Chapter 14. Equity Means Having Full Voice in the Conversation

Higher education reforms and inclusion policies have opened the door to many talented students who previously did not have access to traditional research universities.[1] These initiatives are to be applauded. They lead down the path of social justice and hold the promise of increasing the diversity and strength of the talent that will lead nations' governments and economies in the challenging years to come. Further, the presence in the university of students from all backgrounds enriches the experience for all students and their understanding of the complexity of their societies and nations. But the open door can easily become a revolving door if students do not get the needed academic support. That support must go beyond success in secondary education to help students orient to the new expectations and cultures of higher education. The support needed by nontraditional students may also be discovered to be of great value for traditional students, improving their university success as well. This essay will explore more specifically the value that supports for academic writing may have in Latin American countries as they have had in the US.

The Challenge of University Success

Students who gain entry to top universities are among the most talented, energetic, and disciplined students in their countries. This is true whether the students come through traditional channels of economic advantage, top schools, and highest test scores or they have overcome many challenges of class, education, and limited opportunity to be still recognized as having great potential. In some ways, nontraditional students who come from less economic advantage, who have had fewer educational resources, whose school experiences have not prepared them for university challenges, and who have cultures, perspectives, and affiliations different from traditional students may bring advantages of character, commitment, and motivation that could bring even greater academic success than those who have had fewer obstacles to overcome. The nontraditional students understand well the opportunities being offered to them, and they have had the grit, discipline, and resilience to keep focused on academic success, despite obstacles and struggles.

Nonetheless, nontraditional students may be at risk because they may not have the specific academic preparation of others, may not have the confidence to assert their own voices, may not have families who can give them guidance in the

academic life, and may not feel fully part of university and academic life. Yet given the right support and guidance they can succeed as well as or better than the other students. In either case, traditional or nontraditional, failure to complete the university and to gain the most from the experience is a loss both for the individual student, who will carry the awareness and consequences of the lack of a degree throughout life, and for their nation, which will not have the full use of a talent gone astray. These students are potentials to be nurtured and supported rather than to be cast aside because they struggled with difficult-to-overcome obstacles.

Let me switch the metaphor. New policies and programs and expanding higher education systems (see Federico Navarro, 2017) are inviting people to the table who never received an invitation before. Will those newly invited stay to the end of the meal? Will they get the full benefit? Will they thrive, engage, and develop in mind and spirit in the rich discussion that will carry on long after the dishes vanish, and will they carry that development into their lives after?

Imagine you were invited to an exclusive restaurant, and the hosts, seeing you were new, first put you at the children's table until they were convinced you could act like a proper guest. And then imagine you could not understand the menu. Or the exotic dishes were unfamiliar to you, so you couldn't be sure what you were ordering or whether you would enjoy it. Or you could not pronounce your requests in a way that the waiter would understand or that would lead the waiter to treat you with the respect and pleasantness given to other customers. And then you were handed chopsticks which you did not know how to use, or you were given five forks that left you anxious about which to use when.

Assume you did not make excuses and did not run off in embarrassment or frustration before the meal was finished. Assume you could figure out the puzzles of ordering and eating, overcome anxiety about choices and how you appear, and endure the social judgment of others. Even if you survived all these, emotions may detract from what you take away from the meal and decrease your chance of hanging around for the talk, returning another day, or following up on the connections you made. What you experience, remember, and learn may be discomfort, lack of fitting in, and perhaps survival skills.

Writing Facilitates Successful Academic Experience

I have taken this metaphor a bit far, but I want to make graphic that the real value of an invitation is in the experience that you have once you enter, the experience that will determine whether you persist in the opportunity and what you will take from it. Much of a successful experience in the university depends on a student's ability to write. Writing is a central means for students to express themselves and interact within the university. Writing is a means for students to develop their thinking and critical reasoning. Writing is also the means by which much of student work and learning will be evaluated. If students do not have the means to communicate successfully in writing in the university, their experience will be painful and

unfortunate. Without support for writing, an invitation to the university will be likely an invitation to failure. Since writing is a key skill in expressing ideas, building critical thought, developing reasoning and intellect, and communicating intelligently with others, I will in this essay focus on the kinds of writing programs that we have found to support student success in the particular contexts of U.S. universities. Latin American universities in their desire to support success of students must, of course, design programs that fit the context of their institutions, academic cultures, and students, but they may find the U.S. experience informative.

