

Transforming Academic Writing: The Power of Horizontal Support and Creativity in Learning: Interview with Valeria Parra Gregory

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Abstract

In this interview, Valeria Parra Gregory, professor and member of the writing program coordination team at the Department of Languages of the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO), a Jesuit university in Guadalajara, shares her experience in the field of academic writing tutoring. She emphasizes that the role of a tutor is to support students in their writing, reading, and oral communication processes in a horizontal manner, encouraging reflection and the development of critical thinking. She stresses that the main objective of tutoring is not to solve specific tasks, but to provide tools for students to improve as writers independently. Parra Gregory points out that one of the most common needs in tutoring is text planning, as many students underestimate the importance of structuring their ideas before writing. In addition, she emphasizes that this peer tutoring model can be successfully implemented at pre-university educational levels, such as upper secondary school, offering students early support to strengthen their skills. Finally, she previews the objectives of her workshop Reading and Writing in Academic Contexts: Beyond Spelling and Grammar, which seeks to recognize students' prior experiences, develop complex ideas, and encourage collaborative work, highlighting creativity as a key element in academic writing.

Palabras clave: tutoring, support, writer autonomy, academic writing, creativity.

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Interview with Valeria Parra Gregory

Academic writing is a central challenge in the education of students at the upper secondary (high school) and higher education (university) levels due to the complexity of the discursive genres it requires and the need to integrate critical thinking skills and clear structuring of ideas. Considering this, writing tutorials have established themselves as a valuable pedagogical tool within writing centers to support students in their learning processes.

According to the official website of the Latin American Network of Writing Centers and Programs (RLCPE, 2025), Mexico ranks second behind Colombia in terms of the number of writing centers in operation (23.5% and 34%, respectively, of the total number of members in 2024), which are located almost entirely in public and private universities and higher education institutions. Although a study on upper secondary education (high school) in Latin American centers is lacking, at least three Mexican institutions focused on this level are known: the Tecnológico de Monterrey, the Prepa Ibero Ciudad de México, and the Writing Center of the UNESCO Chair for Reading and Writing at the University of Guanajuato (Tecnológico de Monterrey, 2025; Prepa Ibero, 2025; University of Guanajuato, 2025).

Although most Latin American writing centers include the general community in their user description—often students, teachers, and administrative staff— only the aforementioned institutions explicitly mention their high schools¹, either in the form of virtual repositories and physical facilities on some of their campuses (as in the case of Tec de Monterrey), specialized offices (Prepa Ibero), or pilot centers in certain schools (University of Guanajuato). As a result, writing centers intentionally designed to meet the specific needs of high school students are still far from being implemented with the same force as at the higher education level (Flores Parkman, 2022).

The writing center project of the UNESCO LEAL Chair at the University of Guanajuato is based on the conviction that high school is a bridge to university because the acquisition of academic literacy becomes more complex, as students must use reliable sources and write texts that reflect their learning, the initial development of their authorial voice, and a commitment to academic honesty (Romo and Godínez, 2024). Although students are familiar with and produce a wide variety of texts in basic education, including expository, narrative, and even some argumentative texts, especially texts useful for study and everyday life (Romo and Godínez, 2024), this exposure is not sufficient preparation to ensure a smooth

¹ *Translator's note.* Many Mexican higher education institutions also provide secondary education as part of their broad academic offer.

transition to higher education. High school, at least in Mexico, is in a deep crisis that has led the federal government to reform secondary school curricula on several occasions (SEP, 2017; SEP, 2025), making it even more urgent to support the development of communication and critical thinking skills at this level.

In this interview, Professor Valeria Parra Gregory, a member of the coordinating team for the writing program at ITESO, a Mexican university with extensive experience in academic literacy, shares her experiences and reflections on the impact of this model, as part of an invitation from the Writing Center of the UNESCO LEAL Chair at the University of Guanajuato.

In the conversation, the interviewee highlights the importance of tutoring as a horizontal space for dialogue, in which students receive support to identify both their strengths and areas for improvement. She also emphasizes that this support is not limited to helping students complete assignments, but rather seeks to provide them with tools that enable them to independently face the challenges associated with academic writing.

As a guest instructor for a workshop for upper-level students at the University of Guanajuato in October 2024, the professor addressed the elements she considers essential for improving students' writing skills, from recognizing participants' prior experiences to fostering creativity as a key resource in academic contexts. Her approach emphasizes the importance of building writing skills from an early age, highlighting that the peer tutoring model can be equally effective at educational levels, prior to higher education.

