From the Classroom to the Writing Center: The Transformation of Writing Instruction in Higher Education

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Resumen

The shift from a writing program to a writing center as a support mechanism in a competency-based educational model has been a challenging and enriching process. The experience shared here took place at Tecnológico de Monterrey, whose evolution toward a competency-based educational model (the Tec21 Model implemented in 2019) transformed the didactic approach to cross-curricular competencies, moving from a general area with compulsory subjects to integrated learning across disciplines. This change had a significant impact on the teaching of writing, as it involved the transition from a program to a writing center. This essay describes this experience, focusing on three key points: first, the foundation of writing instruction in functional and sociocognitive approaches, both in the original program and in the new center; second, the advantages of these approaches in tutoring; and third, the administrative and academic challenges involved in managing a writing center. The shift to a writing center offers an opportunity to develop students' autonomy and critical thinking; by providing a more integrated and contextualized space for support and guidance, it opens up the possibility of better preparing them for academic and professional challenges. In summary, the change described and discussed below represents an evolution toward a more flexible and adaptable model.

Keywords: writing program, writing center, competency-based education, communicative competence

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The teaching of writing in higher education is undergoing constant transformation, especially in a context where communication is recognized as a fundamental skill for professional and personal development. In 2013, Tecnológico de Monterrey, a private Mexican university, began a comprehensive curriculum review with the intention of organizing its academic programs into a competency-based educational model. This model, known as the Tec21 Model (Tecnológico de Monterrey, 2024a), distinguishes between disciplinary and cross-disciplinary competencies, among which the communicative competence is included.

As might be expected, carrying out this project required a thorough review of the pedagogical approach. This approach involved modifying the curriculum and creating strategies to ensure the assimilation of cross-curricular skills. The curriculum review process revealed both obstacles and innovative possibilities, and promoted education aligned with the contemporary needs of the labor market and society.

This change represented a significant shift in the approach to communicative competence: for almost 40 years, the curriculum included between seven and nine general education subjects; in these courses, university students focused their attention on acquiring and developing skills related to aesthetic appreciation, critical thinking, ethical thinking, and communication (oral and written, in English and Spanish). The subjects dedicated to communication were structured as a program in which students acquired techniques and strategies to communicate orally and in writing efficiently, adapting their messages to the context and the recipient (Moyano, 2017). In the Tec21 Model, the competencies that made up the General Education area had two outcomes: the first was to become the focus of some elective subjects that students must take throughout their university education; the second was to be integrated—implicitly or explicitly—into the different subjects of the programs. In other words, the new approach also meant a change in approach.

The teaching of communication skills at Tecnológico de Monterrey has gone through several stages. Initially, it was taught through a series of specific courses dedicated to improving students' language skills. However, in the context of competency-based education, it became clear that this somewhat fragmented approach was insufficient. An evolution was needed that would allow for a deeper and more contextualized integration of communication in all areas of study.

This essay shares the experience of transitioning from a writing program to a writing center; it focuses on three key points: first, the rationale for teaching communicative competence in functional and

sociocognitive approaches; second, the advantages of these approaches in the tutorials and workshops offered by the Writing Center; and third, the administrative and academic challenges involved in managing a writing center.

For almost four decades, the development of communication skills at Tecnológico de Monterrey was linked to general education subjects. Students took between three and five courses aimed at improving their oral and written expression, in addition to learning a second or third language. The Spanish communication skills courses focused on oral communication, written communication, and information analysis. Although they were independent, they had a common goal, which was to ensure that all university graduates were able to communicate effectively in academic, personal, and professional settings.

However, the curriculum update initiated in 2013 prioritized a competency-based educational approach. In other words, the Tec21 Model distinguishes between disciplinary and cross-curricular competencies; the latter focus on skills necessary for integration into the workplace and include communication, ethical thinking and citizenship, aesthetic appreciation, and digital transformation, among others. To achieve the educational objectives, the curriculum spaces that used to be occupied by the eight General Education subjects were limited to five; in addition, the possibility of integrating the cross-curricular competencies deemed relevant by the disciplines into the design of each subject was opened up.

The curriculum restructuring required the exploration of various methodologies to ensure that cross-curricular competencies were effectively integrated into all disciplines. In addition to reducing the number of general education subjects, new forms of teaching and assessment were established to promote active learning and student autonomy. These strategies sought not only to impart knowledge but also to develop critical and reflective skills that students could apply in different contexts.

