

# Scientific and Academic Literacies in Higher Education: A Latin American Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## WHAT DOES A LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE ON READING AND WRITING IMPLY?

The *Signum* special issue on “Scientific and academic literacies in higher education” joins a series of at least ten issues on this topic published in the last two decades in scientific journals in different Latin American countries. This recent level of productivity is striking. Why has the production of knowledge on reading and writing in higher education settings in Latin America increased so significantly? What does Latin America have to contribute to the international discussion on the subject? We suggest some answers below.

Latin American literacy research offers an eclectic and diverse toolbox for research on reading and writing. Research in the region draws on different academic traditions, ranging from experimental studies of mental processes, through discourse analysis from complementary perspectives (critical analysis of ideologies, functional analysis of meaning-making choices, or automated analysis of lexical-grammatical resources, for instance), ethnographic or socio-culturally oriented studies on the forms of participation of student writers and readers, to more educational and curricular perspectives on teaching and literacy initiatives. These traditions coexist in the same journals, conferences, associations, and graduate programs in the region, and make up a complex perspective on literacy, as this special issue exemplifies. Latin American researchers interested in reading and writing can draw on varied linguistic, educational and social theories, elaborated in different traditions, languages and geographies (NAVARRO *et al.*, 2016); they can even make room for different epistemologies from the humanities and the social sciences, because the field has been interdisciplinary since its recent origin while in the margins of hegemonic global scientific production.

On the other hand, Latin American literacy research holds a critical view on reading, writing and literacy teaching. Research on higher education literacy in the region has been mainly carried out in contexts of inequity and segregation (CHIROLEU; MARQUINA, 2017), but at the same time in an educational landscape characterized by State participation, a perspective that considers education as a right, and a tradition of social movements of protest and emancipation, which represents a combination of features that is not often found elsewhere. In a region where school segregation and socioeconomic

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determination of the possibilities of higher education admission, graduation and social advancement coexist with political agendas of inclusion, support for learning, and scholarships, the role of literacy as a means for learning and assessment becomes essential.

In this regard, research on reading and writing in Latin America has the potential to inform efforts to understand and promote educational policies that seek to restore alienated rights and redress structural inequities, and it is part of a long tradition of critical pedagogy and emancipatory movements in the region. In other words, a Latin American perspective could empathize the political, empowering, and transformative role of literacy. Regardless of their setting or framework, the articles included in this special issue reject the deficit perspective that blames students and, on the contrary, seek to promote educational change and social justice.

Lastly, Latin American literacy research promotes open, not-for-profit, State-funded, and multilingual research, with equal participation of men and women. The special issues published in recent decades in Latin America are open-access, supported by public and non-profit institutions, and indexed based on quality indicators developed within the region. This Latin American model implies that readers can easily and freely access recent and high-quality scientific products that contribute to social development.

Furthermore, articles are published in a variety of languages, not exclusively or mainly in English, or even in more than one language simultaneously, as is the case with this issue of *Signum*. This linguistic diversity, combined with the use of varied multimodal resources (images, tables, graphs, among others), contributes to the development of multilingualism in science, thus expanding the opportunities to promote the internationalization of higher education.

Although not as frequently noted in the literature, there is a predominance of women among the most cited and productive authors in the region, a pattern that is also apparent in this issue: 83% of the authors are women. Previous research also provides evidence in this regard; within the framework of the research project *Reading and Writing Initiatives in Higher Education in Latin America* (ILEES), four women were cited among the five most influential researchers in Brazil (CRISTOVÃO; VIEIRA, 2016).

These features of Latin American research on literacy, which include institutional, linguistic, and gender issues, offer the potential for a counter-hegemonic dynamic, in a global panorama determined by for-profit multinational publishing houses and overpricing, with a predominance of English-language publications, and gender inequity in influential positions. In this regard, we have the opportunity to strengthen ties between Latin American authors in the promotion of scientific and academic literacies, considering the role of different languages in the production and circulation of scientific knowledge.

## **RESEARCH IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE**

The articles in this issue are listed according to their areas of interest and types of evidence. The first two articles examine intertextuality and verbal processes in writing as a product. The following three articles study the interactions between teachers, students, and peers, both orally and in writing. The two subsequent articles describe, validate and assess initiatives for teaching written genres in academic and professional settings, while the last two articles map genres and teaching initiatives in certain programs and areas. In this regard, this special issue illustrates how literacy can be approached simultaneously through texts, from the perspective of writers and readers, and in educational and disciplinary contexts.

The articles are published in two different languages: English as a language of science aimed at a wide international audience, but also Spanish or Portuguese as valid languages for scientific participation and, in many cases, necessary to reach readers in the region. The diversity of the national affiliations of the editors and authors (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, United States, Mexico and Uruguay) is also a sign of the

regionalism and transnationalism in scientific exchanges that Latin America seeks to promote. All articles are freely available for anyone who wishes to read them.

