Evolution in the Training of Tutors at the Centro de Español of Universidad de los Andes

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Abstract

Writing centers are recognized for their pedagogical practices. Much of their success is due to the fact that those who tutor are peers who are more advanced in their processes, which has been shown to generate many advantages in learning (Bruffee, 1984; Harris, 1995); and to the pedagogical approach centered on notions such as the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1964), scaffolding (Bruner, 1975) and personalized learning. In order for each student to develop what he/she needs in his/her process, we require peers who not only have knowledge in the correct use of Spanish, but also know how to teach and generate a safe space for learning. For this reason, it is necessary to train them in basic pedagogical practices and formative evaluation exercises. The Spanish Center of the Universidad de los Andes has modified and diversified the training exercises based on evidence on the practice that is collected from semester to semester. The intention of this research is to demonstrate the modifications in training and the implications that these changes have on the practice of various pedagogical exercises carried out by tutors. The training challenges explored in this document and the alternatives proposed to overcome them allow us to establish dialogues with other writing centers and contribute to the consolidation of an academic community that reflects on the importance of tutor training in these programs.

Keywords: writing centers, peer tutoring, tutor training.

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Introduction

Writing Centers emerge as a response to the specific needs of students, especially in the particularities of academic texts. According to Carlino (2005), in Latin America, the first efforts in the region focused on facing the challenges of academic writing, particularly in contexts where educational inequalities affected the entry and permanence of students in higher education.

In countries such as Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina, Writing Centers began to take shape through institutional programs that sought to strengthen writing as a tool for learning and communication in all disciplines (Navarro et al., 2016). This interdisciplinary approach recognized that writing is not only a means of assessment, but also a way of constructing knowledge.

However, a key element in the effectiveness of the Writing Centers is the training of their tutors, who are responsible for guiding their students in the process of improving their communication skills. This training includes not only writing and communication skills, but also pedagogical skills to adapt to the diverse needs of the students. According to Simpson (2010), the person who offers tutoring is positioned as a facilitator who encourages writer autonomy, promoting reflective learning.

The Centro de Español of the Universidad de los Andes (hereinafter CE) builds a pedagogical perspective in which three notions converge: the notions of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), which describes the distance between what a learner can achieve independently and what he/she can achieve with the guidance of people with more expertise or through collaboration with others; and the concept of scaffolding (Bruner, 1983), which refers to the temporary support provided by an expert to help his or her apprentice perform tasks that he or she could not complete autonomously; and collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1984), which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the development of knowledge.

In the context of writing centers, ZPD is critical to understanding how tutors can guide their students to more advanced levels of comprehension and writing production. Tutor training should include strategies for identifying each student's ZPD, allowing for personalized guidance that fosters meaningful learning. Now, scaffolding involves the tutor providing strategies, guiding

questions, and adaptive feedback, progressively withdrawing this support as his or her student becomes more confident and proficient. This approach requires tutors to be able to diagnose the student's skill level and adapt their interventions accordingly.

The combination of collaborative learning, ZPD, and scaffolding provides a robust framework for training tutors in writing centers. A person in that role needs to understand how to foster peer learning (Bruffee, 1984), identify the individual needs of their students, and provide adaptive support that enables their students to reach their full potential. Pedagogical training may include workshops, peer observation and supervised practice, as well as ongoing reflection on his or her role as a facilitator of learning.

Context

To achieve the training objective described above, it is important that the dedication to learning and practicing what is learned is high and diverse. Time must be allocated because it is through constant dialogue, metacognitive exercises, peer coaching and guided training that complex skills and knowledge can be developed.

At the CE of the Universidad de los Andes, tutoring is provided by General Education Graduate Assistants (hereinafter "GAs"): they are master's students who are awarded a percentage of their tuition and have a part-time employment contract with the CE. This time is dedicated to three tasks: (a) supporting writing, reading or oral communication; (b) supporting the design, pedagogical sequence and feedback in a course of any discipline with a high communication component (E courses); and (c) training to conduct the different pedagogical interactions with the required quality. This text is concerned with the third exercise.

The spaces dedicated to training seek to replicate the methodologies and pedagogical principles involved in the support offered by the GAs. Part of the process is to interact with more experienced GAs (peer observations and small working groups with different levels of expertise) to gain knowledge or develop skills in their ZPD. For this reason, they seek to generate a community of practice with semi-structured exercises that encourage collaborative learning through conversations about experiences, practices and constant feedback, which gives them the possibility of broadening their perspectives to diverse practices (Valdez Valdez, L. S., Sánchez Uscamayta, J. O., & Lescano López, G. S., 2023).

