

CHAPTER 8.

**FROM REMEDIATION TO
THE DEVELOPMENT OF
WRITING COMPETENCES IN
DISCIPLINARY CONTEXTS:
THIRTY YEARS OF PRACTICE
AND QUESTIONS**

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This profile essay focuses on writing provision at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), or the Free University of Brussels, a French-speaking university situated in the Belgian capital. In 1979, the ULB established the Centre de Méthodologie Universitaire (CMU) (Centre for University Learning), the first initiative of its kind in French-speaking Belgium. The CMU situates its teaching and research within the context of the linguistic needs of first-year, French-speaking students. Through teaching in academic reading and writing, the CMU helps students to surmount the obstacles in language that are the preserve of university-level discourse communities, and enables first-year students to take part in what for them is a new discursive environment. This profile details the history and remit of the CMU and discusses various pedagogical approaches through which the centre has moved over the past thirty years.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), or the Free University of Brussels, a French-speaking university situated in the Belgian capital, covers all disciplines, is divided into 11 faculties, and encompasses all modes of study including undergraduate and postgraduate.¹ In the 2010-2011 academic year, it had nearly

24,000 students, among whom more than 7,000 were in their first year of undergraduate study. ULB enrolls students who are native to Brussels, of course, but also a significant number of provincial students, while 29% of its entire student population comes from abroad (Free University of Brussels, 2011). In the eyes of those who live in Brussels, ULB students are characterized by diversity in their geographic, cultural, and social origins.

One can add to this diverse mix the variety of educational backgrounds, since, as in all institutions of higher education in Belgium (except for the Faculties of Applied Sciences), admission to university is not conditioned by any test (neither exam nor written application), as long as the student has obtained his or her diploma of general or technical secondary education (“*technique de transition*”) through the transition stream.² Taking into account this particularity, the first-year student population in French-speaking Belgium is very heterogeneous and it is difficult to count on all students possessing more or less identical pre-requisites, including linguistic competence. This is what, in fact, led to the granting of ministerial subsidies for universities to improve rates of student success (The Bologna Accord of March 31, 2004) and then to the “decree democratizing higher education, working to promote the success of students and creating the Observatory of Higher Education” (July 18, 2008).

Therefore, we are currently in a political context where the promotion of student success has been, for the past few years, regulated by decree, which makes it possible for institutions to allocate funding for teaching initiatives which, until then, had not necessarily been amongst their first priorities. The ULB, however, had not awaited this decree for the university to take interest in the fate of its first-year students, and established instead *Le Centre de Méthodologie Universitaire* (CMU) (the Center for University Learning) in 1979, the first initiative of its kind in French-speaking Belgium exclusively to develop and support (beginning in the 1990s) disciplinary teaching guidance in most Faculties.

Even if, for historical reasons, the CMU is attached to the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, at least insofar as the management of its personnel is concerned (hiring, careers, administrative framing), it is a cross-faculty center placed under the aegis of the Education Authority of the university and thus offers its services to the whole of the university community. The CMU situates its teaching and research within the context of the linguistic support for first-year students—French-speaking students, it is important to specify. It is indeed a question of helping them to overcome the obstacles in language which the university—and the new discursive environment that this embodies—has in store for them.

Originally called the “Center for French Language Improvement” —a name which speaks volumes about the normative approach and the purist vi-

sion of the Center's beginnings—the CMU now states clearly its will to acculturate students into university-level discourses, through interventions centered on the development of linguistic competences in disciplinary contexts. It is thus anchored resolutely in the theoretical and pedagogic field of *Littéracies Universitaires* or “University Literacies,” which articulates the teaching and learning apprenticeship of writing at university in connection with the construction of disciplinary knowledge.³

This is why the CMU locates its pedagogic reflections and interventions at the heart of this articulation, as we shall see in what follows. First of all, the teaching team is made up of linguists and specialists in the various disciplines; then, the analysis of needs, the research of authentic documents, as well as the definitions of the main strands of the courses delivered by the CMU, are carried out in collaboration with colleagues (professors and/or assistants) in the various departments.

