Nurturing Reflection: Personal Insights from an Instructional Support Integrating Writing-based Teaching

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1   INTRODUCTION

In October 2022, I was accepted into the IWT CLASP Fellows Program, a project of the Bard College Institute for Writing & Thinking (IWT), which offers professional development opportunities that promote writing-based teaching methods. As soon as the IWT director mentioned the Capstone Project, I already had in mind that my project would be related to the instructional support I was providing to a professor in the Design Department at the university where I work. The Universidad de los Andes is a Colombian higher education institution founded in 1948 that fosters pluralism, tolerance, and respect for ideas and seeks academic excellence. It has an Office for Innovation, Academic, Curricular, and Technological Development for Learning (DIDACTA by its initials in Spanish) that supports faculty professional development through some instructional leaders.

As an instructional leader, I am responsible for individually assisting faculty who request it to improve their teaching, and this task brings me the greatest personal and professional satisfaction. Although I have years of experience providing this type of instructional support, I also felt very anxious because it was the first time I had done it. I wondered if a few months of learning would be enough to start supporting something so new to me.

I wanted to share my experience supporting a faculty member by including writing-based practices, and the questions that guided me: How can an instructional leader like me contribute to their university including these new writing practices? How will these instructional practices benefit the teaching of the professor I supported? How far will these practices impact the learning of her students? What barriers and facilitators will I encounter in this process? What will be my greatest learnings as a supporting instructional leader? In this document, I intend to answer these questions, but I want to start by providing context on how the support

was before joining CLASP, then move on to discuss the professor's course in which all the writing practices were applied. Subsequently, I will present the different moments that structured the process and emphasize the role, actions, and decisions I made as an instructional leader. I will present the students' responses as findings when I describe the planned activities. Finally, I will come to some conclusions and possible recommendations for future support.

2   INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

Instructional support with the professor began in September 2021 as part of improving her teaching as a professor in the Faculty of Architecture and Design. A key aspect of the support was that she selected one course from all those she was teaching, ensuring that all support efforts were concentrated on it. The selected course had a workload of ninety-six hours, distributed among thirty-two hours of class and sixty-four hours of independent student work, over sixteen weeks. This was a course that contributed to the development of three competencies previously defined by the Design Department: Literacy, Critical Thinking, and Project Management; and had two general learning objectives for students:

1 Use design tools to formulate and answer questions in the exploration of design practices.
2 Take a critical stance in the design of objects. The final learning outcome was a research-creation project of objects and everyday practices that were close to the students and continuously present in their lives.

2.1   INTEGRATING IWT PRACTICES

By October 2022, when I started the CLASP Fellows Program, although the support was already effective in improving the professor's teaching, she indicated that her teaching had not contributed much to the development of critical thinking skills. I took advantage of this vulnerable space to propose that we review ways in which writing-based instructional practices would contribute to the critical thinking of her students and learn together how to do it. We both made it clear from the beginning that we wanted to do some exploratory exercises on how writing could contribute to critical thinking, that we would build the activities together, and, as much as we wanted to maintain "the illusion of infinite time," we knew that we had very little time to use in the classes. The lack of time was something that generated a lot of anxiety for me and constantly made me think and feel that I was playing against the essential part of the process.

The first moment of the process consisted of better defining critical thinking competencies and the need that motivated her to use writing to promote student learning. The starting point was the definition provided by the university's Design Department, which states that critical thinking, as a competency, involves critically and reflectively assuming disciplinary knowledge and being sensitive to context, problems, and other perspectives at play. It also involves adapting concepts and frameworks, reasonably discussing processes and decision-making, and approaching the professional practice of design creatively, prospectively, and ethically.[1]

While I asked the difficult questions and encouraged her to delimit the definition of critical thinking, she discovered that the department's definition did not convince her. She wanted her students to be more reflective, to question what they learn and how they learn, to evaluate their learning process, and to explore the links between the decisions they make and the actions that result from them. In other words, she was interested in the reflective aspect of critical thinking and wanted reflection to occur among the students in her classes in a more collaborative way.[2]

The next step in the process was to support her decision on the instructional writing practice that would fit the identified need. At this point, my actions revolved around recalling the practices that the IWT considers essential in the writing-based teaching approach. We had a conversation in which we talked about Private Free Writing as a practice that involves writing without stopping; Focused Free Writing, which differs from the former because it always starts with some kind of prompt or question and is usually public or shared with others. In addition, there was Process Writing, which is a practice that invites students to reflect on what has been done to keep some kind of written record of thinking in action.[3] When I told her that this practice helps students evaluate their own learning process and realize the changes that occur in their thinking process, her face changed, and then she and I knew that this was the selected practice.

2.1.1   Process Writing

I read Alfred Guy's chapter on Process Writing and then, in one of our meetings, I provided specific details about the practice.[4] The ensuing conversation confirmed that this was the ideal practice to meet the instructional need for four reasons:

1 Process Writing creates spaces that invite a more reflective stance and encourages students to adopt that stance;
2 it helps them to become aware of how their minds are functioning at particular moments of learning;

3 it supports self-assessment of performance by making students more aware of how they work on specific tasks and enabling them to imagine other ways to approach future performance; and
4 it contributes to a global evaluation of the learning process they have had within the course.