Interview with Valeria Parra

Margarita Godínez: Good morning to the entire university community. I am responsible for the writing center educational project at the University of Guanajuato's Upper Secondary School, an initiative of the UNESCO LEAL Chair's main headquarters in Mexico at the University of Guanajuato. Today, I am joined by Professor Valeria Parra Gregory, whom I deeply thank for giving us some of her time. Before we begin our conversation, I would like to introduce our guest. Ms. Parra Gregory is a professor and participates in the writing program of the Department of Languages at the Western Institute of Technology and Higher Education (ITESO). She is a researcher and teacher at the undergraduate and graduate levels, specializing in the teaching and learning of academic writing and oral communication. In addition, she coordinates and participates in tutoring at the university level. Good morning, Valeria, and thank you for being here.

Valeria Parra: Good morning, Margarita. Thank you very much for the invitation, it's a pleasure to participate.

Margarita Godínez: Let's start with a general question: What does a writing tutor do?

Valeria Parra: A writing tutor accompanies another student in their writing, reading, and academic speaking processes, drawing on their own experience. This is key, as it is not a teacher giving instructions, but someone who has conversations with the student on an equal footing, promoting trust. A tutor shares time, usually a 50-minute to one-hour session, to identify both strengths and areas for improvement in the student's process. Tutoring is not limited to solving an assignment or seeking a perfect grade; its main purpose is to reflect on the communication process and provide tools that allow the student to improve independently, developing their critical thinking skills.

Is it possible to achieve horizontality in tutoring processes? Some authors (Boyes et al., 2024) admit that the peer tutoring strategy is the one that comes closest to this intention of "outside the classroom" support; however, even when carried out by peers of the same educational level, tutoring sessions are communicative situations in which one party is positioned as "more expert" than the other (Mostacero, 2015), and this difference in status cannot be erased unless there is a rotation of roles. Perhaps the notion of reciprocal tutoring allows for the establishment of a collaborative exercise in which participants share similar concerns and needs as part of the same academic environment (Guerrero, 2015). In any case, peer tutoring remains a proven option for establishing an environment of trust and free expression of ideas (Boyes et al., 2024), especially when it occurs between people of the same generation (Pavía and De la Cruz, 2023).

On the other hand, it is worth emphasizing what the interviewee pointed out: tutoring should direct writers' attention toward higher-order concerns rather than remaining focused on the mechanics of writing. Without attempting to be exhaustive, authors such as Andueza and Aguilera (2018) argue that textual coherence is a fundamental principle in the production of texts and that teaching it is essential for students to be able to structure comprehensible discourses, although it is not usually taught explicitly, which is why it should be focused on in tutoring: prioritizing the construction of meaning over mere grammatical revision. Similarly, Espino (2015) supports the idea that tutoring should focus on helping students develop writing strategies that improve their argumentative organization and overall coherence, rather than on grammatical or orthotypographical corrections. Both authors, emphasizing metacognition and self-regulation, propose a reflective and dialogical style of support.

Margarita Godínez: It is very interesting how you describe a reflective approach. Based on your experience at ITESO, what are the most common needs that students bring to tutoring sessions?

Valeria Parra: Often, students only want a “final revision” of their text. However, we have found that in most cases it is necessary to return to the planning process. For example, they often discover that it is essential to organize their ideas before writing, recognize the text genre they are asked to write, or adjust the structure of the document. It is also common for them to think that they only need to correct spelling, but dialogue with tutors reveals that there are deeper adjustments to be made first, such as better structuring their ideas. This work not only improves the text, but also develops critical thinking skills.

With regard to professor Parra’s statement, it is assumed that in upper secondary education, critical thinking is an essential skill for fostering autonomy, reflection, and social transformation. According to MEJOREDU (2024), high school education should promote the analysis of reality, the formulation of questions, argumentation, and commitment to the community. Some authors, such as Dumes et al. (2024) and Huaire et al. (2023), highlight its role in the development of cognitive skills through teaching strategies that promote evaluation, inference, and self-regulation, which are crucial dialogic and reflective skills in adolescence. Rodríguez Málaga et al. (2019), for their part, highlight the use of technological tools, such as intelligent tutoring systems, to strengthen critical thinking in writing and decision-making among young people.