A BIT OF HISTORY: PRACTICES, QUESTIONS AND THE “PEDAGOGIC REVOLUTIONS” OF THE CMU

The CMU was created in 1979, following the publication by the Faculty of Sciences of the ULB of a report in which the authors attributed the main cause of students' failure in the first year to the poor knowledge of the language. According to their observations, these gaps in knowledge render “the students unable to follow the complexity of a scientific thought as much in a written text as in an oral lecture or class, to the extent to which ‘the negligence of French-speaking students with respect to their language is such that they find themselves disadvantaged in relation to foreign students who have learned French recently but more rigorously.’”⁴

These are the catastrophist comments which led to the creation of a center called at the time “The Center for French Language Improvement,” in charge of improving the linguistic performance of future students, through the use of language drills in order for students to master the command of the linguistic system as part of foundational courses as well as during the course of first-year exercise workshops. Through the years, these early practices evolved enormously from a logic of remediation to a logic of student education. The next section shows this evolution, indeed the “pedagogic revolutions” of the CMU. (For a more complete discussion, see Pollet, 2001, 2008.) These changes reflect the limits of some practices, the teaching dead-ends with which we, the staff at the Center, confronted, as well as the reflections which led us to follow other paths. These revolutions at the CMU are the result of our experience, but also

of the evolution of the research into the teaching of French in higher education, and thus, more recently, in the context of academic literacies, of the research in sociology and socio-linguistics.

THE NORMATIVE APPROACH

For a long time, the command of language was considered from a normative perspective, through the reproaches formulated against students as well as the remedial type of solutions offered to them. These reproaches are well-known—poverty of vocabulary, ignorance of the most elementary syntax, appalling orthography—and led to the implementation of exercises whose objective was to develop micro-level skills.

However, no matter how generous and well-meant these practices were, they deserve questioning. First of all, these practices were in keeping with the so-called “compensatory” programmes, the main flaw of which was clarified by sociologists such as Jean-Claude Forquin (1990a, 1990b) and Christian Bachman (1993), who show all the difficulty, even impossibility, of grafting standard language codes on pupils coming from disadvantaged or notoriously harsh backgrounds. In other words, according to theorists, programmes based on linguistic drills are not fully adapted to the student audience that they target in the first place: on the contrary, they run the risk of discouraging students rather than aiding them.

Next, Bernard Lahire (1993) showed that school work on language—the reasoned exercises, the regulated practice, the perpetual work of repetition and correction—causes “practical resistance” [6] among those pupils in whose writing we find the famous spelling errors as well as the wobbly syntactic constructions. Moreover, certain researchers show the over-valuing of the influence of students’ non-command of standard language on the difficulties of training. Thus, Elisabeth Bautier (1998) invites teachers and researchers not to grant too much importance to students’ lexical or syntactic difficulties, because they often mask the difficulties “which represent deeper issues that differentiate pupils even more since they concern the use of language presupposed by school practices.”

Finally—and this is not the least of limits to identify—this approach suffers terribly from decontextualization. The strongly reductive aspect of the teaching that targets the command of the linguistic system causes this type of remediation to result in the demotivation of students, and consequently in teaching failure. Obviously, it is not a question of ignoring the problems—orthographical, lexical, syntactic—of students, which are quite real. Rather, it is a question of thinking of other avenues than those represented by the language

drill and the imposition of a norm. One such solution consists of locating the norm in the challenges of communication, by developing the critical and metalinguistic consciousness of students in relation to this language standard and its variations (Béguelin, 1998). By raising students' awareness in this way, they will undoubtedly grow to be more motivated to appropriate the tools that we can offer them.

THE TECHNICIST APPROACH

The recognition of the limits of the normative perspective such as it has just been briefly described led to the development of a technicist approach for achieving mastery of language and for its teaching in higher education. On the basis of recurring observations that students are not able to “distinguish the essential from the accessory,” nor “to synthesize information,” nor “to take notes,” nor “to write a clear answer,” the technicist approach acts to develop “techniques” and “methods,” considered—wrongly it must be said—as general and transverse.

It is in this way that the programmes centred primarily on the improvement of language moved gradually towards the “working methods,” investing primarily in strategies that concern the summarizing activity (plans, summaries, syntheses, note-taking). Like the normative approach, however, these practices also suffer from decontextualization, at least when they do not take into account the characteristics of the discourse to which they relate nor the analysis of assignment questions, in other words, when, as it is often the case, they are focused on the school exercise of summarising and its purely technical aspects of information reduction. The principal flaw of this approach is “to substitute a logic of technical skills for a logic of knowing and intellectual work” (Bautier, 1998, p. 22).

While this type of teaching can instil in students considerable non-negligible mechanisms such as the selection of important concepts, thanks to the identification of conceptual fields, it also runs the risk, however, of pushing students to take refuge behind automatisms. This approach will not support pragmatic reflection, which would enable them to stay open to the world of the discourse that surrounds them in the environment of their studies.