While it is true that the change in the curriculum was extreme, it brought other possibilities for teaching cross-curricular skills to the table. In the case of communication skills, to ensure that students developed and strengthened them, the School of Humanities and Education proposed as an institutional strategy the opening of a writing center, conceived as a support mechanism to assist students and teachers in developing communication skills within the new curriculum framework. This seems to be part of a recent trend in Mexico and Latin America, which demands the opening of these learning spaces in universities (Calle-Arango, 2020; Jáuregui, 2024).

The transition from a writing program to a writing center took place amid an institutional context focused on revising the curriculum of higher education academic programs. The process began in 2013,

and by 2017, the first decisions had been made that would set the stage for the emergence of the writing center. This entity, at Tecnológico de Monterrey, decided to rescue the methodological approaches that underpinned its communicative competence program, in addition to establishing a series of assumptions to guide its pedagogical practices. On the one hand, the transition to a writing center was based on two complementary approaches: the functional and the sociocognitive (Leal Isida and Carrizales Guerra, 2024).

The teaching practices that take place in writing centers are mediated by dialogue between the tutor and the user. Unlike a regular course, in which learning objectives apply to the entire student body, in the writing center, tutoring focuses on the learning needs of each user (Molina-Natera, 2019). The functional approach drew on practices oriented toward observation, analysis, manipulation, and reflection on the use of language for specific communicative purposes, appropriate to a communicative context or situation. In this approach, while the user recognizes their learning needs, the tutor or writing guide guides the way with questions that, to a greater or lesser extent, allow the student to organize their text and adapt it to the audience and the corresponding communicative objectives.

The sociocognitive approach recovered the view that writing is a complex social and cognitive activity (Cassany, Luna, & Sanz, 1994). Once again, dialogue appears as a key discursive strategy for negotiating the meaning to be shared and the best way to express it. In this sense, the tutor acts as a writing partner with whom the best reading strategies are discussed, in addition to guiding metacognitive reflection on the writing process itself (Molina-Natera, 2019).

As can be seen, the choice of teaching approaches was not arbitrary, but rather responded to the need for a model that balances explicit instruction with autonomous knowledge construction. The functional approach allows students to identify specific linguistic patterns and textual conventions (Halliday, 1979; Hymes, 1971); the sociocognitive approach encourages metacognitive reflection and dialogue as a learning strategy (Vygotsky, 2013). Compared to more traditional approaches based on normative correction, the functional and sociocognitive approaches favor a more equitable relationship between tutor and student, in addition to strengthening the transfer of writing skills to different academic and professional contexts.

In order to align the writing center with the new educational model, it was essential to adopt innovative pedagogical approaches that promote active, student-centered learning based on dialogic interaction. The writing center promotes a model that, guided by institutional guidelines, operates under a scheme where knowledge is constructed collaboratively, while other more traditional models allow the teacher to have unidirectional control over the student's writing. This perspective, which departs from the traditional model of teaching writing through formal courses, places the tutoring process in a space

of negotiation and accompaniment where the student is an active agent of their own writing development. As mentioned above, functional and sociocognitive methods were integrated into the center's practices with the intention of promoting a personalized and contextualized approach to writing tutoring. This change not only allowed for greater flexibility, but also facilitated learning tailored to the individual needs of students. The implementation of these strategies ensured that the writing center was not only a support resource, but an integral pillar in the academic training of students by promoting both communicative competence and writer autonomy. Tutors played a fundamental role in this process.

In other words, it was decided collectively to take advantage of the teaching experience accumulated over almost 40 years of working with a writing program (Moyano, 2017), and the functional and sociocognitive approaches were chosen for the tutoring sessions. However, it was established that the sessions would not be viewed as private classes or informative capsules, but rather that priority would be given to what the student believed needed improvement in their text (Molina-Natera, 2017). And this is of utmost importance. The tutors at the Tecnológico de Monterrey Writing Center are professors with extensive experience in teaching writing; in fact, in most cases, they were teachers of the subjects in the writing program. The vision of tutoring sessions as sessions of dialogue or negotiation of meanings led to an important change: teachers learned the role of writing peer (Molina-Natera, 2019).

The decision to have tutors at the Writing Center who were teachers with experience in teaching writing presented both a challenge and an opportunity. Unlike writing centers where tutors are usually advanced students, in this case, the tutors were teachers who had to take on a different role than the one they had played in the classroom, which meant a transformation in their practice: instead of evaluating or correcting, they learned to guide writing processes through questioning and co-constructing knowledge. This transition was not without resistance, especially in relation to the idea of horizontality in tutoring. However, ongoing training and reflection on their own role allowed them to redefine tutoring as a space for collaboration rather than academic authority.

