

Reconciling Labs, Centers, and Writing Initiatives in Brazil: Paths to a Brazilian Academic Literacy Education. Interview with Dr. Marília M. Ferreira, Laboratory of Academic Literacy (LLAC), University of São Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract

This interview presents a dialogue with Dr. Marília Mendes Ferreira (University of São Paulo), whose leadership at the Laboratory of Academic Literacy (LLAC) has been essential to the consolidation of the academic literacy field in Brazil. Drawing from her Vygotskian dialectical perspective, Dr. Ferreira shares reflections on her scholarly background, the creation of LLAC, and the challenges of institutionalizing writing instruction in Brazilian contexts, marked by internationalization demands and structural inequalities. The interview also explores the relationship between writing labs and centers in Brazil, their intersections with decolonial studies, and the recent impact of generative artificial intelligence on writing education. The conversation offers valuable insights for strengthening Latin American writing support networks and highlights the role of local initiatives in addressing global challenges.

Keywords: academic literacy in Brazil, writing labs, writing centers, teaching writing

Reconciling Labs, Centers, and Writing Initiatives in Brazil: Paths to a Brazilian Academic Literacy Education

My journey into academic literacy studies and writing centers began in 2018, during my time at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR) researching its Academic Publishing Advisory Center (CAPA). Founded in 2016, CAPA was one of the first writing centers in Brazil to position itself as such. There, I conducted a literature review that broadened my perspective on writing support initiatives in Brazil (Cons, 2020). Through this process, I discovered pioneering centers such as LABLER (UFSM) and LLAC (USP), which had already been establishing innovative practices.

It was during this time that I encountered the work of Dr. Marília Ferreira at the Laboratory of Academic Literacy (LLAC) at the University of São Paulo (USP) and learned from her approach to academic literacy. The founding and consolidation of LLAC, as well as Dr. Marília's contributions, continue to inform my work as a researcher and writing instructor. LLAC not only helped institutionalize writing practices in Brazil but also demonstrated a commitment to integrating research and outreach. Through its YouTube channel and free workshops, LLAC has democratized academic literacy for the broader community.

The field of academic literacy in Brazil has been grounded in approaches such as Swales' genre theory (1990; Askehave & Swales, 2001), Freire's critical pedagogy (1970/2007), and studies on multilingualism and social practices within discourse communities, as outlined by Brian Street (1984). In Brazil, scholars such as Ferreira and Lousada (2016) highlight the role of centers and laboratories as hybrid spaces integrating teaching, research, and outreach. Additionally, recent studies (Cristovão et al., 2020; Martinez, 2024) have explored the importance of local initiatives in addressing global challenges, such as internationalization and structural inequalities in writing practices.

This interview with Dr. Mendes Ferreira represents not only an opportunity for learning but also an acknowledgment of the contributions of someone who has helped shape my own path as an educator and scholar. I hope this dialogue enriches the discussion on academic literacy in Brazil and Latin America, connecting our local practices to broader challenges and conversations.

Interview

T: Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed, Professor. I'd like to start by asking about your background in Applied Linguistics and how your experience led you to develop an interest in academic literacy and eventually your creation of LLAC.

M: When I began my master's program, I didn't have a clear research topic yet, but I knew I wanted to work in Applied linguistics. During the first courses, I was introduced to Vygotsky's ideas, which influenced my work. For my doctorate, I attended Penn State University in the United States, intending to continue my studies on Vygotsky. There, I started working as a Teaching Assistant in writing courses for speakers of English as a second language. This was a major shift for me, as academic writing was not initially my focus in the U.S. university setting for my doctorate. Engaging with a different culture, teaching, and writing practices was a transformative experience.

When I joined USP, I took on writing courses with traditional syllabi and restructured them to be genre-based and process-oriented, aligning instruction with students' needs. The founding of LLAC was a natural extension of this process. Above all, I identify myself as a writing instructor—this is essential to my identity. I am also an English teacher, a role I hold with great pride.

T: Your academic journey spans various contexts with distinct traditions in academic literacy and writing instruction. How have these experiences shaped your understanding of academic literacy?