I have devoted my career to supporting student success through writing development, starting with teaching basic writing to nontraditional students in the early years of open admissions in the City University of New York. I gradually came to understand how nontraditional students' writing challenges are embedded within academic practices, disciplinarity, and ultimately the evolution of societies that have made literacy the hidden infrastructure of communication, thought, social memory, and social organization. In my research and pedagogy, I have come to see how writing gives all people voice in the literate world. Limits on our ability to write limit our ability to engage with and represent our interests in the institutions of modernity.

It has turned out that what is a challenge and opportunity for nontraditional students is also a challenge and opportunity for all students. Writing takes a lifetime to learn. Writing is endlessly complex, and people never stop learning, particularly as they enter into the highly specialized communicative worlds of academic disciplines and professions. So the extra benefit in building programs to support nontraditional students in their academic journey is that we as educators learn to support all students. As we discover what kinds of support help our new students benefit most from their education, we also discover the kinds of supports that may help all students, who may have been getting by but not yet understanding how to enjoy and engage deeply with the experience. This is precisely what we have been discovering in writing programs in the US over the last fifty years, as we have developed many models of courses and student supports, designed for the specific circumstances of each university and described in the extensive literature within composition studies.

Demonstrating the Value of Writing Supports

Some quantitative, statistically significant studies have specifically shown that well-designed writing supports for students provide demonstrable benefit on such measures as persistence, retention, grades, and graduation. These numbers miss the depth and reality of the experience, but they do show in institutional terms that writing programs pay off and are worth the investment. The studies also offer some guidance on how support should be organized. These studies all come from the U.S. context where required first year writing courses have been standard at most universities for well over a century. This writing course of one or two terms is typically located within general education requirements for the first two university

years, before students are required to commit to a major. Through general education requirements students are introduced to a wide variety of disciplines and ways of looking at the world. Writing courses typically require extensive writing of essays, often on academic topics, usually involving student development of their own ideas and arguments. There is now also usually an attention to writing process and peer feedback. Also common are additional courses for students who are identified as less prepared than the entering norm and need additional instruction. Whether such a model of first year courses for all with additional work for selected students is structurally, financially, and institutionally viable in other countries or whether supports should be offered through other means, these studies show the value of well-designed supports. The experience elsewhere can help policy makers think through what might be appropriate in each local context.

Producing quantitative evidence of the success of writing courses is tricky because every writing program is different, along with every university and every student population. In fact, an important principle of writing program design is that writing programs need to fit local circumstances and cultures. Additionally, many variables influence student success and retention, and complexity of variables only increases if later consequences are considered, such as graduation or career success. Third, finding controls or comparisons is difficult, as programs are usually campus-wide and student populations in the different course sequences are not comparable because of the characteristics that initially determine how students are placed in different courses. Comparisons across campuses bring in too many variables to consider one campus as a control or comparison for the other. Finally, causality is, as always, a challenge to prove, though correlations can be suggestive.

Given these difficulties, I have searched for the clearest statistically significant studies that directly indicate the value of writing courses for university success. Separately they each establish important elements about the value of writing or writing instruction; together they make the arguments that writing skill is important to college success, well-designed writing instruction can improve writing skills, and attention to writing in subject area courses can foster deep learning. In total, these studies indicate attention to writing, in whatever form best fits the context, aids student success and learning.

Writing is Important to College Success

The most general study I could locate examined student records at a small university using association rule mining, a technique to see what factors or patterns predict others to identify what experiences predict success (Garrett et al., 2017). The authors of this study found that success at the initial writing course was strongly predictive of graduation within six years, and success at this course was about equal in importance to success in courses in the major. They found that only 17 percent of students earning a C- or less in first year writing (below basic pass) eventually graduated compared to 53 percent who earned C or above.

Repeating the course did not improve the odds greatly. This correlation between doing poorly in the writing course and having a lower chance of graduating was about the same as for failing a course related to the student's major. That is, not being able to write well was as serious a difficulty as not doing well in one's chosen subject. While the authors of this study did not directly show whether success was the result of the course or of students' previous skills, they did show the course seemed to provide practice and evaluation of the skills and experience that students needed to succeed at the university. Further their study showed a cluster of courses consisting of first-year library science, first-year public speaking, and first year writing predicted retention more than any other general education courses, with first year writing being the most influential component.

The implication of these findings for Latin American universities is clear: even without a full-scale general education curriculum, the most significant components for retention and persistence to graduation, namely writing and other communication and information courses, can be added within students' higher educational careers.