Drawing from systemic functional linguistics, Ignatieva, Vergara, Jasso and Sánchez study 80 texts written by students from three disciplinary fields in the humanities. In their article “The construal of experience through transitivity in student academic writing across humanistic disciplines: A systemic functional analysis”, the authors use qualitative and quantitative analysis to compare Spanish-language essays, question-answers, reviews and reports across disciplines. The results showed the similarities within the humanities, as well as variations between the different disciplines.

In Silva’s article “Anchoring the first-year research paper: a pilot study of FYW student citation practices”, the analysis of the use and integration of sources in research writing by freshmen in 16 universities in the United States of America allows her to challenge the notion of plagiarism. The author finds that students use anchor sources as a rhetorical formative strategy; they emulate the argumentative structure of a source to organize their own text. This patchwriting strategy helps student-writers to understand discursive patterns and academic expectations and, as the author concludes, should be encouraged in first year writing courses.

For their part, in the article “Written comments on undergraduate theses written in Spanish as a first language and English as a foreign language”, Correa Pérez, Tapia-Ladino and Arancibia Gutierrez analyze written comments by teachers (native Spanish speakers and non-native English speakers) on undergraduate theses to investigate the type of feedback provided. The data, comprising 1,241 written comments, was classified into types (*corrective* or *genre-oriented*) and quantified throughout different drafts. Genre-oriented comments were more frequent in texts written in Spanish, which also received more corrective comments.

Similarly, in the article “Peer feedback in a peer review workshop online”, Álvarez, Colombo and Difabio analyze comments and feedback on thesis chapters produced in peer review activities in an online writing workshop, as well as students’ opinions on the activity. The results show the predominance of overall comments focused both on linguistic aspects and on adjustment to the communicative and research situation. Regarding in-text feedback, most comments focused on the textual structure. The authors claim that there was an improvement in the quality of the texts due to the influence of these assessment instruments.

Verzella, De Moraes Caruzzo e Destro Costa, in their article “Addressing power imbalance in telecollaboration to promote attitudes of intercultural competence,” depict an international telecollaboration project that can significantly contribute to internationalization at home (IaH). The article aims to develop intercultural competence and collaboration through participation in the project, which includes students of English as a foreign language in Brazil and students of English composition in the United States. The authors used a semi-structured questionnaire to collect participants’ opinions on this type of experience for learning a foreign language, as well as for learning about other cultures.

In “Academic literacy and teacher training: Reading-writing of the lesson plan genre”, Olivera analyzes a pedagogical experience focused on the teaching of reading and writing of the lesson plan genre in a teacher training context. The data for the research was collected using questionnaires given to undergraduate students of languages and in seminars within the Linguistics IV course. The author points out that the use of an ethnographic perspective was crucial to achieve the expected results. The holistic nature of this approach allowed students to go beyond the linguistic dimension of the lesson plan, making them understand the importance of this genre in teaching and the role that the teacher plays in its elaboration.

Lousada and Tonelli, in their article “Learning the ‘summary’ genre by undergraduate French language students: a didactic device at the service of academic literacy,” expand the scope of research in undergraduate courses. The authors address writing in French during a semester of a French composition course, aiming at the development of linguistic skills of students in a foreign language. The focus is on linguistic strategies related to the process of summarizing ideas in a certain text and avoiding repetition in a French II class, through activities in the classroom and on the Moodle online platform. As a result, the authors point out that, in addition to showing the initiative and the students’ work, it was possible to discuss the role of the Academic Literacy Laboratory (LLAC) in the development of students’ language skills.

In their article “Demands for two postgraduation courses in relation to academic literacies”, Tognato, Francescon and Vignoli compare the initiatives and requirements of graduate programs in two universities in the state of Paraná (UEL and Unespar). Through a questionnaire addressed to the coordinators and managers of the graduate programs included in the project, gaps in the conception of academic literacy were identified. According to the authors, these gaps could be useful as inputs and motivation for the reorientation of educational practices in these contexts. The study identifies necessary actions, such as the teaching of languages and the understanding and composition of different academic genres (abstracts, articles, oral presentations) both in the students’ native and foreign languages.

In “Reading practices of communication professionals in Uruguay: areas, genres and strategies,” Díaz, Lorier and Achugar map reading practices through a survey of 82 professionals in the communications field in Uruguay. They found that communicators read journalistic (news, editorials, reports) and scientific-professional (research articles, technical reports) genres in various languages to obtain information about events, people, and their contexts, as well as to investigate specific theories and topics. In turn, they transform those sources to create written and oral texts such as news, interviews, and presentations. Based on these findings, the authors offer suggestions to design reading courses in communication programs.

