



Experience Report

Academic writing and engagement: Limitations and possibilities of preparing the final undergraduate thesis

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Abstract

This article presents data from an action research project which sought to analyze the limitations and possibilities of the final undergraduate thesis writing process. Using content analysis (BARDIN, 2010), the results highlighted the following limitations: 1) writing in textual genres needs to be practiced and encouraged regularly; 2) reading culture must be promoted from the very beginning of university. The possibilities of the study found: 1) academic writing can become an important element in the process of student engagement; 2) peer learning improved writing of the final undergraduate thesis (FUT); 3) the promotion of active learning helps in the development of the FUT; 4) the attribution of meaning to the FUT helps student autonomy, if supported by reading good reference texts.

Keywords: Academic writing, Engagement, Higher education.

Introduction

This work presents a report of an experiment conducted in a higher education institution located in Southern Brazil, as an alternative to assist undergraduates in the process of preparing their final undergraduate thesis (FUT). Based on the common dream of professors, master's and doctoral students in the education department, an alternative was created to offer academic writing workshops. Graduate students aiding and advising undergraduates has been recognized by the academic community as effective and thus has materialized the institutional principle of integration between undergraduate and graduate students. This project, which is entitled Academic Writing Workshops, arose from the need to meet the visible demands of undergraduate students when elaborating their final thesis, called TCC in Brazil (Final Undergraduate Thesis) and Final Undergraduate

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Work in other Latin American countries, according to Brancher and Oliveira (2016). Based on the proposal, the academic writing workshops began to be taught to undergraduate students in the education and social work departments by masters and doctoral students in the education graduate program, under the supervision of the professor in charge of the Education and Academic Writing course in the higher education institution where the project was developed.

The pedagogical intention of this project was to offer a working system that included the valuable possibilities of written productions, aiming to systematize the research carried out at the end of the education and social work programs. It also arose from a shared belief between professors in both departments who recognized the numerous difficulties that students face due to the academic routine in higher education, which requires them to have skills and competences in terms of what is considered "good writing" at the university level. Equally legitimate are the concerns of teachers regarding the quality of the written production of new and graduating students in education and social work in the context of university education, given the number of challenges that have yet to be overcome, especially when entering higher education.

In the face of shared concerns, a joint approach was devised to help undergraduates with regard to academic writing, as well as a way of integrating different knowledge. The idea of the workshops emerged as possible, productive, encouraging peer sharing, to qualify the writing processes.

Regarding the possible contributions to the area of language and academic research, this paper aims to portray the students' trajectory involving the different language, writing, and didactic transposition abilities. This pedagogical effort culminates in a set of knowledge transformed and adapted for the purpose of the writing the FUT. The methodological steps used to map the problems encountered, make the theoretical-methodological interrelationship explicit, based on Bakhtin's (1986) concepts. Namely, he argues that the use of language in conventional communicative contexts gives rise to a specific set of communicative purposes that establish structured forms for writing. Also, the assumptions defended by Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990), when they argue that written production happens based on the reading of different textual genres, considered to be socially consecrated ways to organize communicative activities, or the textual structure produced. Regarding the epistemological contribution, the findings may contribute to the organization of disciplinary content in order to encourage academic writing sooner, beginning the first year of undergraduate studies.

Remembering that we also firmly believe that offering diverse experiences to students, such as workshops, is a way to promote student engagement at university. Engagement in different activities, according to Salanova et al. (2009), allows one to go beyond academic findings, enabling analysis of other important dimensions of the university context (participation, sense of belonging, learning quality, and interpersonal relationships).

Thus, we understand engagement as defined by Schaufeli et al. (2013) as a positive mental state of accomplishment, related to work that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. According to the authors, vigor is characterized by high levels of energy, persistence, desire to push oneself, and mental resilience while working. Dedication refers to the feeling of being fully involved in doing the work, inspiration, pride, challenge, purpose, meaning, and enthusiasm. And lastly, absorption is characterized by being fully focused and fulfilled, feeling that time simply "flies by" and difficulty "disconnecting" from work (SCHAUFELI et al., 2013).