Furthermore, in any conscious pedagogical training, it is essential to reflect on one's own practice (Sánchez, 2012). For this reason, some training scenarios offered to the GAs are focused on the metacognitive exercise on the milestones and improvements they can make in their process. To this end, there are (a) individual conversations with the coordinators based on needs identified by the GAs, (b) an individual and collective reading of the evaluation made by their students regarding the quality of support and (c) two moments during the semester in which, based on a matrix, self-evaluation of performance is carried out.

Finally, it is essential that the process be guided by a sequence of pre-designed learning outcomes. This occurs through the various training workshops. These are a series of spaces strategically located throughout the academic period to generate progress in the mastery and practice of the tutors' work. This last space is the one that has undergone the most modifications due to the type of intervention required.

We will describe below the initial training model used by the CE; then, we will establish the aspects of this model that need to be improved, with special attention to the needs regarding the level of expertise of the tutors in the training and the support they offer; and finally, the modifications that have been made.

Description of the initial training model

In the early years of the CE, the training workshops were collaborative work spaces between novice and expert attendees. The latter attended these even if they had already advanced in the learning outcomes because: "[...] por un lado, acompañan a los novatos en la construcción de las comprensiones sobre el Programa de Escritura del Centro, y, por el otro, les permiten reflexionar sobre su propia práctica y mejorarla en la interacción con sus nuevos compañeros" (Escallón, Parra and Vásquez, 2020 p. 126)[1]. The previous model implied the same route for assistants with different levels of expertise.

Although this model had the advantage of constant interaction, it was more beneficial for those who were new to the process and less so for those who had advanced further. Lara (2013), in a study on the tutoring process in CE which was carried out at the time when the training had

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[1] *Translator's note*. This quote could be translated to "on the one hand, they accompany the novices in the construction of their understanding of the Center's Writing Program, and on the other hand, they allow them to reflect on their own practice and improve it in the interaction with their new colleagues".

this model, concludes that: "En general, los tutores novatos describieron cualitativamente mejor la experiencia de aprendizaje derivada de hacer tutorías que incluyó miradas más positivas, más gratificantes y reconocimiento más apreciativo del proceso de aprendizaje, tanto de los estudiantes, como propio" (p. 48)[2]. Additionally, he asserts that those in more advanced semesters (third and fourth semesters) expressed exhaustion and a sense of routine.

For this reason, two training routes were created, one for those who were beginning their process and practice and the other for those who had been in practice for more than a semester. The first focused on basic understanding of pedagogy and its implications for their roles. For example, workshops were offered on feedback, the structure of tutoring and its purpose, principles of the Centro de Español, the basics of accompanying students in the classroom, and the relationship between writing as a process and learning. The second sought specificity about the various roles and contexts of support and delved into pedagogical strategies for each of these spaces. For example, when and how to use pedagogical sequences in the framework of tutorials and in course workshops. This model also implemented a diversification in tutoring. The tutors who were beginning the process accompanied reading and writing tutorials, while those who had already been in practice for one or more semesters extended the exercise by also offering oral communication and research tutorials. The main purpose of this modification was to deepen the training and apply the knowledge with the support of other textual products and training levels.

Challenges of the previous model

Although the previous modification had positive effects, the proposed training route still had some problems. This model assumes that there are only two levels of learning: novice and expert. However, given the functioning of the CE and the commitment to progressive training, the GAs are part of this training program throughout their entire master's degree path, so most of them stay on between 3 and 4 semesters. The expertise between a person in their second and fourth semester varies according to the experience and reflection of their pedagogical practice. This is evident in some responses to the training offered in that period, in which it is stated

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[2] *Translator's note.* This quote could be translated to "In general, novice tutors described qualitatively better the learning experience derived from tutoring, which included more positive, more gratifying views and more appreciative recognition of the learning process, both of the students, as well as their own".

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"[...]siento que [los talleres] fueron muy repetitivos con la información que ya conocía de mi semana de formación" (2022)[3].

