CHAPTER 9.

ACADEMIC LITERACIES IN THE SOUTH: WRITING PRACTICES IN A BRAZILIAN UNIVERSITY

By Désirée Motta-Roth
Federal University of Santa Maria (Brazil)

Paulo Freire (2000, p. 46), the renowned Brazilian educator, once stated that "one learns to read by reading." To understand what writing does, we need to experience interaction mediated by writing. In this essay I focus on the importance of learners' participation in academic activities for the development of academic literacies: the material and symbolic acts that (re)produce verified knowledge, associated with higher education. I will give an overview of the writing practices at the Federal University of Santa Maria (Universidade Federal de Santa Maria or UFSM), where I have been investigating and teaching academic writing since 1994. The essay starts with a brief history and mission statement about the university. The second section brings a general description of writing at UFSM in relation to why and in relation to what goals this writing occurs. In the third section, I analyze English undergraduate and Applied Linguistics graduate students' answers to a questionnaire about their literacy practices. The essay closes with a description of the principles for a writing program and a note on ambitions and frustrations regarding writing pedagogy in my local context.

THE SIZE, BRIEF HISTORY, AND MISSION OF UFSM

Founded on December 14, 1960, UFSM[1] (http://www.ufsm.br/) is located in an area of 4,593 acres on the outskirts of Santa Maria,[2] a city of 270,000 inhabitants, in the geographical center of Rio Grande do Sul, the southern-most state of Brazil.[3]

Through its 152 years, Santa Maria has become an important regional reference for agricultural and services sectors, especially medical and educational

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institutions. The city has education as one of its driving forces: one federal university and seven colleges for higher education, a school system (preschool to high school) that includes 80 city schools, 38 state schools, four federal schools, and a large number of private schools.

In its 50 years, UFSM has become paramount to the city's economic, cultural and social organization. Its mission is to construct and impart knowledge in order to make people able to innovate and contribute to the sustainable development of society as a whole, with the vision to become recognized as an institution of excellence. In the campus (total area of 4,593 acres, with 3,439,697 square feet of edification), 16,663 students pursue a degree in 10 colleges and 76 undergraduate programs in all areas (from Medicine to Education, from English Teaching to Business) and more than 50 graduate programs, taught by 1,397 professors organized in 200 research groups. Although UFSM is of medium importance and size if compared to major Brazilian institutions like the University of São Paulo,[4] some programs such as the ones in the Chemistry or the Rural Sciences (Agriculture and Veterinary) departments are among the best in the country.

Originally a rural university for the study and development of the local agricultural economic system and the field of medical services, UFSM has developed competencies in the areas of humanities, science, and technology. Although scientific publication and technological patent processing are two aspects of Brazilian academic life that need to grow exponentially in comparison to other developing countries like Argentina, publication and authorship have received a lot of attention. UFSM, in particular, has a policy to foster publication not only in Portuguese (Brazil's official language) but also in foreign languages. It allocates budget for each unit according to publication indexes, among other factors.[5]

WRITING AT UFSM: WHY, ABOUT WHAT, IN WHAT LANGUAGES, IN RELATION TO WHAT GOALS?

In departments with post-graduation programs, undergraduate writing for publishing is strongly advised if not demanded. Even though Brazil has an established tradition of publication in Portuguese and of translation of international material into Portuguese, UFSM departments tend to encourage reading of material in English or other languages (e.g., French or Spanish), as a way to keep updated with international research. Furthermore, some post-graduation programs (e.g., Chemistry) receive PhD candidates from other continents, so English is often used as the lingua franca in classes, labs, and publications.

Evidently the choice of the language is dependent on the object of study and research. While publishing in English may be the norm in Electrical Engineering or Physics, in the School of Arts and Languages, where a teaching degree in Portuguese is offered, reading theoretical/professional material in Portuguese is the norm. Academic activities for professors working at the Post-Graduation Program in Literature and Language Studies include publishing mostly theoretical books aimed at a readership in Brazil and Portugal, with few research papers in academic journals or in a foreign language.

In the Department of Foreign Languages, with teaching degrees in English and Spanish, and special courses in French, German, and Italian, research papers appear mainly in journals in Portuguese and Spanish. Writing in Portuguese is more comfortable, and the goal is to establish a local readership for the work of nationals and Latin-American colleagues, so that the Brazilian literature can be used as reference for further development of the area.