Taking into account all of these issues, masters and doctoral students were therefore trained by the project's coordinating professor for six months. They were taught about subjects such as grammar, syntax (HALLIDAY; MATTHIESSEN 2004; BECKER, 2014), spelling (FERREIRO, 2002; FISCHER, 2010; MORAIS, 2003), cohesion as well as coherence (FÁVERO 2000). Twelve workshop leaders (both master's and doctoral students) were trained and they worked in pairs to administer the workshops. Each pair was responsible for 4 undergraduate students. Therefore a total of 24 undergraduate students participated in the workshops. A database was then created that registered the main problems found during the workshops, highlighting the most expressive recurrences present in the students' writing. A protocol for monitoring writing performance was therefore generated in order to propose strategies for the qualification of academic writing.

The workshop leaders' work was organized based on the difficulties they encountered during the weekly one hour sessions. From the texts produced, or rather, from the writing of the FUT, as well as from the limitations expressed orally by the students during the workshop, the students were instructed how to proceed to construct a clearer and more cohesive text, more in line with standard expectations of the level of a student finishing their undergraduate studies.

The difficulties that were found came to highlight the difficulties inherent in spelling, cohesion, coherence, punctuation, agreement, accentuation, verbal rules, and vocabulary. As a result of these difficulties, pedagogical strategies were created in the workshops to minimize these limitations and maximize the available resources to improve the written texts.

This article therefore presents some results of this experiment, aiming to analyze the most significant aspects in terms of limitations and possibilities made clear by undergraduate students when writing their FUT.

2. Theoretical Concepts

Contemporary literature presents us with different perspectives and assumptions about the understanding of the meaning or concept of "academic writing". We use Myers' (1989) work that indicates academic writing is the effect generated by the use of an epistemic modality that is much more related to meanings in the informational/experiential plane than in the evaluative/interpersonal plane (WHITE, 2003). According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), a text is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be read and interpreted in different ways and its grammar reveals which system or language is spoken/written. On the other hand, Vitória (2018) states that writing has an agile and subtle socializing dynamic, because it hides its roots in a specific context, where its authors present diversified meanings and understandings, which are enriched from the personal interests of their authors as well as the lived, experienced, and shared context. In this work, academic writing was based on Mello and Vitória (2007), who added:

It is not enough to speak of the importance of reading as an anchor point on which to base possibly more qualified writing, but understood, above all, as a starting point for exercises of reflection and resignification of meanings, always associated with the interpretation of what one reads (MELLO and VITÓRIA 2007, p. 17).

According to these authors, reading and writing must permeate the student's life continuously. Moreover, it is essential that the subject finds pleasure in reading and writing that they produce. Thus, when encouraged, they will be motivated to record their ideas and intentions.

In this sense, our understanding of the academic writing to be developed in this specific work consists of writing using simple, accessible language that is nonetheless meaningful to those who read it. It should also consist of writing that respects the formalities and scientific rigor inherent in the conclusion of undergraduate study and the final undergraduate thesis.

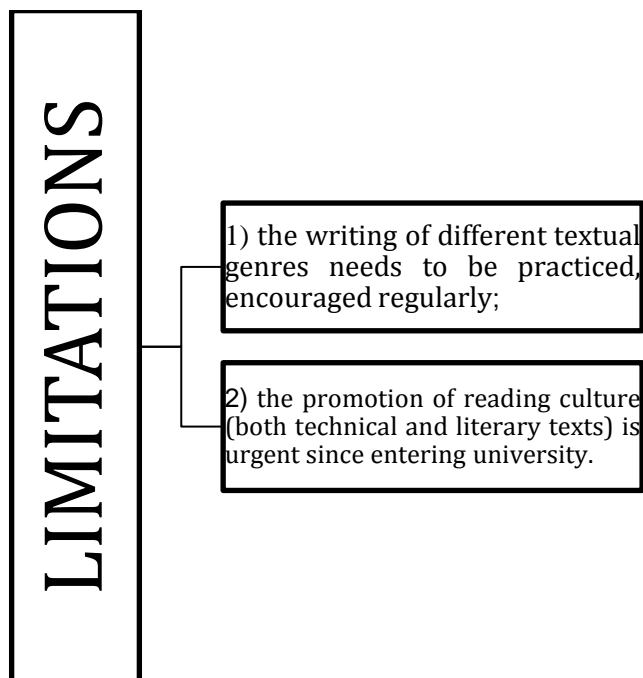
Though we know that academic writing is characterized by the production and diffusion of knowledge and scientific rigor, it must also be objective, present clear ideas, consistent argumentation, cohesion and coherence. Nonetheless, we also understand that in addition to technical content (FINN 1993), we need to engage the student in this challenge so that writing can be understood as intellectual commitment, but also as a source of pleasure and personal satisfaction. Thus, the work should be taken on by the student much more so than by the teacher and/or workshop leader, who are ready to guide and lead them without ever becoming the protagonists the culminating text of the student's undergraduate studies as a whole. From this perspective, written production in higher education has led to multiple discussions regarding teacher education and the understanding of good pedagogical practices (MONTEIRO, 2001) for writing the FUT.