M: My background and pedagogical practice have been shaped by a Vygotskian perspective, starting with orality and progressing toward writing and reading. During my doctorate, I began systematizing my view of academic literacy, which was consolidated in my professorship thesis (Ferreira, 2015). My theoretical foundation combines frameworks such as John Swales' sociocultural rhetoric, corpus linguistics, V. V. Davydov's dialectical pedagogy, called Developmental Teaching, and the process approach to writing instruction.

In my 2018 book, I use "literacy" in the singular rather than "literacies" in the plural, grounded in a Vygotskian perspective and the aim to transcend dichotomies. My focus has always been on understanding a) the abstract, the common element that explains various phenomena,

and b) the internal and external processes underpinning academic writing practices. While I acknowledge the value of “literacies,” as seen in Brian Street’s work highlighting social practices across discourse communities, I prefer the singular “literacy” because I work with dialectical concepts, focusing on the abstract component of practices without losing the critical perspective. This choice does not reject the plural but instead emphasizes the shared abstract element of empirical practices, as seen in my publications from 2012, 2015, and 2024. In a Vygotskian approach, the focus is on dialectics—the coexistence of opposites (the abstract and the empirical).

T: What aspects of Brazil’s linguistic, educational, and institutional contexts are unique and have contributed to the creation of writing laboratories like LLAC? How do these factors align with or differ from traditions in other contexts, such as Latin America and the U.S.?

M: The creation of LLAC was driven by increasing demands in Brazil and at University of São Paulo (USP), particularly related to internationalization, such as academic publishing in English, mobility, and participation in international research networks. These demands have existed since 2011 and have intensified over time. However, there is a disconnection between these demands and the resources available.

In recent years, more books on genres and academic writing have been published in Brazil, but we are still far from adequately supporting students. Academic writing courses are scarce and sporadic, and when they do exist, they are often not credit-bearing. This leaves the responsibility for academic literacy on the advisor or the student, who should learn through trial and error.

LLAC emerged because of this need, observed in both undergraduate and graduate programs, and from my experience in the U.S., where I attended writing centers and saw their positive impact on me and my writing. These centers provide structured, continuous support. In Brazil, despite individual efforts and isolated initiatives, we still struggle to institutionalize this kind of support. My mission has always been to show students that academic writing is something we all need to develop, regardless of language or context.

T: According to the academic literacy literature (Cristovão et al., 2020), LLAC was one of the pioneers in writing support in Brazil, following Santa Maria and Ponta Grossa. How do you perceive the expansion of writing support initiatives in Brazil since then?

M: The expansion is positive but still limited. According to research, there were about 14 officially recognized initiatives in Brazil, but I have heard this number could be as high as 20. Despite this growth, the number remains insufficient given the needs.

In the United States and even other Latin American countries, despite challenges, writing centers have more robust structures and consistent support. In Brazil, the availability of support relies heavily on individual efforts, with limited financial resources, physical spaces, and guaranteed continuity. Many initiatives are extension projects created to fill gaps where institutional support should exist.

Furthermore, we lack systematic research to truly understand the state of writing instruction and support in various Brazilian contexts, such as language and literature courses and language centers. There have been attempts to map these, like Aranha and Oliveira's (2019) study, but these efforts are few and limited.

T: Considering your 2016 publication (Ferreira & Lousada, 2016), which highlights LLAC's distinction in reconciling research and outreach while providing community services, how do these initiatives connect or differ from North American and European writing centers? How would you explain the difference between "labs" and "writing centers" in Brazil to an international audience?

M: At LLAC, the term "laboratory" was strategically chosen at USP to gain administrative legitimacy. The concept of a "laboratory" also conveys a group of people focused on a common object—in our case, academic literacy—and serves a hybrid function: conducting research and producing materials while offering services akin to writing centers, such as tutorials and workshops. It reflects the need to reconcile research, outreach, and services. In Brazil, regardless of the name—laboratory, writing center, studios or workshops—many initiatives share similar philosophies and face the same challenge: institutionalization.

T: This leads me to ask about the tension between being linguistic support for international research publications versus the role of laboratories in language education. In this context, how can writing labs and centers in Brazil align with decolonial studies to address the legacy of colonialism in academic literacy practices?

