

Reading and Writing in the Common Basic Cycle (CBC): A Memoir of Experiences in a Semiology Course

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Over the past decades, the Semiology course at Universidad de Buenos Aires, led by Dr. E. Narvaja de Arnoux, has evolved significantly in its approach to teaching reading and writing. Initially introduced in 1985 as “Semiology and Discourse Analysis,” the course aimed to foster theoretical reflection on languages and textual analysis within the first year in the social sciences and humanities undergraduate majors. Early challenges included updating faculty training to align with emerging discourse analysis theories and addressing gaps in students’ reading and writing skills. In response, a research project was launched to diagnose and address these issues, leading to the development of a ‘Reading and Writing Workshop’ integrated into the curriculum. This workshop, now a mandatory part of the course, focuses on improving students’ analytical skills through diverse texts and discourses. Ongoing research and pedagogical adjustments have expanded the course’s scope, including collaborations with regional universities and continued faculty development to enhance teaching practices in reading and writing.

Over two decades, the course of Semiology, part of the Common Basic Cycle (CBC) of Universidad de Buenos Aires and led by Dr. E. Narvaja de Arnoux, developed a systematic approach for teaching reading and writing.¹ This approach was based on research and theoretical discussions of the practices that are central for student learning at the beginning of higher education. This work reviews the story of how this space was collectively built.²

1 Translators’ note: The first year of studies at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, which is introductory and preparatory in nature. It includes some subjects common to the entire university, along with others that are specific to different degree programs.

2 This memoir was part of the panel “Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Relation to Reading, Writing, and Oral Practices” and specifically reviews aspects related to the panel’s theme.

First Stage: Retaking the Critical Line in Language Studies

This course started in 1985 under the name “Semiology and Discourse Analysis” as part of the initial requirements for programs in the social sciences and humanities. Its main objective was—and still is—to promote:

- Theoretical reflection on languages and discursivity, and
- Textual analysis from the perspective of the sciences of language.

The first period of working on the course was marked by two institutional issues that needed to be addressed as a result of the context surrounding the course when it began. On the one hand, we had to deal with several different sections largely taught by novice instructors who were trained in grammatical reflection and in the description of phenomena characteristic to sentence-based linguistic analysis, or under the framework of literary theory and criticism.³ The majority of the instructors did not have previous academic training with textual problems, the connection between discourse practices and social practices, or the contributions made by discourse analysis to understanding historical processes. This situation led us—during this initial era developing the course—to implement permanent updates and reflections for the faculty, who during annual colloquiums advanced their initial training on the contributions of the sciences of language to understanding social discourses.

Faculty training was connected to a society which was moving away from a period of dictatorship and therefore during those years was very committed to public universities. The expectation of both faculty and students was that the university should resume the educational practices with the quality and critical thinking of the pre-dictatorship period. In our case, we had to recover the research traditions on diverse languages, which had been crystalized in a journal whose objects of study ranged from comics to political discourse—the journal *Lenguajes*,⁴ where Oscar Traversa, Oscar Steinberg, Eliseo Verón, and Sofía

3 Some instructors conducted studies on discursive problems or about different languages, but those were the minority.

4 The journal *Lenguajes*, published by the Argentine Association of Semiotics, began publication in 1974. Juan Carlos Indart, Oscar Steinberg, Oscar Traversa, and Eliseo Verón formed its editorial committee. The journal defined its specific field as that of the “social languages,” the field of social production of meaning, with a particular emphasis on “mass communication.” Against the so-called “sociology of culture” or “mass communication research,” *Lenguajes* claimed that “The so-called ‘cultural’ phenomena cannot be considered as isolated domains. If, instead of using one of these expressions, we talk about the social production of meaning, it is because we think that meaning-making ... cannot be isolated from the functioning of society as a whole” (*Lenguajes*, Editorial Committee, 1974, p. 8). In this context, they developed a critique of what they considered four reductionisms: contentism, aestheticism, technologism, and economism.

Fisher, among others, participated. It was also important to recover the first theoretical outlines on discourse analysis in Argentina, developed in 1973–74 by the faculty from the General Linguistics course, led by Luis Prieto, from the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters.

This double demand, with the theoretical framework of these courses at its core, put the initial focus of the faculty on elaborating materials in the form of booklets. These booklets presented a selection and adaptation of theoretical texts that, in turn, put instructors and students in contact with the discursive universe of the sciences of language, along with proposed examples and exercises. Among the latter, we favored texts reclaiming the historical path brutally interrupted by the dictatorship. Both were aimed at supporting the faculty's labor and were useful for conducting a critical review of the recent past to recover the different traditions of resistance through analytical tools developed in the 1970s and the 1980s. As for the study of literature, at the time it was preferred to work with primary sources and a selection that promoted an ideological reading of the material, seeking to deconstruct the discourse's own mechanisms.