Well-Designed Writing Instruction Can Improve Writing Skills

Other studies have shown retention improvement for specific programs designed for the needs of students within particular institutions. These studies have provided more direct evidence that success is due to the course and not students' prior skills. Two such programs shown to be of value in appropriate contexts are the CLASP model at Washington State University which combines faculty development with a curriculum that focuses on critical pedagogy (Buyserie et al., 2017) and the Accelerated Learning Program which has proved effective in Baltimore County Community College (Cho et al., 2012) and has been replicated in other two- and four-year colleges. The Accelerated Learning Program integrates students into university level work and presents challenges for critical thought from the beginning.

One of the most detailed series of studies of the value of a well-designed writing program has come from Arizona State University, examining the impact of a redesign of the writing course sequence for students who are identified as needing extra support (Glau, 1996, 2007; Snyder, 2017). Prior to the redesign such identified students had to take a no-credit remedial, pre-university level course. (Glau, 1996). Both before and after the redesign all students at the university had to take a 2-term sequence of English 101 and 102, typically completed in the first year or as early as possible for those needing remedial courses. After the redesign, the remedial no-credit course was eliminated, and the students identified as needing more work were placed in a two-term version of 101 (designated WAC [Writing Across the Curriculum] 101 followed by English 101), but stretched out and with smaller class size. This sequence relied on the theory that these students were ready for university work but that they needed more time and personal support to do the

work. Integration into college level work was hypothesized to be more effective in advancing writing skills than holding students in preliminary courses. It was a simple concept and a simple change, that the key thing to be worked on was university writing rather than a more generic writing, repeating high school skills.

In the first year after this program was instituted in 1994, 23 percent more passed the first stretch term WAC 101 than the remedial course, 20 percent more went on to take English 101, and 30 percent more passed English 101, with a 92 percent pass rate (Glau, 1996, p. 85). So the stretch course was clearly an improvement, and the concept of integration into university work seemed correct. Further, the stretch course students seemed to be more engaged than even the traditional students who were not required to take extra work, as indicated by the retention rate for the two-term sequence fall to winter, which was 81.8 percent, 15 points higher than students placed directly in regular sections of 101 who continued to 102 the next term at a 66.2 percent rate (p. 83). Results for spring to fall and summer to fall versions of the stretch course were not as successful, suggesting momentum and continuity in integration into the university may be an issue.

A ten-year follow-up which included data for all the intervening years confirmed the value of the stretch course and indicated that the students who passed through it were even more successful than the non-designated students who took only the traditional 101-102 sequence (Glau, 2007). It turned out that at the end of 101, students in the stretch versions had higher pass rates than students in the traditional one term version (p. 38). Not only that, the stretch students got as good or better grades than the non-designated students in the follow-up course 102, where they were mixed together. Persistence across terms was also better for the stretch students (p. 42). These trends also held when looking only at the subgroup of students from underrepresented minorities (pp. 40-41). The lesson from this set of studies is that not only are appropriately designed writing courses useful in improving student writing for students with weaker skills, but that with appropriate support students entering with weaker skills could surpass their peers who enter with stronger skills.

A follow-up study looking at second language students taking an ESL version of the stretch course found even greater persistence than for the native English speaking (NES) stretch students (Snyder, 2017). The cohort of ESL stretch students beginning in fall 2012 passed at a 93 percent rate compared to the 89 percent pass rate of the students in NES stretch course. Of those passing, 97 percent of the ESL students registered in the second course of their sequence, and of those, 96 percent passed compared to 88 percent of the NES students registering and 91 percent passing. Then in the final course, 74 percent of the ESL students who had completed the stretch sequence enrolled, and 97 percent of those passed, compared to 64 percent of the NES students who had completed the stretch sequence and 85 percent passing. The pass rates of the NES speakers coming out of the stretch sequence were almost as good as those of the traditional students who did not take the stretch sequence, and the ESL students taking the stretch sequence exceeded both the NES stretch students and the traditional students.

Overall, these studies confirm that at-risk students with proper support can become highly successful and that well-designed programs that meet the needs of particular populations have positive effects on persistence, retention, and even grades in consequent courses. In their study, Garrett et al. (2017) further indicated that writing skills are important not only in further writing courses but also in success in completing majors, so improvements in writing skills resulting from appropriate writing courses can be linked to university success. These studies also indicated that the students who come through these programs can match or even exceed better-prepared students who take only the traditional sequence. These findings suggest these special programs may offer something that even more typically prepared students can use.