THE PRAGMATIC APPROACH

This last approach, which is currently dominant, consists of developing writing competences in disciplinary contexts, and according to these contexts. Thus, the conception of “French in higher education” has been expanded to

make room for its discursive and cognitive aspects. Moreover, “the mastery of the language” is considered from the angle of linguistic practices (reading-writing) in use in the medium of studies and the disciplinary field, and in connection with the modes of this disciplinary knowledge construction.

It is in the context of this pragmatic approach, initially developed due to the failures of the previous approaches and through a kind of pedagogic intuition, that the concept of “Littéracies Universitaires” came to be coined at the right moment. This concept, which made its way into the French-speaking world from the Anglophone countries, offers a genuine framework for us to inscribe our reflections, our research, and our practices. Indeed, this field of knowledge makes us consider the specificities of academic disciplines, and “taking into account these disciplines (of teaching or research) obliges us to articulate the analysis of writings and of writing with the various institutional spaces of discourse production, of academic or educational spaces with those of scientific research.”⁵ This also leads us to consider that it is within this space, of the “complex relation between university writing and the knowledge and know-how acquired in the disciplines,” that it is appropriate to locate our pedagogic interventions (Donahue, 2010, pp. 43-44).

It is thus a question of supporting our students through their transition into their university literacy(ies), for there is more than one single academic literacy in keeping with the disciplines and types of discourse to comprehend and produce as part of their various strands of study. More precisely, it is advisable “to consider the connections between writing and knowledge in a discipline, as well as the epistemological role of the latter” (Delcambre & Lahanier-Reuter, 2010, p. 15) because “the writing and the object of the writing cannot be separated, and the learning of disciplinary writing will need to be done in connection with the teaching of the discipline itself” (Donahue, 2010, p. 57).

CONCRETELY: PRAGMATIC TEACHING APPROACHES OF THE CMU²

The CMU organizes various types of classes, according to the wishes, constraints or cultures of faculties and/or courses of study. This provision takes the shape of exercise sessions, practical work (which can be optional or heavily guided, or even subject to a “bonus” in terms of credits), or else courses taken as part of the students’ degree programmes. Nevertheless, no matter the form the CMU teaching may take, certain fundamental principles guide the development and organization of its provision.

THE CONTEXTUALISATION OF INTERVENTIONS: THE ANALYSIS OF NEEDS, INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION, AND TEAM-TEACHING

The contextualisation of the CMU's teaching interventions involves a close cooperation with staff in academic departments, a deep analysis of students' needs, based on interactions with colleagues, but also on the observation of students' papers and work on authentic documents.

Moreover, most courses and/or practical work are delivered jointly by two teachers: one a linguist, the other a specialist in the discipline. This collaboration, which sometimes unsettles students at first, proves very profitable. Indeed, the complementarity of competences of each specialist renders the seminars rich, dynamic, complete, and legitimate, both on the linguistic and on the disciplinary level. The participation of disciplinary colleagues is paramount because only they make it possible "to clarify from within the epistemological dimensions of the writing, the interactions between the writing and the research methods, the challenges and the forms of the scientific communication" (Decambre & Lahanier-Reuter, 2010, p. 15).

RECOGNITION OF THE NEED FOR CONTINUED TRAINING IN READING-WRITING, INCLUDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It is the main tenet of the concept of literacies that is pinned down here, and that in itself allows for a change in the conception of teaching writing at university from the idea of remedial tuition to that of formation or education, at different strategic moments during the student's course of study, a kind of teaching that is normal with respect to the novelty of the environment. This also offers us the opportunity to envisage the articulation of reading/writing as integral to a single pedagogy of writing.

A BALANCED ARTICULATION BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

While the interventions of the CMU are meant to be especially practical and to lead students to exercise, above all, competences of reading comprehension and writing production, my colleagues and I believe, nonetheless, that the contribution of certain theoretical concepts represents a further means of developing students' metalinguistic consciousness, and their ability to transfer what they have learned into their courses. Therefore, it seems important to us to lead students to reflect on the concepts of discourse genres, textual or sequential typologies, cohesion/coherence, and enunciative modalities, as well as on practices of reported speech and problem-raising.