3. Methodology

We chose Thiollent's (2007) presupposition for this work, which characterizes it as empirically based social research, conceived and carried out in close association with the action or resolution of a collective problem in which researchers and participants are involved in a cooperative or participatory way. According to Vergara (2000), the main characteristic of an action is the solution of a nontrivial problem involving the participation of the various actors in the process. Thus, the action developed here took place in a cooperative and collaborative manner, aiming to link theory and practice to intervene in a collective action - the creation of the FUT. In the same vein, we used the technique of content analysis (BARDIN, 2010) to examine undergraduate writings, using systematic procedures and content description, to obtain indicators (quantitative or not) to infer new knowledge concerning the conditions of current written production. Thus, this paper presents the results of this experiment, whose purpose was to analyze the most significant aspects in terms of limitations and possibilities revealed in the writing of undergraduate students producing their final undergraduate thesis. Then we present nine aspects that can be improved to better meet this exciting challenge of creating the FUT.

4. Key Findings

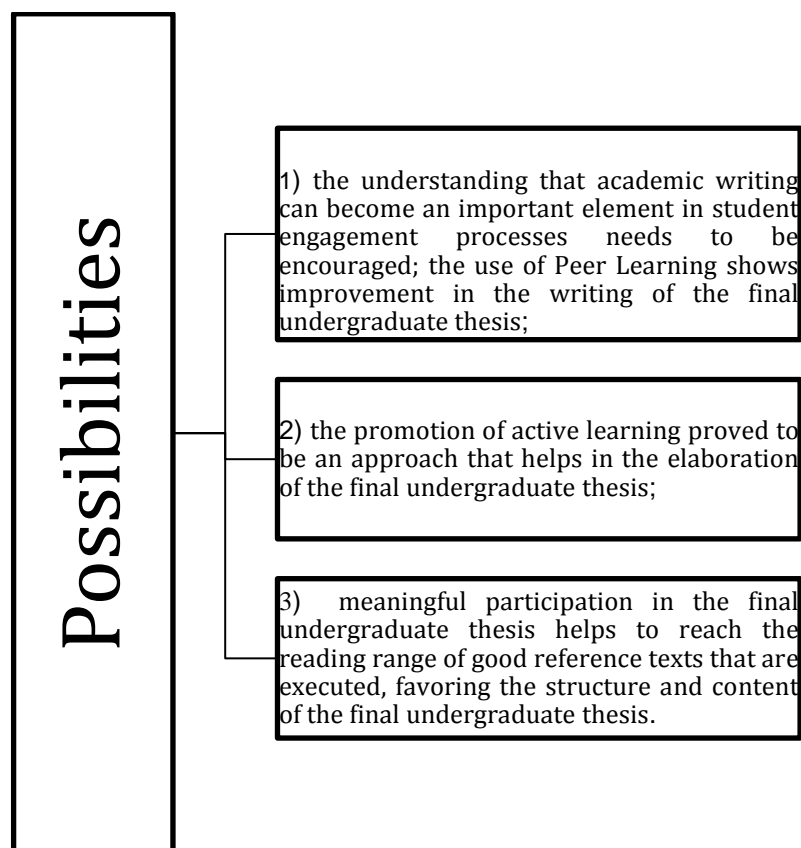
Figure 1: Main limitations



Source: elaborated by the authors

Analyzing the limitations in relation to academic writing, we realized that fostering undergraduates' reading and writing requires varied incentives ranging from encouraging reading to the practical exercise of including various writings from different textual genres. Here we can point to Vitória and Cristofoli (2013), when they emphasize that it is absolutely necessary to read various texts and submerge in their understanding, reflection and analysis, before and each time the task of writing is undertaken. By becoming familiar with different written works, although not in a reflective and conscious way, the subject is empowered and adapted to the cultural forms that convey the transmission of written information. Thus, reading emerges in this context as an effective alternative to mobilize other knowledge, as well as to improve the undergraduates oral and written vocabulary. In the words of Tardif (2008, p.21), "teaching is mobilizing a wide variety of knowledge, reusing it in work to adapt and transform it through and for the work".