The use of technological means to offer tutoring focused on the development of critical thinking, says Zhizhko (2018) in his analysis of virtual tutoring in youth and adult education in Mexico, can also promote social and educational inclusion through two-way communication and horizontality in the tutor-student relationship. This last point is emphasized by the UNESCO LEAL Chair project based at the University of Guanajuato, whose objectives include the elimination of barriers to achieving inclusive, quality education.

Margarita Godínez: We, at the Chair, are starting a project focused on upper secondary education. You have mainly worked with university and postgraduate students. Do you think this tutoring model is applicable to earlier stages of education?

Valeria Parra: Definitely. The mentoring model, being a peer-to-peer endeavor, can be implemented at the upper secondary level, although the objectives will be different due to the students’ stage of development. This type of early support can offer them significant advantages. For example, developing writing skills before they arrive at university would allow them to face academic challenges with greater preparation. In addition, this model fosters empathy and horizontal dialogue, which are fundamental elements in the learning process.

Specifically, the UNESCO LEAL Chair project, headquartered in Mexico, seeks to contribute to this mission by establishing writing centers in secondary schools with a balanced vision of academic enculturation and sociolinguistic justice, where the knowledge and practices of students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, are valued and legitimized (Zavala, 2019; Navarro, 2024), and to scaffold their growth processes as academic readers and writers, with a socioconstructivist and active learning approach (Thibaut and Muñoz, 2024). This vision frames the dialogue with professor Parra, as well as her participation as a workshop leader in the colloquium.

Margarita Godínez: I completely agree with you. Now, could you give us a preview of the workshop you will be giving at our International and Intercultural Writing Colloquium?

Valeria Parra: Sure. The workshop, entitled Reading and Writing in Academic Contexts: Beyond Spelling and Grammar, has three main objectives. First, to recognize that students already have previous writing experience that can be leveraged. Second, to identify the elements necessary to improve in an academic context, such as structure and the development of complex ideas. Finally, to challenge the perception of writing as a solitary process, emphasizing the importance of collaborative work and creativity. The workshop will provide practical tools that participants can apply in their own processes.

Margarita Godínez: It's a very enriching approach. Finally, do you have any closing message for those who will participate in your workshop?

Valeria Parra: All that remains is for me to express my gratitude for this opportunity and invite everyone to actively participate in the workshop. These initiatives are essential for sharing strategies and reflecting together on the challenges of academic writing. I am sure it will be an enriching experience for everyone.

Margarita Godínez: Thank you very much, Valeria. We are very excited about your participation in the colloquium and wish you every success in your work.

By way of conclusion

The interview with Professor Valeria Parra Gregory highlights the importance of academic writing tutorials as a comprehensive strategy for strengthening students' reading, writing, and oral skills. Throughout the conversation, she emphasizes the need to reconfigure teaching practices around a collaborative and reflective model, where students are supported horizontally by a tutor who helps them identify their strengths and areas for improvement.

A key point addressed is text planning, an aspect often overlooked by students, who tend to focus on spelling correction. This observation underscores that the writing process requires a broader approach,

encompassing everything from organizing ideas to understanding textual genre. The interviewee also emphasizes that tutoring goes beyond simply improving academic texts, as it fosters critical skills that are essential in any professional or educational context.

On the other hand, Parra Gregory highlighted the applicability of the mentoring model at the upper secondary level, where this early support can offer significant advantages. Experience shows that this approach not only better prepares students to face the challenges of higher education, but also allows them to build a solid metacognitive foundation in terms of critical thinking and creativity.

In short, the workshop given by the professor reinforced these ideas by proposing specific strategies for improving writing in academic contexts. These types of activities not only promote technical skills, but also highlight the value of collaboration and creativity as pillars of writing, positioning it as an indispensable social and reflective practice in contemporary education.

To close, it is worth emphasizing that writing centers at the upper secondary level are also relevant and necessary, and that perceptions of their relevance have been changing. However, in Mexico, their implementation in upper secondary education remains limited and understudied. Works such as those by Pavía and De la Cruz (2023) emphasize the need to better define the role of the tutor, structure more robust tutorial programs, and expand the availability of this modality to strengthen the transition and retention between upper secondary and higher education levels, as was made clear in the conversation with teacher Parra Gregory.

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