M: I believe it is possible to align the work of writing labs and centers in Brazil with decolonial studies, but this depends on deliberate choices and how these actions are carried out. In the context of academic literacy, there is room for critical work, as I have developed in my research projects (Ferreira, 2021), even before explicitly addressing decoloniality.

Decoloniality is a theory that, like any other, can present contradictions. For example, Vygotsky gained global prominence after being legitimized by the Global North through translations into English. We must be cautious that, with decoloniality, we do not reinforce another dichotomy (North vs. South knowledge, colonizer vs. colonized knowledge), which may not solve the problems and could even create further divisions. At LLAC, we focus on addressing students' practical needs and equipping them to navigate institutional structures, such as CAPES' requirements for graduate students.¹ This enables students to take charge of their academic trajectories. To me, it is essential to act theoretically and in an informed way—not simply reactively—while never losing sight of the primary goal: transforming practices within our current context to empower students for deeper, conscious changes in the future.

T: What is your opinion on the influence of emerging technologies, such as Generative AI, on the future of academic literacy and writing centers?

M: Generative AI, such as ChatGPT, has introduced a profound and rapid shift to the challenges we face—not only in academic writing at universities but also in academic publishing. Previously, we dealt with issues like plagiarism, but these seem almost trivial compared to the complexities

¹ CAPES (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) is a Brazilian federal agency under the Ministry of Education that oversees the evaluation, funding, and regulation of graduate programs nationwide. At institutions like the University of São Paulo (USP), CAPES plays a major role in shaping graduate education policies. It sets rigorous academic standards for master's and doctoral programs, including requirements for research productivity, international publication (often in English), and engagement in research networks. CAPES is also responsible for assigning evaluation scores (from 1 to 7) to graduate programs in its four-year review process, directly impacting their funding and institutional standing. CAPES's expectations influence both faculty and student trajectories, placing significant emphasis on writing and publishing as markers of academic success, which has material consequences such as eligibility for scholarships and grants, and project and research funding.

introduced by new technologies. The current challenges involve companies, H-index drivers, and algorithms shaping the entire publishing ecosystem.

Before November 2022, I would have said that the greatest challenge for writing centers was advocating for institutionalization, convincing administrations of the need for resources, and demonstrating the relevance of academic literacy work. However, with the rise of AI, the challenge has completely changed. Now, we must emphasize that learning to write still matters—that writing remains relevant and should not be outsourced to these technologies.

Writing is more than a product; it is a form of cognition, a mediation for thought, and a powerful tool for transforming the world. With AI, we risk losing this transformative relationship. In this context, is it still worthwhile to create a writing lab in Brazil? I want to believe it is, but anyone creating a writing center today must think very differently than they would have 10 or 20 years ago. The reality has completely changed, and we must constantly consider AI's impact on our work. The future of laboratories depends on integrating these technologies critically and ethically, without abandoning the fight for the relevance of writing. And that's why the Vygotsky tradition becomes even more relevant and timely.

T: This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Latin American Network of Writing Centers and Programs (RLCPE). Based on your experience as a researcher and administrator of a writing center in Brazil, what lessons or strategies could be relevant for diverse audiences in Latin America and globally?

M: One of the most important lessons I've learned over the years is that many of the challenges we face in writing centers and laboratories are remarkably similar, regardless of the context. Participating in international writing center listservs (such as [WCenter](#)) and networks has been immensely helpful, especially during two critical periods: the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and now, with the rise of artificial intelligence.

In Brazil, one major challenge is tutor education. It's a constant cycle: you educate them, they leave, and you start all over again. We need to learn from centers that have institutionalized this process through credit-bearing education courses, making it more sustainable.

Regarding Latin America, I have the impression that many centers in other countries are more developed than those in Brazil, but I also see a growing interest in collaboration. Moving

forward, I believe strengthening networks like RLCPE and conducting surveys like those by Molina-Natera and López-Gil (2020) are essential for sharing experiences and building collective solutions. At LLAC, we continue prioritizing direct contact with writers, but we recognize that the online format is here to stay. We need to explore both more synchronous and asynchronous formats to expand our reach.

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