From Disciplinary Frameworks to Cross-Disciplinary Approaches: A Proposal for Writing Support in University Education

Eduardo Daniel Libreros Galicia, UPAEP Universidad

Abstract

The text reflects on the disciplinary fragmentation that characterizes higher education institutions and how this structure impacts curriculum organization and knowledge generation. In this context, writing is presented as a tool that promotes cross-disciplinary approaches related to transdisciplinary perspectives, giving students opportunities to transcend disciplinary boundaries. Based on the above, the writing program at the Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP) is analyzed, which consists of courses that promote writing in disciplines with a cross-disciplinary approach. Examples such as work with students in the health sciences demonstrate how this approach fosters the development of cross-disciplinarity. Finally, the challenge of transforming the conception of academic writing is highlighted, moving from a remedial vision to one that values its formative potential in the university.

Keywords: transversality, disciplinary writing, higher education

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Introduction

Fragmentation is often a characteristic of the structure of higher education institutions, which are usually organized by disciplinary fields and hierarchically constituted into schools, faculties, and programs. Curricular organization is no exception to this logic, as it is often developed around a disciplinary approach, divided among multiple areas of knowledge.

Since the 1990s, various reflections have questioned this predominant view in universities, where disciplinary fields operate within independent spheres with their own content and forms of dissemination. This perspective, understood by Morin (1990) as a "disciplinary view," raises a series of issues that can be observed in the university environment, as it promotes a unilateral and segmented view of what the coexistence of different types of knowledge in disciplinary fields entails.

Alternatively, Nicolescu (1996) introduces the concept of transdisciplinary culture, with the idea of promoting dialogue between disciplines in order to weaken the boundaries that separate them. This approach highlights the importance of considering that the knowledge, practices, and insights derived from disciplines are not static, but rather evolve, transform, and generate new meanings produced, among other ways, through interactions with different fields of study.

This does not mean that disciplinary work should be limited to the university setting, as it integrates theoretical and methodological concepts that are important for the construction of knowledge. In this sense, the barriers referred to by Nicolescu (1996) do not stem from scientific disciplinary knowledge, but from socio-historical components. This means that the way in which disciplines are divided is not a purely theoretical question, but rather responds to historical processes, institutional decisions, and changes in scientific practices (Mittelstrass, 2018).

Paradoxically, in order to transcend these boundaries and promote transdisciplinary approaches, making disciplinary boundaries explicit in university education seems to be one of the keys. According to Russell et al. (2020), this is possible thanks to the demystification of academic culture, which involves establishing clear relationships with the disciplinary perspective

and conceptual frameworks that underpin courses, which are often unknown to students. Making the discipline explicit is a crucial element in fostering comprehensive ways of thinking that intentionally help students cross the barriers between disciplines (Russell et al., 2020).

Based on the above, writing has the potential to foster transdisciplinary approaches through its teaching at the university, even when it is carried out within the framework of the disciplines. To achieve this, we propose the adoption of cross-disciplinary approaches that not only foster a dialogue between disciplines, but also contribute to overcoming the socio-historical barriers they entail.

Based on this premise, the reflection on transversality proposed by Correa Mosquera and Carlachiani (2021) is ideal when considering the existence of two analytical planes that reveal links and contrasts between transdisciplinarity and transversality: the plane of knowledge (which, in a certain way, is transdisciplinary) and the plane of social problems, whose characteristic is transversality. This is illustrated by the following example developed by the authors, where they explain the idea of going "beyond" disciplinary boundaries and the fragmentation of problems, promoting flexible and comprehensive thinking:

> Si consideramos por ejemplo la salud, no podemos pensarla de manera unilateral, como ocurre regularmente en la medicina curativa especializada, porque la salud está asociada a factores o problemas sistémicos que son causa de su bienestar o su deterioro y, en consecuencia, de su calidad. Aquí podemos ver dos aspectos de la salud. El aspecto científico de su estudio que debiera ser transdisciplinario, y no simplemente multidisciplinario, y el aspecto relacionado con los problemas que en ella se generan que son transversales. Cada problema de salud está conectado con otro u otros problemas y así sucesivamente, de una manera sistémica y holística. (p. 186)[1]

As it is related to issues involving transdisciplinary knowledge, transversality allows for a comprehensive approach to the latter, which can be promoted through subjects that develop

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[1] *Translator's note*. This quotation can be translated to: "If we consider health, for example, we cannot think of it in a unilateral way, as is often the case in specialized curative medicine, because health is associated with systemic factors or problems that cause its well-being or deterioration and, consequently, its quality. Here we can see two aspects of health. The scientific aspect of its study, which should be transdisciplinary, not simply multidisciplinary, and the aspect related to the problems it generates, which are cross-cutting. Each health problem is connected to one or more other problems, and so on, in a systemic and holistic way (p. 186)".