The competency-based educational model adopted by Tecnológico de Monterrey focuses on meaningful learning and the development of skills that students can apply in different contexts (Tecnológico de Monterrey, 2024a). The Writing Center aligns with this model by offering a personalized and flexible learning space where students receive individualized support to develop their writing skills at any stage of the process. The center does not limit itself to correcting grammatical errors, but focuses on helping students improve their understanding of the writing process, from idea generation to final revision. Student autonomy is promoted, with the aim of helping students become more conscious and reflective writers (School of Humanities and Education, 2022). In this sense, the Writing Center was

conceived as a support resource, but its implementation has raised key questions about the role of writing in the university. To what extent can a tutoring space balance guidance with student autonomy? How are power differences between tutors and students regulated to prevent tutoring from reproducing hierarchical relationships similar to those in the classroom? These questions have guided adjustments in the center's practices, such as an emphasis on Socratic conversation and the use of tutoring protocols that ensure that students maintain control over their writing process. In addition, following institutional recommendations, strategies have been developed to integrate disciplinary teachers into the discussion about writing instruction, seeking to ensure that the responsibility for academic literacy does not fall solely on the writing center.

This view allows students to understand that writing has two functions: communicative and epistemic (Camps and Castelló, 2013). In other words, writing serves to convey information and maintain interaction with different audiences, but it also allows us to generate knowledge and advance in different areas of human knowledge. In tutorial practice, this dual function involves verbal interactions at different levels, since it is not only a matter of producing legible texts, but also texts that can be integrated into a broader corpus, belonging to a specific discursive community and conforming to precise formal characteristics and disciplinary conventions.

The transition to a competency-based model supported by a writing center was not without obstacles, especially in terms of the perception of the teachers who took on the role of tutors. On the one hand, there was a sense of displacement among the teachers in the communication program, who viewed the decentralization of this function with uncertainty. On the other hand, teachers from other disciplines, while recognizing the importance of language as a tool for knowledge construction—the epistemic value of language—maintain a deep-rooted conviction: the teaching of writing, particularly academic writing with its specific conventions and genres, should be the exclusive task of language teachers. This position, entrenched in traditional academic culture, hinders the adoption of a cross-curricular approach to writing; in fact, it represents a significant challenge to the integration of the writing center into the new educational model.

In addition, the implementation of the new educational model required a thorough review of strategies for developing communication skills. With the elimination of specific language subjects, it became clear that there was a need to create a space that would offer comprehensive support to students in their writing processes. The Writing Center was established in response to this need; it was conceived as a support resource for both students and teachers in all disciplines. However, simply creating the center did not guarantee its effectiveness. It was crucial to implement strategic outreach campaigns to raise

awareness of its role, services, and innovative teaching strategy within the university community. These campaigns included various actions, such as informational workshops for students and teachers, the organization of academic events, the creation of educational materials (Tecnológico de Monterrey, 2024b), and the use of digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (@escrituratec) to reach a wider audience. The main objective was to demystify the idea that the center was only for students with writing "problems" and to position it as a space for learning and development for all members of the university (Calle-Arango, 2020).

Finally, one of the most critical challenges was the formation of a team of highly trained tutors and the adaptation of suitable physical spaces for the center to operate. The tutors at the Tecnológico de Monterrey Writing Center are initially selected from among professors with experience in language or communication teaching; the aim is to capitalize on their knowledge of language use and their familiarity with writing processes. Priority was also given to their ability to listen actively, their constant updating of the latest pedagogical approaches and writing theories, and their ability to create an atmosphere of trust and empathy with students. Aware of the importance of continuing education, tutors actively participate in courses and workshops specifically designed to strengthen their role as writing partners. In addition, spaces within the university were adapted to create a welcoming environment conducive to individual and collaborative work between tutors and students.

In conclusion, the creation of the Writing Center at Tecnológico de Monterrey, within the context of the Tec21 Model, marks an important milestone in the promotion of communicative competence within the institution. The decision to base tutorial practices on functional and sociocognitive approaches, coupled with the careful selection and training of tutors, has resulted in a dynamic and effective learning space. This transformation process, although not without initial challenges related to faculty adaptation and change management, has succeeded in consolidating a personalized support model that empowers students as autonomous and reflective writers. However, the work does not end here. Looking ahead, it is crucial to continue strengthening the culture of writing throughout the university community, promoting collaboration between the Writing Center and the various disciplines, exploring new technologies to expand the scope of its services, and documenting practices that evaluate the long-term impact of this model on the development of graduates' communication skills. Although the Writing Center does not currently have the function of certifying or evaluating communication skills, it is an essential part of the comprehensive training of Tecnológico de Monterrey students as competent, critical citizens who are prepared to face the challenges of the contemporary world.

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