Attention to Writing in Subject Area Courses Can Foster Deep Learning

Appropriate university-integrated writing support thus seems to prepare students for success in the directly related courses as well as in courses in their major and in completion of degrees. This then leads to the questions of whether attention to writing in consequent subjects is also of importance for academic success and what kind of attention that might be. A study based on data from the large annually administered National Study of Student Engagement suggests how important well-designed writing assignments are to perceived student learning in their majors (Anderson et al., 2015). The findings are a bit complex, so I will go through the reasoning, assumptions, and methods in detail, so as to make the findings as clear as possible.

Previously three large-scale studies had shown the importance of writing for university success. A. W. Astin (1992) found that attention to writing skills correlated positively with achievement of general education outcomes more than any other variable measured. Richard J. Light (2001) also found the amount of writing assigned correlated more with student engagement than any other variable. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011) further found that the only variable to correlate with increases in critical thinking and complex reasoning in the first three semesters was to assign in each course more than 40 pages of reading a week and 20 pages of writing over the term. However, more detailed studies of the relation of writing to learning in specific contexts produced more mixed results. In order to identify whether specific characteristics of writing tasks might influence effects, Paul Anderson and his colleagues (2015) polled experts in college writing to develop three constructs of good writing assignments, which became the basis for questions added to the National Survey of Student Engagement, with responses for over 90,000 first and final year students from 80 participating institutions. These constructs were "Interactive Writing Processes," "Meaning-Making Writing Tasks," and "Clear Writing Expectations"—specified as follows:

- Interactive Writing Processes, which involve the student writers communicating orally or in writing with one or more persons at some point between receiving an assignment and submitting the final draft. . . .
- Meaning-Making Writing Tasks, which require students to engage in some form of integrative, critical, or original thinking. . . .
- Clear Writing Expectations, which involve instructors providing students with an accurate understanding of what they are asking their students to show that they can do in an assignment and the criteria by which the instructors will evaluate the students' submissions. (pp. 206–207).

These constructs, after some adjustment, were confirmed by the survey and then found to correlate with already established constructs of deep learning (taken from Laird and colleagues, 2006), measured as follows:

- Higher-Order Learning is measured by four questions about how much students say their course work emphasizes analyzing experiences and theories, synthesizing concepts and experiences into more complex relationships, making judgments about the value of information, and applying learned concepts to practical problems.
- Integrative Learning survey items measure the student's engagement in combining ideas from various sources, such as including diverse perspectives in course work, using ideas from different courses in assignments or class discussions, and discussing course concepts with either faculty members or others outside of class.
- Reflective Learning is measured by three questions that center on the student's self-examination of views on a topic, understanding the perspectives of others, and learning that changes the way the student understands an issue (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 211).

The correlations between constructs of writing and the constructs of deep learning ranged from 0.19 to 0.42 (Anderson et al., 2015). These correlations were stronger than those between constructs of deep learning and amount of writing, which ranged from about 0.11 to 0.27. Further it was found that these three constructs of effective writing instruction correlated with student perceptions of learning and development. Students perceived that they were learning and developing more through experiencing these best practices but did not perceive the same gains just from the amount of writing assigned.

While these data do not indicate actual learning, nor actual outcomes, they do indicate that writing assigned and carried out across the curriculum within best assignment practices were perceived by students to be associated with deep learning and development. Since such perceptions are indicators of engagement, and engagement has been shown to correlate with a variety of academic success outcomes (Kuh, 2008), these findings suggest that engagement in writing tasks is important to learning and academic success.

The findings from the NSSE study indicate the importance of meaningful writing experiences across the curriculum, which would entail greater engagement and forethought of disciplinary faculty in assigning, supporting, and responding to writing assignments. These findings combined with those reported earlier in this essay, suggest well-designed locally appropriate writing instruction and support, integrated into actual university level work with writing assignments in subject courses aid learning. That is, these findings indicate the educational value of a Writing Across the Curriculum approach that works with the faculty in the various subject areas to provide better assignments and supports that foster deep learning.

Writing in Latin American Higher Education

What would such a Writing Across the Curriculum orientation look like within Latin American higher education, and in particular among the most demanding public and private universities? That ultimately is something that is best left to local knowledge and local educators with wisdom about the nature of students, institutions, and majors. The expanding set of writing studies with the Latin American context provides important starting points (for overviews of that work see Natalia Ávila-Reyes, 2017; Navarro et al, 2016; and Mónica Tapia-Ladino et al., 2016). Nonetheless, based on my own research, experience, and pedagogy, as well as the consensus of national panels of writing teachers and researchers, I can make a few general comments about writing development and the challenges faced by students.