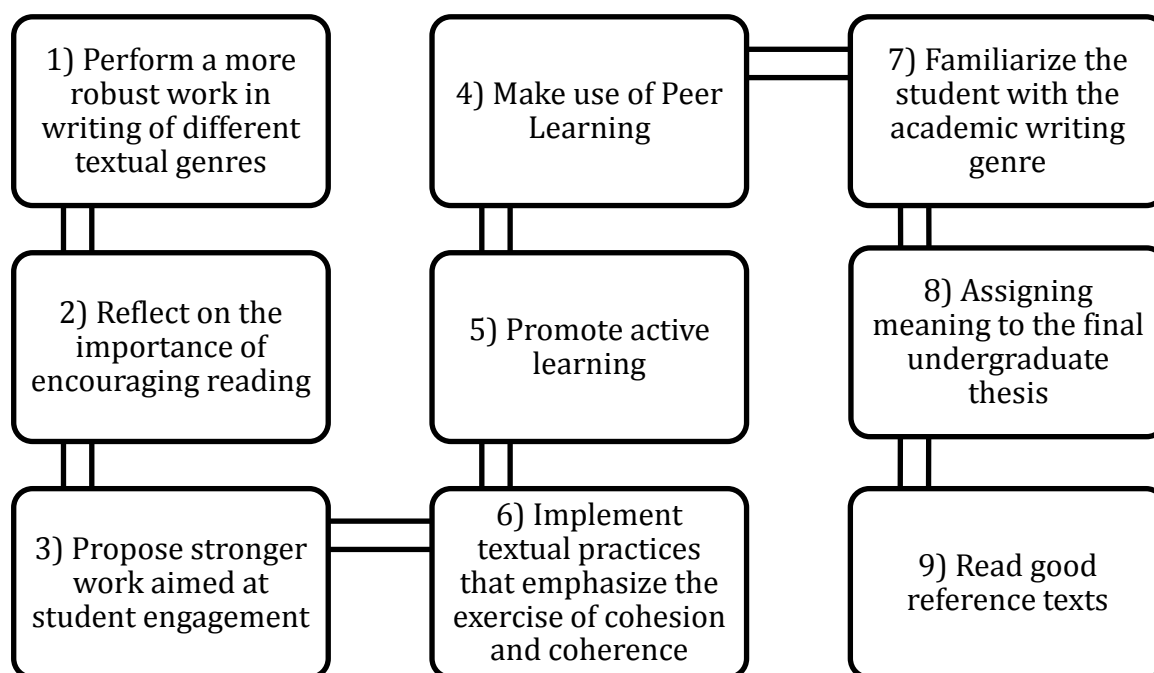
Figure 2: Main Possibilities



Source: elaborated by the authors

After identifying and analyzing the main limitations and possibilities, a new universe was unveiled. A series of opportunities began to emerge, presenting different nuances. These new notes highlighted the need to expand and enhance the objectives initially proposed, namely: to analyze limitations and possibilities. In fact, at this point we began to analyze the results through a different lens, which will be described below through nine findings that, in our understanding, require a closer look for academic writing itself. In fact doing so in future writings can ensure that academic requirements and guidelines are met and promote the development of more secure and meaningful academic writing for the undergraduates themselves. These nine findings emerged as we evaluated the writing of undergraduate students in detail as they prepared their final undergraduate work. According to all of those involved with the project, these points indicate the need for further study of the following points:

Figure 3: Necessary Insights Regarding Academic Writing



Source: elaborated by the authors

This claim to develop more specific points, arose during the workshop aiming to overcome various obstacles that still permeate the universe of academic writing in higher education. Given the relevance of the shortcomings or points for improvement that were identified during the project, we will outline the specificities of each one individually:

1) Doing more robust work writing in different textual genres

Proposing writing in different textual genres, aiming to recognize and use the writing according to the specificities of each textual genre, proved to be a consistent activity to practice written language in different textual forms. In this sense, organizing thoughts, grammatical structure, and vocabulary correlation are all elements that benefit the student's linguistic performance.

2) Reflecting on the importance of encouraging reading

Raising students' awareness of the importance of reading as a resource for enhancing proficiency and competence in written production, incorporating daily reading into students' routine, proved to be more effective than talking about the importance of reading as the base of more qualified writing (MELLO; VITÓRIA, 2007). Qualification in reading as well as education takes place throughout life and due to its processual nature it must be present at all times during the university experience.