This task involved not only selecting appropriate literature but also adapting certain sources, translating texts for internal circulation and, lastly, disseminating the theoretical frameworks with which we wanted to work among other contexts and national universities so that the conversation on language and discursivity could also be held beyond our course.⁵

In broad terms, the same criteria are still being applied. Comics, journalistic, political, and historical discourses, and manifestos are included for students to read and analyze. The selection of this range of discourses is based on the idea that social sciences and humanities students—who are the target of our course—need to be readers of more than just academic discourses—included in the theoretical literature of the course. Importantly, they also need to be readers of social discourses relevant to studying various disciplines, including historical documents, media content, and cultural texts. These are essential for training future graduates to be critical readers in their respective fields.

New Challenges Posed by Reading and Writing Issues

This first period of work on this initiative, between 1985 and 1987, was very rich in discussions and debates, especially regarding research. Its challenges are now a matter of colorful discussions with our current faculty, many of whom were

5 In these first years, alongside disseminating literature, the course's faculty taught training courses at the Argentine universities of Morón, Mar del Plata, San Juan, La Pampa, and Comahue.

our first students back in those days. However, despite the positive valuation of our efforts, the work in the classrooms forced us to deal with problems for which we were not sufficiently prepared. They were mainly problems with reading literature along with writing problems arising from exams.

With the aim of finding appropriate answers to such problems, at the same time that the continuous faculty training process took place—in 1987—part of the faculty began the first research project.⁶ The goals were to elaborate the tools necessary to diagnose our students' problems with reading and writing and to develop a framework for a pedagogical proposal to address reading and writing as practices in higher education.

In theoretical terms, the contributions from cognitive psychology that dealt with reading and writing processes were, at that moment, insufficient to approach complex texts. In our field, most studies were oriented towards early language acquisition and the dominant paradigms did not provide many answers to guide the complex cognitive and discursive processes faced by novice university students. The contributions from the science of education were not very specific; we believed that the text comprehension techniques, which in those years were dominant in the field—e.g., synaptic pictures, content diagrams, concept maps, and underlining—should be complemented with specific knowledge related to the texts that students must read and produce in their courses. At this level of schooling, however, reading and writing could not be taught in an exclusively *operational* way. On the contrary, we believed that they should be supported by reflections on practice and with dialogue that utilized theories which describe the socio-discursive functionalities of the texts read and written by university students. Lastly, from the domain of empirical research, there were no exhaustive diagnoses systematically describing students' difficulties. Based on these aspects, the first research project was aimed at defining those difficulties, categorizing the problems, and starting to systematize the ways of collaboratively solving them while broadening existing approaches and theoretical frameworks.

In those years, the issue of reading and writing in higher education was addressed, in the CBC, in an initiative from the University Extension Division called "Study Skills Workshop." Students of all the programs had the option to attend this space, led by faculty from science of education and semiology. As a result of the previously mentioned research project, they incorporated

6 UBACyT project "Applying principles of textual linguistics and psycholinguistics to reading and writing instruction in high school and higher education." Principal Investigator: Prof. Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux. Members: Mariana di Stefano, Analía Reale, and María Cecilia Pereria. Executing Unit: Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Institute of Linguistics, Universidad de Buenos Aires. Project No.: UBACyT FI-031. Years: 1987-1989.

contributions from textual linguistics, linguistic theory of enunciation, and psycholinguistics into the existing paradigm of study skills. We assessed the descriptions provided by these disciplines and analyzed the processes of production and reception of academic discourse in order to develop a pedagogical approach that would promote reflection on the discursive features of texts. This initiative also recovered the long-standing tradition that workshops had in our country, especially the projects produced for other educational levels or focused on other genres, among which we want to emphasize Nicolás Bratosevich's work and that of the group Grafein—formed by, among others, Maite Alvarado. The work of the research team also resulted in the elaboration of pedagogical materials for students (di Stefano et al., 1987) and the activity's name being changed to "Reading and Writing Workshop."

Additionally, the results of the first diagnoses and the theoretical reflection which emerged from its analysis led us to conclude that there was a need for this optional, extracurricular workshop space to be progressively incorporated into the course of Semiology. That is, the curricular space within the Common Basic Cycle focused on reflecting about language; in that way, the workshops were to be framed within a disciplinary field and be mandatory for all the students of social sciences and humanities programs, not only for those students who had serious difficulties. The research reports submitted to the administration of the Common Basic Cycle enabled the implementation of the workshop space within the course—in 1990, one of the university's site was selected and the course was administered to all of its students. The scope of this experience grew every year, as well as the number of university sites where the workshop was taught. This process ended in 2001, when the CBC assigned six credit hours to the course. Since then, all our students have a Reading and Writing Workshop, taught in parallel to the lectures, but in smaller groups for a more personalized experience.