2.2   ACTIVITIES

Once the practice was defined, the next step was to plan the writing activities. My proposal for this stage of the process was:

1 We would design the activities together;
2 each activity would define a need and at least one learning objective aligned with reflection
3 we would review the step-by-step sequence of each activity; and
4 we would determine the best time during the class to develop each activity, considering the limited time available (there was never more than fifteen minutes because the professor had to cover the disciplinary content).

In the conversations we had, we understood that taking the time to think about the needs and learning objectives of the activities made them more coherent with the four reasons that had helped select Process Writing. Table 1 shows the general planning of the activities.

Activity	Learning Objectives	Cohort	Questions
1 Writing a letter	Evaluate one's own learning process at the end of the course. Question what they learned and how they learned it.	2023 second term cohort	What was the most important learning? What about it was important? In what way will it help you in your personal or professional life? What recommendations would you make to a future student of the course to achieve that learning?
2 Responses to self-assessment questions	Self-assess performance to investigate the object through primary and secondary sources. Explore the links between the decisions made during the investigation and the analyses reached and the resulting actions.	2024 first term cohort	What have you discovered about the object of your inquiry? What has surprised you about the object you are investigating? From what has surprised you, is there anything that allows you to make a critical reflection on your object?
3 Dialogic writing	Exchange reactions and opinions provoked by the question posed in a presentation of a colonial object or experience. Develop an understanding of the concept of coloniality in an open and collaborative way.	2024 second term cohort	Question from the student presenting on the object Response to the question by student 1 Comment on the response by student 2 Final comment by student 1

1 General planning of the activities designed during the instructional support

2.2.1 Activity 1: Writing a letter

The first activity aimed to encourage students to reflect on and assess their learning process before the semester ended and they went on vacation. It consisted of writing a letter to an imaginary student from another cohort describing some learning from the course and offering some recommendations for this future student to achieve successful learning when taking the course. This activity was planned for the second semester of the 2023 cohort and was carried out on the last day of the course. We both thought of the questions, but I remember the professor made several observations to ensure the questions helped students question their learning within the course.

2.2.2 Activity 2: Responses to self-assessment questions

From here on, the activities were planned for the cohort in the first semester of 2024 . The second activity was designed for a moment when students were learning to inquire about the design object through primary and secondary sources. The professor's expertise indicated that this skill was not as developed as she thought and that students could not see the connection between the investigation they were doing and the decisions they had to make in the future within the research project. This was the need that guided the activity, and the activity itself consisted of answering two questions that would allow students to self-assess their performance on the investigation.

2.2.3 Activity 3: Dialogic writing

The need identified for the third activity was connected to the outcomes observed in all classes during the initial activity known as "Bonus." It consisted of a short presentation by a student in each class, aimed at presenting an object or an experience of coloniality (this was a central course concept). Each presentation ended with a question posed by the presenting student, which the others had responded to orally up to that point in the course. As expected, very few students participated, and the professor needed to know what they thought about the concept of coloniality. I proposed planning Dialectical Notebooks,* and we discussed it; I explained what they were. I discovered that it was not a practice she was interested in, mainly because it required class time that she did not have. I recalled the words from Margaret Ranny Bledsoe's† chapter, which I felt encouraged me to support the professor to experiment with Dialectical Notebooks and try to discover a more appropriate way to use them.[5] We developed a dialogic writing proposal which consisted of

* Dialectical Notebooks or written conversations are practices that combine Focused Free Writing and Process writing. Students work in small groups on a difficult text to understand it more deeply.

† Margaret Ranny Bledsoe is an accomplished educator with a Ph.D. in applied mathematics from New York University. She has worked in academia at Bard College and the University of the Oriente in Venezuela, and has collaborated with the Institute for Writing and Thinking. Her public education roles include teaching mathematics, serving as a mathematics coach, headmaster of Charlestown High School, and Superintendent of Schools in St. Johnsbury, Vermont.

each student responding to the question by writing (in this case, about the colonial experience as it relates to the traditional El Chumbe sash),* passing their notebook to another student to comment on the response, and then returning the notebook to the owner to read and make a final comment. Again, from the professor's facial reactions, it seemed that the proposal had been a success. I imagined Margaret Ranny Bledsoe smiling and saying: I told you so.

3   RESULTS

3.1   ACTIVITY 1

The activities were already planned, and each was implemented in its time. Let's go back to one of the questions that guided the support: how far did these practices contribute to student learning? I believe that through the letter, students evaluated their own learning and through writing they learned to make their point of view as more critical designers, largely because they learned two major skills: questioning the environment and exploring more than one perspective. Apparently, they developed these two skills because the professor taught them to investigate objects and to conduct and analyze interviews with the users of the objects, and also because of the decolonial approach she imparted throughout the course.