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precisely transversal practices. In this sense, writing in higher education has the potential to integrate social issues into its teaching in order to enhance transversality. This perspective influenced the design and implementation of the subjects that make up the writing program at the Popular Autonomous University of the State of Puebla (UPAEP).

Transversality in the UPAEP writing program

Since its inception, UPAEP's Writing Program has responded to the need to prioritize cross-curricularity in writing instruction. In this sense, it distances itself from prescriptive approaches that focus on students' "deficiencies" in producing textual products, emphasizing writing as a process that contributes to learning development, including those that belong to the disciplinary profile of university students.

Currently, the program includes three courses designed from a disciplinary approach: Writing in Health Sciences, Writing in Social Sciences, and Writing in Humanities. In addition, it offers an elective course called "Acompañamiento a la escritura"[2], aimed at training writing tutors who can support their peers. These courses not only promote the development of writing skills, but also seek to foster active collaboration between teachers from different areas and UPAEP's Writing Center.

As mentioned above, the program promotes transdisciplinarity by, among other things, demystifying academic culture (Russel et al., 2020). Therefore, some strategies and activities carried out in the program's courses aim to establish clear relationships between the disciplinary perspective and the conceptual frameworks that underpin the courses, making the discipline explicit and encouraging students to cross the barriers referred to by Nicolescu (1996).

An example of this is presented in the work carried out in the Writing in Health Sciences course, designed for students in the Medical Sciences, and Life and Health Sciences departments. This course includes writing activities that integrate the characteristics of relevant textual genres in these areas, such as lab reports, clinical cases, and documentary research. This allows students to link the work in class with other courses in their curriculum.

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[2] *Translator's note*. "Acompañamiento" is literaly translated to "Accompaniment". It is a broadly used term in Latin America when referring to tutoring support.

In line with this, the activities carried out by students contribute to their familiarization with various conceptual references for the promotion of writing. One of these is the rhetorical situation, which is explicitly broken down with the aim of recognizing that every writing assignment involves the selection of a genre that entails specific purposes and audiences (Hyland, 2003). This concept, related to genre pedagogy, allows us to visualize the characteristics of the context in which the writing task is carried out and to identify different types of texts that could be developed to address it (Braziller & Kleinfeld, 2021).

In addition to teaching this content to students, the rhetorical situation is presented as one of the most relevant conceptual frameworks in the class, emphasizing the notions of rhetoric and composition. Based on this, the rhetorical situation is revisited in various sessions of the course during the creation of different texts, linking the latter with disciplinary genres. In the process, students reflect on the characteristics of their writing and make decisions considering their disciplinary environment, including the incorporation of informative support.

Stating the conceptual frameworks of the subject and linking them to their discipline of study sets the tone for the development of transversal writing practices. On incorporating informative support, the students of the Bachelor's Degree in Nursing, for example, write about the problems that affect their work, such as emotional health, working conditions or the accompaniment of patients' families. They do this based on the notion that social problems are transversal, so they must think "beyond" disciplinary boundaries to address these issues in a comprehensive manner.

The focus of the disciplinary writing courses makes it possible to transversalize writing practices, providing students with opportunities to identify and transcend the barriers between disciplines. In this way, UPAEP's writing program collaborates with the purpose of promoting a transdisciplinary culture (Nicolescu, 1996) in the university, which values the knowledge contributed from the disciplines but, at the same time, encourages an integral treatment of their problems, contributing to the development of transversal ways of thinking.

Final notes

Approached from a cross-disciplinary perspective, the subjects that make up UPAEP's writing program exemplify the ways in which transdisciplinarity is fostered through writing within

the framework of the disciplines. Similarly, making the references that make up the thematic content of the subjects explicit contributes to the demystification of academic practices (Russell et al., 2020), encouraging students to participate in the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that underpin the courses, which they are usually unaware of.

Like everything else, the development of the program has not been without challenges. One of the main challenges is the belief that a first-year writing course is designed to address students' writing deficiencies. That is why some of the main efforts made by UPAEP's writing program are related to promoting more diverse perspectives on academic writing, which help to avoid remedial practices and eradicate the idea of writing as a generic skill.

The approach adopted by the writing program represents a significant step forward in consolidating these efforts. Writing within the framework of disciplines, but with a cross-disciplinary perspective, promotes the development of skills in students that prepare them to recognize and cross disciplinary boundaries. In this way, writing becomes a tool that contributes to a comprehensive reflection on knowledge.

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