While the development of this workshop was occurring, it is important to note that the 1990s were marked by the growth of existing research initiatives and the elaboration of specific pedagogical and reading materials on the problems and topics addressed in the course. On the one hand, we began the publication of, among other works, what today is known as *Enciclopedia Semiológica* [Semiology Encyclopedia], whose first volume was *Paratexto*, by Maite Alvarado, published in 1994. It was a joint publication by the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters and the Semiology faculty of the Common Basic Cycle. This collection, which is still published by EUDEBA, now has thirteen volumes, some of which have been written by our faculty-researchers, such as the work *La Explicación* [The Explanation], by Bertha Zamudio and Ana Atorresi.

On the other hand, new research projects were also initiated during this period. A group led by Bertha Zamudio and later by Roberto Marafioti studied argumentation and its teaching.⁷ Another interdisciplinary team, formed by researchers from the Institute of Linguistics (Faculty of Philosophy and Letters) and Psychology faculty of the CBC, resumed the studies of reading and writing problems experienced by new students.⁸ This work, as well as subsequent projects led by E. Narvaja de Arnoux,⁹ allowed us to design tools which focused on certain discursive aspects used for assessing students' performance and to define more precisely the existing difficulties of students in order to test different strategies for solving them.

Contributions of Reading and Writing Research

Some studies addressed students' *note taking*. They examined how previously trained students recorded information in reading notes of polemic argumentative texts. In their notes, some students selected excerpts that allowed them to recall the argumentative structure, while others developed a narrative, demonstrating two ways of representing the texts in question (Arnoux & Alvarado, 1997). Additionally, after comparing the behavior of more skilled with less skilled students, they found that the former were able to develop a complete note entry, displaying confronted positions through various graphic tools, while the latter stopped writing the entry note in the parts that were most controversial—the densest parts of the text. This work allowed us to

7 UBACYT U016 project "The role of social representations in learning argumentation for the development of critical thinking." Principal investigator (PI): Bertha Zamudio; Co-PI: Roberto Marafioti. Three-year Project (2004-2007). UBACYT-U017 "Rhetorical skills and critical thinking in learning argumentation." UBACyT Two-year project UO17, RS 5027/2000. UBACYT-AU14 project "Self-reflective learning of argumentative skills." Universidad de Buenos Aires. PI: Bertha Zamudio. RS 3435/2000. UBACYT AU-01 Project "The impact of orality in the development of argumentative skills." Universidad de Buenos Aires. PI: Bertha Zamudio. Project No.: CB001, File 3880/97, Appendix 8.1. (1998-1999).

8 1992/-94. UBACyT Project "Reading and composing programs in the first year of undergraduate. An Interdisciplinary psychological-semiological approach." PI: Prof. Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux and BA Jorge Freiria. Executing Unit: Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Institute of Linguistics, Universidad de Buenos Aires. Project No.: UBACyT CB-005.

9 1998/2000. UBACyT Project "Reading and writing: psycholinguistic processes and social practices." PI: Prof. Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux. Executing Unit: Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Institute of Linguistics, Universidad de Buenos Aires. Project No.: UBACyT: TL-02 1995/-97. UBACyT Project: "Impact of metadiscourse operations in the processes of reading comprehension and writing production." PI: Prof. Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux. Executing Unit: Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Institute of Linguistics, Universidad de Buenos Aires. Project No.: UBACyT CB-002.

identify those parts of the text which posed the most difficult grammatical challenges for students, which were those related to the domain of negation. In those segments, highly skilled readers unfolded their notes and went back through them; the other students, in turn, misinterpreted the text or excluded those parts from their notes (Arnoux & Alvarado, 1998).

The study of *underlining* of argumentative texts revealed a tendency to select segments that, as a whole, enabled a rather expository or narrative representation of the text organization, as if students thought of it as a textbook (Arnoux & Alvarado, 1999).

Other studies on reading issues requested students to write presentations about the sources read. On that occasion, we assessed *the impact of previous knowledge*. Despite working as a facilitator in some cases, when previous knowledge differed from what the complex argumentative source was presenting, students tended to project their previous knowledge without considering the new information provided by the text, thus misinterpreting the sources (di Stefano & Pereira, 1999).