Although publication in international Applied Linguistics journals is a career asset, publishing in Portuguese is sometimes an affirmative action, according to email interviews with Brazilian applied linguists (Motta-Roth, 2002) about factors that constrained their academic writing:

> 20[6] - Obviously having a text accepted for publication in a prestigious international journal lends high status to the researcher, but in a new area such as ours I still think we have to democratically impart the results of our research projects in Brazil to Brazilian academics and school teachers.

> 28 - I'm convinced that especially in applied areas it is more important to publish in Portuguese in order to give Brazilians access to research results done about Brazilian issues. If not, you'll end up having to translate your own texts so that your work becomes known in Brazil.

In a large developing country such as Brazil,[7] creating a sense of disciplinary community for fostering theoretical elaboration is a political move, as is publishing in the native language.

> 29 - Many times, it's a one-way street. Almost no foreign researcher makes an effort to know what is being done in Brazil (. . .), while we are supposed to know what's going on in foreign countries (like US or UK). Many times what you see abroad is a concept that has been developed here first,

> but since it has not been published in English, people do not acknowledge its previous existence.

While researchers in many areas aim at publishing in English,[8] applied linguists often feel that circulating their work in Portuguese is an act of resistance to "academic imperialism": the hegemony of Anglophonic scientific publication that legitimates research paradigms sometimes without further questioning (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999, p. 31).

This "resistance" view can be disputed on several grounds and seldom extrapolates to students' discourse on writing. In fact, the average undergraduate has a relatively commonsensical view of the function of writing in life. A more articulate perspective that conceives writing as "social participation" is shown either by students who take part in undergraduate research opportunity programs with scientific initiation grants or graduate students doing research for their theses/dissertations. The answers to the survey conducted at the Reading and Writing Research and Teaching Laboratory (REWRITE) with undergraduate students from the English Teacher Education program and graduate students from the Applied Linguistics Program at UFSM are the focus of the next section.

WHERE AND WHAT STUDENTS WRITE AT UFSM: DISCIPLINES, GENRES, ASSIGNMENTS

Students have variable perceptions of how writing mediates their engagement in university activities and how these activities are significant to them. Perceptions of the role of writing in one's academic life depend on the model of writing and on the kind of learners' engagement in the activity/genre system that constructs their university environment.

Two very distinct kinds of undergraduate students' perceptions of the university arise: 1) learning mediated by teachers in regular classes and lectures or 2) education mediated by symbolic and material research activities. The kind of insertion students have in the discipline depends on how much they seek research opportunities and mentoring, beyond the lecture halls and classrooms.

"One has to live the process in order to be able to understand and practice it" (Freire, 2000, p. 46), as indicated by the results of a survey carried out at REWRITE with 41 students divided among four years of the English Teaching Degree Program. Questions regarded how often, about what, for what purpose, and in which situations students wrote, their greatest difficulties, and the relevance of writing activities in Portuguese and English to their everyday university or professional lives.

In their analysis of these data, Assis-Brasil and Marcuzzo (2009) argue that these undergraduate students have a clear perspective on the everyday written genres, since they identify them by such names as "e-mails," "letters," "notes" or "e-scraps." When referring to the production of academic texts, however, general terms emerge such as "texts" or "assignments" (p.171). For the authors, this distinction would demonstrate that these students know the genre-set pertaining to everyday life but lack metaawareness about academic genres.

Alternatively, I believe that, even though they mention everyday genres, these students tend to think of writing as a mechanical skill whose general aim is to "to express oneself" or "to communicate with others." There is no concept of genre systems exactly because of the lack of a general sense of literacy practices: the knowledge of the social practices mediated by the use of the written word (Lea, 1999, p. 106), of how living is mediated by tools and signs (texts) (Vygotsky, 2001).

First-year students express an imprecise perception of how often, when and why they write:

> 1/2 - Every day at work, in class, at home[9]
>
> 1/3 - Normally when I think of something that's controversial or interesting.
>
> 1/11 - To communicate with people that live far away

One could ask: to acquire vocabulary in what genre? To communicate with people in what capacity/role, for what purpose?

Most answers about writing situations and objectives are general: "chats" (1/1), "e-mail" (2/8), "assignments" (3/4), "notes" (4/1). At the time of the survey these students had not taken a course in academic writing and many expressed their frustration when trying to write an assignment because they lacked expressive resources. Although a writing course would certainly have made a difference, engagement in actual social research practices could have built awareness of the complex process through which written texts construct disciplinary knowledge. It could also help them understand how the very act of engaging in written practices specific to the discipline constructs a particular world of meanings, a particular mode of ratiocination (Bazerman, 1988).