First, students to develop as writers need a variety of meaningful and motivated experiences, opportunities to practice writing in a variety of specific settings, and understanding the value of carrying out those tasks (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015; Bazerman et al., 2017). That is, students, in fact all writers, grow in their capacity to write by being engaged in writing tasks they find interesting, challenging, and useful, resulting in valued accomplishments. Each experience then builds capacity for each new one.

Second, if the goal is improvement of academic writing, the settings need to be specifically academic, and the most motivating rewards are those of learning and intellectual discovery. So while brief periods of directed instruction and support within separate writing contexts are useful, these must be seen and experienced substantively as moving students into the identities and worlds of knowledge and thought students aspire to. Further, these experiences must provide the opportunity for students to assert their own thoughts, meanings, and conclusions into the disciplinary space, solving puzzles they have taken ownership of and asserting themselves as legitimate participants.

Within the university curriculum we educators have some control of the sequencing of these writing experiences, and within the careers or majors chosen by students departments already have a framework of experiences and affiliations that can drive engagement. The majors or careers identify where students have already been successful, where they want to go, and what they want to become.

Insofar as students see writing as part of achieving those directions and goals, they are predisposed to solve problems and engage in communicative tasks.

What are the specific kinds of challenges students face in academic writing and the problems they must solve to produce successful academic work? University reading and writing present challenges for even the best-prepared students. The language and textual forms of academic disciplines are unfamiliar and specialized but, even more, disciplinary communications establish different relationships among the participants and different stances towards the subject matters. To understand disciplinary texts and to be able to produce them, students must develop new ways of thinking and new ways of looking at the world. Merely repeating received knowledge using phrasing from textbooks leads at best to limited understanding and poor performance and does not allow students to develop a sense of competence, performance, and autonomous thought. Students must be able to synthesize the ideas and information from multiple sources and come to their own conclusions; they must be able to evaluate points of views and biases of sources; they must weigh the claims of their sources against evidence they themselves learn to collect; they must come to argue for their original claims. Students must do all these things within the disciplinary practices and theoretical frameworks of their chosen fields—representing data, evidence, and knowledge appropriately and drawing meaningfully from relevant literatures. They must recognize and care about the stakes in disciplinary discussions and develop confident positions to speak from. If they fail to carry out these transformations of knowledge, they will remain alienated from the academic work and academic ways of reasoning. They will see academic work as artificial, not meaningful, and done only under duress for grades. They may even develop more negative beliefs about academic work. In short, students must develop and commit to professional or academic identities that give them positions from which to participate wholeheartedly within the work of their careers, citizenship, and communities. It is a long journey to emerge from beneath dominant authoritative texts in order to assert active, engaged, confident, and competent voices in the discussions of their professions.

To guide curriculum development in the US to prepare students for this kind of disciplinary engagement and academic success, a consortium of the major teaching of writing organizations—the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Writing Project, and the National Council of the Teachers of English (which includes the Conference on College Composition and Communication)—have developed a set of outcomes for first year writing courses (http://associationdatabase.co/archives/38n1/38n1outcomes.pdf). In addition to the traditional understanding of conventions, this statement of outcomes has three other major categories that coincide with the kinds of development we have been discussing: "Rhetorical Knowledge"; "Critical Thinking, Reading, and Composing"; and "Processes." This outcomes statement may prove useful as a heuristic for considering the goals of programs elsewhere that would fit local needs in Latin American countries.

Other potentially useful resources are available at the WAC Clearinghouse website (https://wac.colostate.edu/). These include pedagogic and program development materials that illustrate and provide alternatives for both first year courses and writing across the curriculum materials, including the Reference Guides in Rhetoric and Composition book series and the Landmark Publications in Writing Studies book series.

Support in both the first year courses and the more advanced subject courses within majors has been useful for all students, nontraditional and traditional, within U.S. settings. This support goes beyond the kinds of preparation students are likely to achieve in even the best of secondary school experiences and requires the atmosphere, motives, and culture of higher education to be meaningfully realized for students. Such support has increased retention, completion, and success for all students in the US and may be of some use in other national contexts. The challenge now facing Latin American universities is to design and implement appropriate support in ways that fit the institutional structures of local institutions, the societies they are part of, and the characteristics and motivations of the students. I look forward to the solutions that Latin American academics will find.

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