In sum, the articles in this special issue represent the three aforementioned features of literacy research in Latin America: eclectic and diverse approaches to writing; critical views on writing and the teaching of writing; and open-access, non-for-profit, public, multilingual contributions, with equal participation of men and women.

## **READING AND WRITING STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA: WHAT’S NEXT?**

It is necessary to explore the potential gaps in contemporary reading and writing studies in higher education in Latin America to anticipate possible future lines of development. The first aspect worth exploring is how literacy, as a complex phenomenon, is intertwined with social and educational issues that have recently attracted greater attention, such as gender identities, lifelong learning, community participation, multilingualism / multiculturalism in the classroom, and mental health. However, it is rare to find research that draws on reading and writing as a way to access these or other contemporary themes (NAVARRO; COLOMBI, in press).

In addition, given the complexity of studying literacy, researchers should be transparent about what was left out of their studies due to theoretical, methodological, budgetary, logistical, or other restrictions. Conversely, it is also necessary that research contributions explain how they add to or challenge existing knowledge, that is, scientific relevance cannot be based on simple accumulation but on critical and strategic engagement with previous research, what some refer to as “niche creation” (FEAK; SWALES, 2011). After 20 years of development in our field, we should be able to clearly state what

was left out and what we were able to contribute when sharing our findings. This will help to identify common grounds and pending issues in the field at a given time. Our research community has matured enough to be able to do so.

In more general terms, the development of our own theoretical frameworks is still incipient and indebted to proposals from other regions. In fact, where such local frameworks do exist, they are often overlooked in the literature in favor of theories developed elsewhere. In addition, researchers in other regions seldom recognize or cite the significant body of scientific research on reading and writing in Latin America, which at best is exoticized (NAVARRO, in press). These dynamics are neither individual nor spontaneous, but rather are a manifestation of the structural conditions of unequal distribution of the possibilities of knowledge generation at the global level (MIGNOLO, 2010), and lead to colonial citation patterns that should be challenged, rather than just assumed as being correct (CANAGARAJAH, 2002; LILLIS *et al.*, 2010). Latin America is a good starting point for carrying out counter-hegemonic actions.

Regarding methodology, it is still infrequent to include explicit and rigorous procedures of what is called methodological integrity (LEVITT, 2019), such as auditing, expert consultation, member checks or inter-rater reliability, depending on the type of study. Similarly, inevitable research biases must be critically considered, for instance when assessing the impact of our own teaching initiatives, when we project our assumptions, prejudices and even well-intentioned aspirations onto the research subjects, or when using *a priori* categories that may not fit well into data analysis.

As for quantitative studies, it is necessary to explain how basic data collection instruments, such as rubrics and surveys, are developed, and the relevance and rationale of the selected statistical tests, as well as the representativeness and generalizability (COOPER, 2019) of the findings. The exploration of complementary and mixed methods, and the triangulation of diverse data. is vital to confirm or adjust hypotheses, while concepts informing our instruments and procedures (genre, assessment, cohesion, learning, and so on) must be theoretically substantiated. In summary, we do not need to be methodologists, but it is urgent that we move from a more or less implicit choice of methods to a well-founded and rigorous construction of a methodology.

Furthermore, we must regularly consider ethical dimensions in our research. It is important to consider the relationship we establish with the investigated subjects (how do we safeguard their freedom to not participate if they are our students?) and to protect their right to be informed, to be treated with respect and without stigmatization – both as individuals and their texts – and to withdraw from the research if they wish. Some of these ethical aspects are linked to theoretical and epistemological dimensions; literacy teaching and research still show deficit perspectives (O'SHEA *et al.*, 2016) on the way students read and write, remedial and non-structural actions to address literacy, and (false) “crisis narratives” of writing and education (RUSSELL, 2002) in order to account for different phenomena, such as the expansion of access to higher education and the diversification of the ways of thinking, acting and communicating in society.

On the other hand, international co-authorship is still scarce, both among Latin American authors and between Latin American authors and authors with affiliation outside the region. Collaboration and co-authorship between Hispanic American and Brazilian authors are also infrequent (BAZERMAN, 2016), although this issue aims to make contributions in this regard. Another aspect related to the humanities and social sciences deserves attention. Collaborative research between actors with legitimate full and peripheral roles (principal investigators, research assistants, interviewers, consultants, teachers/professors), which is essential to account for a complex phenomenon such as literacy, is increasingly common in the region. However, there is still resistance to accept the idea of including all the participating authors in our books, articles and presentations, which in turn limits the recognition of this collective effort in the authors' list.



These potential gaps do not limit the extraordinary development of Latin American studies of reading and writing in higher education over the last two decades. It could even be claimed that some of these gaps are not exclusive to our region but are characteristic of reading and writing research in general. In any case, these are key research aspects that we could collectively discuss and address in the years to come.

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