In all cases, reading was assessed upon *writing*, but we also conducted *evaluations focused on writing itself*. Research on the *student notes genre* uncovered differences between notes from a narrative text and notes from expositive texts (Arnoux & Alvarado, 1999).

Other studies were centered on *source integration*, a common practice in university. A part of this work was focused on students with little past training in producing expositive-argumentative texts based on readings. We examined the difficulties for assigning enunciative responsibility in polyphonic discourses and the problems for building argumentative orientations. In terms of sequential structuring, we found a tendency by students to incorporate excerpts of the assigned texts without providing an articulation of the propositions therein or indicating hierarchical relations among them. Moreover, in general, the writings did not suggest the existence of a textual plan guiding global organization and revision processes, or previous knowledge on genre models (Arnoux et al., 1996).

A subsequent investigation also related to source integration showed how students with important previous training achieved integration through the transformations demanded by the activity, while less-trained students summarized the texts separately or integrated segments from one source into another with no further reformulation (Arnoux et al., 2001). This research showed the impact of previous school experience on students—in some cases, they stuck to the requested genre (in the exam, an encyclopedic entry) and were extremely careful about introducing previous knowledge based on “objective” criteria. In other cases, the student showed a strong presence, polemicizing

even with the information from the sources and entering knowledge uncontrollably (Arnoux, Nogueira, & Silvestri, 2002).

Another set of research focused on *the impact of the students' social representations in their reading and writing practices*. The representations of the task of reading a corpus were specially examined. Students tended to read in a mostly decontextualized manner, and were prone to accumulate data indiscriminately, to fail to establish relations between texts, and to add information rather than confronting or comparing it. These attitudes could not be linked to lack of previous knowledge on the texts' topics or ignorance of their authors. Instead, it was shown that students thought that reading a corpus did not imply establishing relations between texts or between text and context (di Stefano & Pereira, 1997). Regarding the representations related to writing practices in university, the study found that students were extremely concerned about creating arguments to dissent from a read text, indicating their perception of written language as the bearer of unquestionable authority. Contrastively, formal, graphic, or orthographic aspects were not found to be an area of concern (di Stefano & Pereira, 1997).

Teaching

These studies oriented the task of teaching reading and writing in the workshops and allowed us to address teacher training, the development and reformulation of material for teaching reading and writing, and the elaboration of a conceptual framework for approaching these topics.¹⁰

Regarding this framework, research led us to incorporate into our pedagogical approach the contributions on reading and writing made by different disciplines, that is:

1. Those contributions that consider reading and writing as *cognitive processes*—cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics—and that enable a reflection on the planning and revision processes, among other concerns.
2. At the same time, the contributions made by discourse analysis, enunciation theory, and argumentation theory, on the one hand, and by social psychology and sociology, on the other hand—disciplines that all conceive of reading and writing as *social practices*. In order to do this, we sought to:
 - a. Consider the particular features displayed by these practices in the institutional contexts where they are used. In the case of

10 Among others, di Stefano, & Pereira (1995), Arnoux et al. (1996), and di Stefano & Pereira (2001).

reading, we worked with extensive corpora of disciplinary texts, including diverse texts. For writing, we focused on the production of texts derived from previous readings, with the aim of developing skills for complementing and confronting sources.

- b. Consider the discursive dimension over the propositional one. This involves changing the traditional order of topics: we began by reading argumentations, where the speaker's subjectivity and stance were staged through traces that are more evident for students, and then we continued writing and reading presentations where the writer often hides their perspective in order to create a sense of objectivity.
- c. Make explicit the students' social representations in order to intervene in them when they create obstacles for understanding or producing texts.
- d. Include the sociological and historical reflection in the contents of the workshop, since they allow understanding the logic of scientific discourse production in a field, as well as the changes and conventions governing it through time (Arnoux, di Stefano, & Pereira, 2002; di Stefano & Pereira, 2001, 2004).

In relation to faculty training, our course teaches 5000 students. Therefore, expanding the activities of the workshop demanded a significant effort to orient the faculty training towards the teaching approaches that were being developed. Given that undergraduate programs do not have a specific space for reflecting about reading and writing practices, the initial efforts involved professors who not only were a part of the research team but also taught internal colloquiums, oriented the observation activities of the courses, and created guidelines for faculty to know how to address the teaching activities.

Instructor training continues up to today, because new instructors are incorporated, but we also have a specific graduate space for systematizing this important form of training. In 1996, the UNESCO Chair on Reading and Writing in Latin America was established, Universidad de Buenos Aires joined its regional network and, afterwards, implemented the Specialization Program in Reading and Writing Processes as part of an existing program of the Master's degree in discourse analysis. Both initiatives were under the authority of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters and directed by Dr. E. Narvaja de Arnoux. Other national universities have also joined the regional network (such as La Pampa, Comahue, Rosario, Tucumán, Cuyo, and Córdoba) and other undergraduate, postgraduate, and MA programs have been created, like the Master's Program in Reading and Writing at Universidad de Cuyo.