These students have a "study skills model of writing" focused on "surface features of language form in terms of grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc," so that writing is considered a "technical skill" (Lea, 1999, p. 106).

This unfortunately is the writing model generally adopted in Brazilian schools and at UFSM, with few exceptions, as I will explain in the last section of this paper. In fact, writing difficulties are credited to lack of vocabulary and poor command of grammar and text organization skills, showing a structural perception of writing as the application of knowledge about language structures (Assis-Brasil & Marcuzzo, 2009, p. 173).

To understand complex academic writing practices and the role of writing in their everyday and academic lives, these students would need a model of "academic literacies" (Lea, 1999, p. 107): the social uses of alphabetical competencies by those who have appropriated reading and writing and have incorporated the social practices that demand them (Soares, 1999).

No respondent mentioned the specific literacy practices or genre systems that construct their field: essays for course assignments, articles originated in course papers, book reviews published in undergraduate journals with an appraisal of the literature in the area, teaching activities for teaching practice, research proposals submitted for approval, reports to present research data, final graduation papers, conference abstracts, e-mails with requests (e.g., for the copy of an article, for submitting a paper in a conference), letters and résumés for grant or job application, etc.

In contrast to this sample, another group of students from REWRITE were interviewed: two fourth-year students who hold a research scholarship in the English Teacher Education program, six master's students, and six PhDs students in the Applied Linguistics Program (who are either about to or have recently graduated). Of the seventeen questionnaires, fourteen were returned.

These students engage as authors in the complexity of academic written social practices, as part of the knowledge construction system at UFSM. They mobilize a repertoire of academic genres that allow them to negotiate a position as newcomers to the discipline.

The undergraduate students seem to have a precise view of what counts as a writing situation:

> 4/4 - I use writing in the university context: a) course assignments, b) tests, c) teaching material, d) teaching practice and research reports for scientific initiation, e) papers for conferences, f) administrative demands, e.g., a memo to ask permission to waive prerequisite(s) for an advanced course . . . I also write in everyday practices, such as i) notes for family members back home, j) messages in MSN, facebook, or to friends, . . .m) shopping lists.

They understand what writing does and how it does it in different contexts in terms of roles/relationships/purposes for the academic genres mentioned: "e-mail— to classmates—to make appointments for study meetings."

Post-graduate students have to practice academic writing on a daily basis and hold a clear perspective on the repertoire of genres that construct their professional activities.

> M/4 - I have been writing final papers for the post-graduation courses which later become articles that I submit to journals . . . later on they are edited and become parts of the thesis.[10]

> Dr/2 - In my teaching practice I write class plans, teaching materials . . ., tests and exams . . . As a researcher, I write book reviews…, research proposals, reports, memos, abstracts and papers to present results of my research in conferences, research articles . . . .

Although only eight respondents had taken the academic writing course I teach, those who had and were committed to research seemed to have the most articulate sense of how writing mediates their participation in the professional field:

> M/2 - . . . .writing is a way to open a niche from where to speak out in the academic environment. . . .

> M3 - . . .I write to maximize my CV and demarcate my presence in the academic environment.

Participation in research literacies generates a sense of authorship, which is one of the main attainments in academic writing teaching, as discussed below.

CONCLUSION: AMBITIONS AND FRUSTRATIONS, AND AN APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING

The academic writing course whose principles are described here has been offered once a year since 1994 at REWRITE. Its three objectives are: 1) to raise novice academic writers' awareness of academic literacy practices, 2) to develop their reading and writing competencies by implementing a writing cycle that

focuses on their own (real) work, 3) to encourage learners to develop discourse analysis abilities so that they can continue improving their written competencies throughout their academic lives in a cycle of reading/writing/revising/editing/publishing.

The course has been developed from three principles. First, academic literacies obtain from reading and writing: one attains a literacy state/condition by appropriating technologies to interact with the social context as reader/writer in order to participate in the knowledge society (Soares, 1999). People learn how to use language because they learn to interact in their social context (Halliday, 1994).

Second, one learns to write by engaging in literacy practices, by becoming an author. The course aims at developing learners' authorship by encouraging them to explore disciplinary literacy practices and fostering writing within events and genres that structure the academic life in which they want to participate. Authorship—as the writer's prerogative and responsibility to choose the aim, content, style, and readership of the text (Ivanic, 1998, pp. 26, 219, 341) —stems from the experience of this awareness. The concept of literacy(ies) depends on that of authorship.