3) Proposing more work to promote student engagement

Investing in the process of raising undergraduate students' awareness of the importance of engagement in the different stages of the process, aiming to improve their own academic performance, proved to be an important element to create the FUT. It is possible to measure engagement by observing the amount of physical and psychological energy the student devotes to the academic experience. According to Finn (1993), engagement is linked to individuals' personal characteristics, identifiable through behavioral attitudes, where the affective component is an integral part of the process by which participation (or non-participation) is perpetuated.

4) Using peer learning

Encouraging peer integration, sharing ideas, socializing information, student cooperation, and promoting situations where they can exercise mutual assistance in the preparation of the FUTs has resulted in satisfactory experiences in the preparation of FUTs. In many respects, we recognize the importance of plural socialization as a factor for more fruitful interactions, whether formal or informal, intentional or unintentional interventions, as indispensable factors for building one's own learning.

5) Promoting active learning

Promoting active learning, which according to Baepler et al. (2016), is composed of learning in flexible online and offline spaces, through variations and combinations, using technologies with pedagogical approaches, favors autonomy and monitoring the writing process itself. Hence, as Rigo and Vitória (2015) argue, the use of technologies in learning spaces encourages and captures the student's attention, enabling conditions for the implementation and monitoring of creative trends in the process of preparing the FUT.

6) Implementing textual practices that emphasize cohesion and coherence

Systematically offering writing activities that emphasize the use of cohesive and coherent elements has resulted in meaningful and productive tasks. Students dealt with the applied theory of these linguistic concepts, overcoming conceptualization and exercising application. Moreover, these fundamental concepts can be identified by understanding that cohesion is responsible for the "sewing" together of words in a logical sequence, while coherence compromises the harmonic connection of utterances and their interaction with the reader (ANTUNES, 2005).

7) Familiarizing the student with the genre of academic writing

Proposing written essays as one of the fundamental tasks of university work has resulted in students' familiarity with academic writing. For example, writing articles, which is often required in academic institutions such as universities, laboratories, research institutes, and higher education institutions. This is a specific

genre of text, basically meant to produce and disseminate knowledge. Hence, mastery of the specificities of the academic genre (articles, reviews, essays, files, experiment reports, FUT, monographs, dissertations, and theses), significantly help in the production of final undergraduate work.

8) Attributing meaning to the FUT

Assigning meaning to the production of the FUT resulted in a reflective process, consisting of reflecting before, during, and after (SCHÖN, 2000), a process that greatly favored the student's commitment to the FUT itself. It concerns recognizing an opportunity to express oneself through the writing process, demonstrating the learning gained throughout one's time as a university student. A FUT can (or maybe should) represent the first formal exercise of scientific research of one's academic life. This means that we are dealing with the initial steps in the development of an investigator.

9) Reading good reference texts

Encouraging the reading of good reference texts has resulted in meaningful and formative pedagogical activity as aspects such as vocabulary, text structure, syntax, style, and content have been analyzed and used as an example for writing itself. Thus, criticality is developed, increasing one's ability to argue, adjusting the needs of the FUT to our expectations for the future, which is crucial to the accomplishment of such work.

Final Considerations

This study argues that the habit of reading, rereading, giving what we have written to another to read, makes us work with the understanding that writing is synonymous with rewriting, producing is synonymous with rewriting, which encourages the culture of self-correction. We argue that there is a fundamental assumption when it comes to academic writing, that is, there is not always consistency between what we think we write, what we write, and what the other understands from our writing. Therefore, we consider that giving what we have written to another is an excellent opportunity to be in permanent contact with one's own writing, anchoring experimentation, rereading, rewriting, and the idea of writing as a process, the possibility of attributing to the written text, new guises, new meanings.

The idea of helping undergraduates in the process of developing their FUTs, through academic writing workshops, was recognized by the academic community as a bold action with transformative potential. Graduate students advising undergraduate students also materialized the institutional principle of integration between undergraduates and graduates. However, it was always made clear to students that nothing and no one replaces their own involvement and engagement in the creation of this work. That is, writing workshop leaders set out to offer resources, technical support, aiming to identify the limitations and potential in their writings and consequently seeking to improve and qualify them. In addition to the workshops, undergraduate students had mentoring sessions with their advisors in a collective effort, because all participants play varied roles and have their own conventions of

interaction for each type of interlocution. Moreover, articulating language acts that can be inserted in each situation, never losing sight of the fact that the workshop project only set the context for the student to masterfully, and in the best way possible, to be the absolute protagonist safely and creatively in relation to the FUT itself.

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