Thus, this training model still replicated some of the difficulties that motivated its design. On the one hand, there is still a lack of motivation among experts who face the same learning challenges. On the other hand, there is no evidence of the transformation of the exercise according to the acquired experience . This makes it difficult for learning to be applied in new contexts, which is fundamental in training by levels (Stiggins, 2008). Proposing challenging exercises to the GAs in their process not only modifies their motivation, but also has implications for the quality of the accompaniment. Given that some of the problems mentioned above persist, particularly in the training of GAs at the highest level of expertise, a model was designed that seeks to address the above needs.

Current Model

The model proposed as an alternative is structured in four phases: foundation, deepening, integration and consolidation. Each phase responds to current training needs (recognizing basic concepts in training and pedagogy, deepening support exercises and integrating them into other contexts), the framework of support in tutorials, and E courses, ensuring a progressive and flexible approach that combines theory and practice.

Fundamentals (first semester)

The main objective of this stage is focused on providing tutors with the pedagogical bases to develop their role. Here, the training is focused on recognizing the particularities of support in the tutoring scenario and in the E courses, as well as on understanding the pedagogical bases of formative evaluation, understood as a learning-oriented process that seeks to identify the progress, needs and difficulties of students during the development of an activity. The understanding of the possibility of providing feedback to improve the process decentralizes the evaluation of the qualification and focuses on the learning process. The foundation is complemented, throughout the training semester, with specific actions on the

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[3] *Translator's note*. "I feel that [the workshops] were very repetitive with the information I already knew from my week of training".

exercise of tutoring and the design, implementation and evaluation of effective workshops that promote significant learning in type E courses.

In-Depth Training (second semester)

The tutors have training spaces that seek to broaden their knowledge of pedagogical strategies, adapting them to the particular needs of their students. In this semester, they delve into notions of curricular alignment, group writing, and pedagogical sequences in tutorials.

Integración (tercer semestre)

This phase seeks to articulate the pedagogical knowledge and skills acquired in order to apply them to different scenarios in the tutoring exercise (writing, reading, orality, research) and in the support carried out in the courses, in which the particular needs of the students' communication skills and the mesocurricular elements are integrated. In this phase, tutors understand that all communication skills are a dynamic process, in which different factors interact with each other (in orality, for example, content, adaptation to the audience and effective use of paralinguistic resources). In addition, this phase goes deep into understanding the communication process in context; thus, factors such as the physical, social, cultural and emotional environment influence the meaning, interpretation and effectiveness of the communicative exchange. It also delves into resources, materials and methodologies that support the support of communication processes associated with research.

Consolidation (fourth semester)

The training ends with tutor's achieving a level of autonomy and leadership that allows him/her to innovate and train other tutors through observations, implementation of workshops for trainers and reflective support. In addition, they also contribute to the creation and implementation of instruments to evaluate the impact of the program on the performance of their peers and recommend adjustments.

The model ensures that tutors understand and adapt to the writing and communication skills requirements of different areas of knowledge. The phases advance from basic understanding to autonomous practice and innovation, incorporating theoretical, practical and reflective dimensions that promote the development of communication and critical thinking skills in both tutors and their students.

This training model has been implemented over the last two years. To transform it, we took the structure of the previous model and its successes as a basis, in particular, the support based on the needs of the first phase. After that, we identified the learning objectives required for each level (knowing, deepening and integrating) and created the path for the next three phases that would compose the strengthened training program.

The first version (implemented in 2023) involved recognizing some modifications that needed to be made for each level. This was identified through: (a) feedback from the trainees, (b) self-evaluation in the implementation exercise, and (c) common weaknesses and strengths in the achievement of the objectives demonstrated in the performance of the tutors. Feedback from a person who has experienced the training is vital to reformulate specific aspects of the training, based on qualitative evidence. To this end, perception surveys are conducted each semester with the tutors, in order to establish the successes in the training offered and to recognize opportunities for improvement. It is important to note that these training evaluation instruments are also differentiated according to the phase (semester). These instruments inquire about the conceptual and methodological relevance of each exercise. In addition, they explicitly ask about the relationship of the training received with the support exercise and the fulfillment of the training objectives.

Throughout this period of implementation, and thanks to the evaluation previously described, it has become evident that the current model does respond to the difficulties presented by the previous model. On the one hand, it makes the exercise carried out by tutors through the phases more complex and makes it possible to transfer the practice to different contexts. On the other hand, by proposing training and exercises differentiated by level of expertise, it provides greater motivation throughout the training process and not only at the initial level.