Third, one learns to interact through language by becoming a discourse analyst (McCarthy & Carter, 1994, p.134), by developing a sense of how discursive practices are situated as genres (Bazerman, 2005). Students analyze the connections between contextual features (activity, identity, relations as well as the role performed by text in the situation) and their respective linguistic realizations (expression of content, instantiation of relationships between interlocutors, and organization of text).

The writing cycle taught in the course completes in three steps:

1. Context Exploration—collect genre exemplars, observe and report research practices, genres, concepts and problems from their labs (Which roles does language play in knowledge production practices in your discipline?);
2. Text Exploration—learners analyze genre systems for referential meanings (that make intelligible the activity system of their context), for interpersonal meanings (that represent the roles and relationships of the participants of that activity system), and for language itself (text form and content) (How does language construct context and vice versa?); and
3. Text Production—learners write, revise, and edit their own as well as others' exemplars of relevant genres (How is language used for engagement and participation in academic literacy practices? Who publishes where? Who reads what? Do you intend to publish your text? How can you do that?)

In the Context Exploration phase, learners go back to their laboratories to interview colleagues and advisors to identify relevant research topics, concepts, methodological approaches, and academic genres to structure their work. Learners already working on their dissertations are supposed to see their advisors in order to establish the writing priority for the course: to concentrate on writing a paper or one of their dissertation chapters (Rural Sciences learners, for example, often experience a hard time in writing their Review of the Literature chapter and tend to choose this text). The semantic map will evolve into the writing of the objectives and then into a tentative abstract that will serve as a guide to the writing of the longer text. The Text Exploration phase offers the learners the opportunity to analyze genre exemplars for referential meanings (relevant content for their research), interpersonal meanings (experienced authors' tone and style), and language itself (which linguistic choices produce these meanings, cohesion, and coherence).

We look at research articles from important journals or relevant research projects learners have identified with the help of advisors during the Context Exploration phase. The whole class analyzes each exemplar together in order to make contrasts among areas more evident and thus raise learners' awareness of language, text, and discourse features across disciplines.

Finally, in the Text Production phase learners write their drafts and bring copies, so the class reads and comments on them. As texts grow longer, we divide into revising teams and set a calendar so that every class a number of people bring their texts to be revised. After that they will have a fortnight or so to edit their texts and bring a new section or an extended version of their papers (or other genre). A textbook written especially for this course (Motta-Roth, 2001)[11] offers support for writing academic genres (explanations about aim, form, style, structure and linguistic choices).

This "Academic writing cycle"[12] is successful as long as learners are encouraged to experience disciplinary interaction as readers and writers (Russell, 1997). My academic literacy presupposes understanding how a system of written genres constructs a disciplinary context in different situations, how texts work differently in each field depending on the nature of the activities each area of study conducts and of the relations the participants maintain to produce knowledge. Awareness about the bi-directionality between text and context allows students to see how the texts they write are an integral part of academia so that they can situate their text in the system of discursive genres (Bazerman, 2005) that structure academic interactions.

One of my frustrations in relation to writing pedagogy at UFSM is the general lack of an institutional writing program that fosters undergraduate

students' engagement in material and writing research practices from their very first year. Only sometimes is a special course offered as an initiative of the central administration or in one of the specific colleges, but no writing policy has yet been devised to significantly improve our publication levels. Institutional support of an extensive and inclusive writing program would be crucial. Specifically in the Language Teaching Program, the ambition would be to integrate into the teacher education process research and writing practices in academic genres, so that future teachers begin systematic thinking and writing from their freshman year forward.

NOTES

1. I thank Fabio Nascimento for the suggestions for the manuscript.

2. More at http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Maria_(Rio_Grande_do_Sul).

3. About 680 miles from São Paulo, the major industrial and economic powerhouse of the Brazilian economy and the largest city in South America.

4. A leading institution in Latin-America and one of the 100 best universities in the world (http://www4.usp.br).

5. In 2009, UFSM had 603 articles indexed in the ISI Database and Web of Science, besides books, chapters, proceedings, etc.

6. A number identifies each interviewee.

7. The fifth largest country in the world, after Russia, Canada, China and the US, with a total area of 3,287,612 square miles.

8. The *Brazilian Journal of Medical and Biological Research* and the *Brazilian Journal of Physics* are in English.

9. Two numbers identified each respondent: the year they are studying in/their assigned number. Thus 1/3 corresponds to First year/Respondent no.3.

10. M (master's) and doctoral (PhD) students.

11. This material originally published by my laboratory has been updated, revised and extended for publication under a new title and publishing house as Motta-Roth & Hendges (2010).

12. See Motta-Roth (2009) for a detailed description of this pedagogic approach.

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