in charge of the Writing Center, because there were no tutors. This is further evidence that the idea of a writing center was not understood.

Sadly, all of these events led to the closing of the center, thus sending a formidable message to the professors who had included writing in their courses throughout the years. Harris (n.d.) helps us understand what happened:

When there is a lack of understanding, outsiders tend to view the center as less important, capable of operating with limited funds and/or facilities, and able to cope with minimal assistance. In times of budget cuts, writing centers are more likely to be viewed as expendable because they are unlike

traditional credit-bearing courses. Thus, the tenuous nature of some facilities and their reduced levels of support can demoralize the staff and weaken the writing center's ability to do its work. Where there is a clearer understanding of what the writing center contributes, however, support is strong, and writing centers are likely to be given increased responsibilities (15).

The years that followed the closing of our center disrupted all we had done to incorporate writing across the curriculum. It is during this period that the composition course in Spanish was also eliminated as a graduation requirement university-wide. A world literature course was substituted for it. In addition, the university policy regarding writing across the curriculum was annulled at this time.

THE NEW BEGINNING

The efforts to transform the teaching of writing were left in the hands of a small group of professors who were committed to this end. In other words, we were left to work individually in our classrooms. We also continued publishing our work and attending conferences in Latin America and in the United States. Basically, we felt it was our responsibility to continue our own professional development, hoping that one day we would be able to resume our discussion of communication across the curriculum (CAC) throughout our campus.

In 2003, the UNESCO Chair for the Improvement of Reading and Writing in Latin America was established on our campus through our initiative. This event started a new dialogue about the importance of both processes as learning tools. To inaugurate the Chair a symposium was held in 2004, thus creating more interest in the writing process and academic writing. This activity coincided with a new administration that expressed great interest in reopening the Interdisciplinary Writing Center.

Finally, in March 2008, the Center was reopened based on the same model we had developed. One-to-one tutorials are given in Spanish and English—and this time in an extended schedule. Now the Center is open at night and on Saturday morning in order to service our graduate students, who only study during these periods on our campus.

Our experience has been rewarding once again. The number of tutorials has surpassed our expectations. Alliances have been made with the Teacher Prepara-

tion, Spanish, Music, and Psychology professors. At this moment our Internet webpage is under construction to serve our online students. We are also making plans to develop podcasts to strengthen our services.

Reopening the Center constitutes a new effort to incorporate writing as a learning tool in the curriculum, while we also take care of our students' needs during the writing process. The Center is also part of the restructuring of the services offered by the Faculty of Humanistic Studies and part of the new academic vision of our present administration. It is important to mention that the Language Laboratories have been eliminated, so our Writing Center occupies the place it should have in an educational institution that aspires to graduate its students with writing competencies.

WHERE WE ARE NOW

We are very satisfied with our achievements up to now. Nevertheless, we are aware that budgetary decisions sometimes do not allow us to offer the number of tutorials requested. There is still not a clear understanding that the tutoring sessions have to be given individually in both Spanish and English during the hours when the Center is opened. In addition, there is still no budget assigned for books and other educational materials.

We are also concerned that many faculty members still view the teaching of writing as being equivalent to teaching grammar. Therefore, these faculty believe that only Spanish and English professors should teach writing. All required Spanish courses have also been revised since 2000; they are all literature courses now. The syllabi indicate that writing and reading processes are included in all of them, but not all professors teach these. A strong grammar component has gradually been included in these courses in recent years, too.

Faculty development is still part of the Center, because the present administration has appointed us as members of a campus-wide Interdisciplinary Writing Committee. Therefore, we sense that the administration is trying to locate our CAC program in our Writing Center. The mission of this committee is to train professors who are interested in incorporating writing in their courses.

It is interesting to note that our participation in this committee has helped us reaffirm the results of a study that we recently completed with two other colleagues from other higher education institutions in Puerto Rico (Quintana, García Arroyo, Arribas, & Hernández, in press). In Puerto Rico, the teaching of reading and writing is still viewed from a very timid standpoint. All of the administrators of the institutions that we surveyed agreed that there is a great concern with CAC, and they also recognized that many of the students enrolled

in their institutions need to improve these competencies. However, the participants in our study still view the writing process as being the same as learning grammar. In addition, the majority of the institutions that were surveyed still have Language Laboratories, including the other campuses of our institution. All emphasize remedial work, mostly grammar and punctuation exercises for which “correct” answers are sought to make sure, it is imagined, that students will obtain writing competence.

Some of the members of our campus Interdisciplinary Writing Committee also share this vision. They believe it is our responsibility, as Spanish and English professors, to make sure our students learn to write. In addition, they do not understand their role in helping students gain writing proficiency in their discipline. They all agree that students need to improve their writing skills, but they do not do anything about it. As a matter of fact, they have indicated that they do not include any writing activities in their courses because students do not know how to write. Therefore, our main challenge in this committee is to convince these members that writing is a learning tool in all disciplines. They also need to understand that the Writing Center can play a very active role in the development of the writing competencies of our student body.

Over the years we have finally understood that professors who write and publish their work are the ones who understand the importance of the role of writing in their disciplines. It is these professors who also understand the mission of the Writing Center; this is why they sponsor it.

Finally, it is important to point out that we have never doubted the value of the Writing Center. In the Center our students write and discover their strengths. There writing is promoted as an art and as a tool to obtain success in any field or profession. The Center gives them a wonderful opportunity to develop their intelligences, talents, and writing processes, most likely not developed in many traditional learning settings.

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