The Current Period

Nowadays, the space of Semiology at the CBC has expanded and diversified—there are now three faculty groups, one led by R. Marafioti, another by A. Rubione and the last one by E. Narvaja de Arnoux, as well as many research teams focused on reading and writing. Beginning in 2001, with the development of its workshops, a change in the global contents of the course began to brew in the courses taught by Narvaja de Arnoux. Indeed, the studies and the institutional demand related to students' reading and writing problems led us to prioritize the reflection about oral and written codes, thus adjusting the articulation between the lectures and the workshops.¹¹

As for the faculty, many of them are part of research teams, study or studied in these same graduate programs, and the youngest ones are either undergraduate research assistants for faculty who teach courses related to the sciences of language or instructor-researchers who conduct action research in their own courses. All of them actively bring their contribution to course planning, general meetings of the campus and faculty, as well as conferences and internal colloquium. Some of them have formed work teams in their teaching location, which have led to publications;¹² others work in our new research line, focused on transfer: the articulation between secondary school and university, the issue of teachers' training,¹³ and the problems of reading and writing in graduate school.¹⁴

11 The space for audiovisual language was postponed to subsequent curricular moments in each program.

12 Di Stefano, M. (Ed.) (2006). *Metáforas en uso* [Metaphors in use]. Biblos; Klein, I. (Ed.) (2007). *El taller del escritor universitario* [The university writer workshop]. Prometeo; Reale, A., & Vitale, A. (1995). *La argumentación. Una aproximación retórico-discursiva* [Argumentation. A rhetorical-discursive approach]. Ars Editorial; Vitale, A. (2002). *El estudio de los signos. Peirce y Saussure* [The study of signs. Peirce and Saussure]. EUDEBA; Zamudio, B., Rolando, L., & Ascione, A. (Eds.) (2002). *Argumentación, pensamiento crítico y cognición* [Argumentation, critical thinking, and cognition]. Oficina de Publicaciones, CBC, Universidad de Buenos Aires; among others.

13 2004/2006. UBACyT Project of Social Urgency "Towards a systematic teaching of reading and writing in high school and in the first year of the teaching education programs in areas with vulnerable populations in the City of Buenos Aires and its surroundings." PI: Prof. Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux. Executing Unit: Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Institute of Linguistics, Universidad de Buenos Aires. Project No.: UBACyT F-703. 2005-2007. Project for Supporting the Development of Secondary Education "Reading and writing in high school: Design and implementation of differential lesson plans." Program of Secondary Education Enhancement, Ministry of Education of Argentina. PI: Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux.

14 2005-2008. PICT Project "Writing and knowledge production in graduate education". Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica [Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica], SECyT. Project No.: 04/14084. PI: Prof. Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux.

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Reflection

The article—with the omissions and constraints imposed by the brevity of the work—narrates the story of a semiology course of the Common Basic Cycle at Universidad de Buenos Aires, led by Dr. Elvira Narvaja de Arnoux. The course began in 1985 and was still running in 2006 when this article was presented at Universidad Nacional del Centro.

The article focuses on approaches to reading and writing practices, something that was a challenge for the university in the context of the return to democracy and that continues to be central to the critical development of young adults. The research activities, development, and teaching described in the article helped to strengthen the reflection on discourse and gave birth to courses and workshops that continued to be updated and used in proposals in other universities' graduate and undergraduate programs in the country and across Latin America. The article also describes the important pedagogical material and research produced by the course's faculty, who always strove to articulate theory and practices regarding teaching education, research, and students.

With time came new developments, so it is appropriate to complement this commentary with the proposals that respond to current cultural changes. That semiology course, today led by Dr. Mariana di Stefano, has faced several challenges over the intervening period. Reading practices have diversified and the academic discourse that young adults need to master in university life is increasingly distanced from their everyday interacting modes and their communicative practices. As well, new technologies demand approaches that take the specificities of multimodal discursivity into account and that address the specific conditions of production and circulation.

These and other developments have caused faculty to deepen the study of discursive practices from a conceptual framework that takes into account the

contributions from discourse analysis and glottopolitics, a framework that enables the questioning of social discourses, genres, and expected norms, while also considering the historical dimensions and the political values. Recent studies from this same team of researchers also deserve to become part of the global synthesis of new teaching and development proposals.

– María Cecilia Pereira