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Among the courses or exercises taught by the CMU, we shall give here an example of a course which already has a long tradition and has recently been reorganized within the context of the latest reform of programs in the Department of History (2010) for it to adhere even more to the specificities of the discipline. Indeed, the course entitled “Exercises on the construction of historical knowledge,” registered under this name with the programme for five years but existing informally for more than twenty, usually taught by a historian and a linguist, has been seen as being entrusted with the mission of anchoring, more than ever, work on writing in the discipline and its specificities, including those which are related to the practices of research. This demand for reinforcement thus led to an increase in ECTS course credits (10 instead of five out of 60 in total), to an increase in the number of tenured tutors (four instead of two), and to an enhanced collaboration with the unit teaching documentary research.

With regard to the implementation of this current draft of the course, a new analysis of needs was carried out based on three intersecting sources: the discussion of teachers in the department about their discipline and the students’ needs; samples of the students’ perspectives on the writing in their discipline and on their difficulties when confronted with the reception or the production of these discourses; and the characteristics of the various types of legitimated discourse circulating within this discipline (articles, books, and pedagogic discourses produced by teacher-researchers).

Afterwards, we cross-fertilised the various elements thus observed with certain reflections by “theorists of the history” of writing, the methods, and practices of research, from which we attempted to establish some characteristics of disciplinary discourses that cannot be ignored. The data thus collected make it possible to determine, besides the notions relevant to the discipline itself, the linguistic concepts to summon and the linguistic competences to develop in the students, in order thus to build a course centred on disciplinary writing, in which epistemological and heuristic specificities guide the choice of content.

SOME QUESTIONS BY WAY OF CONCLUSION . . .

The most important question concerns the status of this kind of course. First of all, do such courses have to be optional (either opted for by the students who wish to take them, or imposed by the institution on some students, following a test, for example), or obligatory (which is to say imposed on all the students by the requirements of the program)? If the pragmatic character and the formative

aspect that we privilege cause us to show an inclination toward the obligatory, experience shows that these courses are not necessarily legitimate in the eyes of certain students (“I can read and write, nevertheless”) nor, sometimes, it should be said, in the eyes of certain colleagues. We further add to this the problems which are encountered in all higher education French courses, including “techniques of expression,” “methodology,” and so on; these “weakened territories,” to use again an expression of Michel Dabène and Claude Fintz (1998). To prevent this problem, it is necessary for this course to be a true project of the institution, but also of the department of study, to which all of the colleagues adhere. Moreover, the disciplinary anchoring must be very visible, which, very prosaically, implies an important reflection concerning the title of the course, which must signify this anchoring.

The question regarding the status of the course also arises insofar as the proportioning of theory and practice is concerned, and also in the mode(s) of assessment being used. These points, which require great flexibility and great adaptability on behalf of the CMU, must be tackled within the department, in keeping with the demand, the needs, the constraints, and the practices.

A second question concerns the cost, in all senses of the word: in terms of time, since the preparations are individualized according to the needs of the departments, but also in terms of money, since several people become involved in these courses. Institutional policy, therefore, must thus be very willing from this point of view.

The last question to be addressed relates to the most appropriate moments and objectives in students’ courses for the organization of such teaching. In Belgium, the tendency is for such courses to be focused on the first year of study, and that is justified, of course, by the need to familiarize students with a new discursive environment. However, research in the field of University Literacies and our experiences in the field lead us to defend the idea of continuous teaching, focusing on the various genres of written and spoken discourse with which students are confronted throughout their courses.

NOTES

1. The editors wish to thank Dr. Catalina Neculai, Centre for Academic Writing, Coventry University, England, for translating Marie-Christine Pollet’s essay from French to English.
2. For students who do not have this diploma, a university admission examination is organized by the institution, but these cases are relatively rare.

3. For a full definition of the term “Littéracies Universitaires” (“University Literacies”), see I. Delcambre and T. Donahue, “Academic Writing Activity: Student Writing in Transition,” in M.Castelló and T. Donahue, eds. (2012). *University Writing: Selves and Texts in Academic Societies*. London: Emerald Group.
4. Enseignement des candidatures—Facteurs de réussite, Rapport du groupe de travail Faculté des Sciences—Enseignement secondaire [Teaching of the candidatures—Factors of success, Report of the Faculty of Sciences working group—Secondary education], ULB, 1975, p. 7.
5. Conference call « Littéracies universitaires: Savoirs, écrits, disciplines » [Academic Literacies: knowledge, writings, disciplines], Université Charles-de-Gaulle – Lille 3, 2-4 September 2010.
6. M.-C. Pollet, C. Glorieux, *Rapport d’activités du CMU* (rapport interne) [Activity Report of the CMU (internal report)], March 2010.

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