A key element that has resulted from this model is the cooperation and exchange of knowledge among the GAs during the phases. By integrating into collaborative work teams, participants take advantage of the diversity of experiences and approaches within the group, which enriches the exercise and favors the generation of innovative solutions to educational

challenges, which not only strengthens the GAs' individual pedagogical skills, but also promotes a sense of community and mutual support (Pascual-Arias, C. and López-Pastor, V. M., 2024).

Challenges

Throughout this document we have shown the training path that has been designed and implemented at the Centro de Español of the Universidad de los Andes for Graduate Assistants who offer tutoring. First, with a training focused on the basics of pedagogical notions necessary to understand and carry out the work, then with a gradation of two levels (expert - layman) and, finally, with a training that involves four moments with work, learning and experiences according to different phases in the program. Although it has been shown to respond to the training needs and difficulties of other models, there are some challenges that we have categorized into three elements:

A. *Theoretical and practical integration, alignment, and sequentiality.*

Existe un desafío para garantizar que las tutoras y los tutores comprendan cómo aplicar los conceptos teóricos adquiridos en cada fase al acompañamiento de estudiantes y que ello posibilite una profundización teórica (autónoma) y la experiencia práctica en escenarios reales. En este sentido, asegurar que todas las fases estén claramente conectadas es un reto constante.

B. *Evaluation and enhancement of program impact*

A second challenge is linked to making the program's impact visible in a structured manner in two areas: the performance of the tutors and that of the students they accompany. This is related to issues such as ensuring the quality of learning and student success, and the inputs that this task requires. This implies strengthening the commitment of tutors to act as multiplier agents in the university community to ensure that the knowledge and skills acquired are effectively transmitted to the educational community and to achieve communication and dissemination strategies of these contributions and learning.

C. *Time management, resources, and institutional support*

A third challenge is to optimize the time available in each phase to meet training objectives without overburdening tutors and coordinators. It is also necessary to ensure that they have access to timely resources and materials to support their learning process and that of

their students. This implies greater institutional support, both operationally and in consolidating a culture in which tutors are a fundamental part of the students' training process, as well as monitors, teachers and other members of the academic community.

Addressing these challenges requires constant monitoring of the program, an adaptive approach, and effective communication between tutors, trainers, and those responsible for the model.

Conclusions

The task of a tutor is twofold. On the one hand, they must attend to the needs of communicative competence with all the complexities that this entails. On the other hand, in order to fulfill their purpose with quality, it is essential that they are trained in the pedagogical exercises required by their work. This implies a progressive, constant and coherent exercise with the pedagogical demands involved in supporting students at the University.

The latter implies that the need for meaningful and deep learning that recognizes levels of expertise must be addressed. Thus, people who have been trained, reflected on and applied their learning for a longer period of time need to complexify, diversify and deepen their learning and practice. For this reason, the CE has gone through three training models, the last of which seeks that people with more expertise are challenged, accompanied and trained according to their needs and that, in coherence with this, the quality of the accompaniment offered by the CE community to the students it supports is improved. To this end, the new model has four phases: foundation, deepening, integration and consolidation.

Although this model responds to the needs of meaningful and adaptive learning, it implies some challenges that must be overcome. The articulation between each phase must be clear and explicit for those being trained in the program. Evaluating the impact of this process on the training of tutors and students implies analyzing how it has contributed to the development of their pedagogical, communicative, and training competencies, as well as their ability to guide and support others in learning. In addition, it is essential to optimize the use of available resources, and time, ensuring that the strategies implemented are efficient and sustainable. To this end, institutional support plays a key role, since it provides guidance, materials and adequate spaces, as well as recognition of the importance of this work,

strengthening its meaning and motivating those who carry it out. In this sense, it is essential to delve into the possibility of evaluating the impact of institutional support in the training of tutors and students, which also implies a better use of resources and time of all those who intervene in the training. It is worth noting that, even though this model implies challenges, there is a positive response from those trained under this model, compared to previous ones: "Considero que los ajustes realizados potenciaron mi aprendizaje porque suponen un reto para poner a prueba las habilidades ya adquiridas" (Initial training of former tutors, 2023-10)[4]. That last comment from a GA reveals the achievement of the central purpose of the current EC training model which, like any pedagogical action, must be under constant review.

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[4] *Translator's note.* "I consider that the adjustments made enhanced my learning because they are a challenge to test the skills already acquired"

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