Additionally, the students said that these learnings helped them "open their minds" to other perspectives, understand contexts, design with other purposes, find other sources of inspiration for design, think about the effects their designs can have, and think about the contribution they make to their society through design as a discipline. Finally, the students reported that they learned skills that were not in the official curriculum, such as working in groups, being empathetic, observing and listening to others and themselves, being patient, and connecting with other people. A couple of students said that the group work methodology is not always easy to achieve, that there is a lack of clarity in the instructions for the assigned tasks, and that the feedback the professor provided throughout the course was very helpful in their learning.

3.2   ACTIVITY 2

With the second activity, the students wrote that learning to conduct inquiries allowed them to understand the origins, history, and evolution of the design of the object each group studied. They wrote that they realized the role of culture in the meaning, value, and use attributed to objects. Of all the inquiring exercises they

* "It is said that the son of the stars, Juan Tama, upon emerging from the waters, felt naked and surrounded by the nature of the Páramo and its animal life; the spirits of the nine maidens took the threads of the rainbow and with their hands wove the Chumbe, the animal skins were transformed into anácus, capisayo, and turí."[6]

"The Chumbe is a sash that can measure from five to ten centimeters wide, and four to five meters long. It is used by the Misak and Nasa women of Cauca and the Ingas of the Sibundoy Valley to carry newborns on their backs and to hold the anácus or traditional skirt. The Chumbes are woven by women with wool threads of various colors, forming the figures of the original art through rhombuses. These sashes are more than garments: they express their worldview and thoughts. Through their designs, they represent a series of forms related to history and experiences"[7]

had done, what surprised them most was learning that people create bonds with objects and that sometimes these are part of family values; that technology influences the use attributed to an object, and that values and uses are rooted in culture. An interesting and unexpected finding was that the writing activity allowed some students to realize that the inquiry contributed to their awareness and reflection on the privileged status they have within Colombian society.

3.3   ACTIVITY 3

Through the third activity, students exchanged opinions about the appropriation of Indigenous cultural and intellectual heritage by foreign fashion chains. In their responses, it can be understood that, for them as designers, the concept of coloniality is associated with a design practice that ignores or nullifies the origin of the ideas that inspire the creations. It seems that in these exchanges mediated by writing, students make some initial connections between the inquiring exercises they learned (object genealogy, interviews, etc.) and the type of designer they want to be. In my opinion, it seems they are starting to understand that they aspire to be designers who foster more respectful connections with the objects that inspire them and those they create, while also embracing less hierarchical power dynamics.

4   CONCLUSIONS

I want to conclude this document in two ways; first, I will discuss the conclusions related to student learning within the course and try to answer how much the writing activities contributed. Then I want to address what it was like to support the professor, what my learnings were, and what I will do differently in future support processes. I would also like this section to provide recommendations for others who support similar instructional processes.

    I believe that the three writing activities we planned together made the students pause and take class time to reflect on their learning at different moments during the course. From my point of view, the students' responses in all the writing activities suggest that inquiry was the most significant learning for them. I also think that in some way, the activities provided feedback on her teaching. For example, the letter worked to receive information on how they evaluated what they learned; the second activity indicated how well developed their inquiry skills were; the dialogic writing showed her what they were connecting the concept of coloniality with and how it was impacting their reflection as future Colombian designers. Although it was not clear to me how the activities contributed to the development of Critical

Thinking as designers, there is no doubt that writing activities provided – for the first time – an opportunity within the course curriculum for students to take three pauses during a semester and "step aside" to reflect and evaluate the progress of their learning as designers both individually and collectively with their professor and peers.

As an instructional leader, I gained several insights that I wish to share. However, I must admit that the anxiety stemming from the novelty of supporting a professor in integrating writing practices never fully disappeared. In general, it was not an easy process because I believe I did not achieve something fundamental: supporting the professor to understand that her students can learn about design as a discipline through writing. Instructional support on writing practices should not be a set of strategies to implement. It must go further, helping faculty to discover and cultivate the "personalized approach" that writing brings to learning the discipline.

4.1 THERE CAN BE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF INSTRUCTIONAL WRITING SUPPORT

At this moment, I believe there can be different levels of instructional writing support. The first level might involve a collection of strategies, serving as an initial, exploratory phase. Another level would involve developing a personalized approach, which I admittedly did not achieve with the professor. In a faculty development experience like the one described and analyzed in this document, while detailed planning of activities, selection of practices, and identification of specific needs were essential, my impression is that they were not sufficient. I believe that within instructional support for writing practices, at least these four actions must be taken.

4.2 FACULTY MUST WRITE DURING THE INSTRUCTIONAL WRITING SUPPORT

Surely making the professor read about the topic is a good practice to understand what writing-based teaching means. However, the experience with this process leads me to propose that faculty must experience writing exercises that allow them to have an experiential learning very similar to what I experienced within CLASP. I believe that understanding will also be achieved if there are more prior moments to talk about writing practices, to discuss them, and to review their challenges and the doubts they have. Above all, true understanding can take place if there are intentional moments to invite faculty to write about their learning and read what they write ; to experiment within the process to see how writing and reading what they write works, and then reflect with me on this experience. The experience with this process makes me think that a learning community around writing-based teaching could also be a good example of an experiential formative opportunity. If faculty

do not achieve this understanding, their writing-based teaching will be threatened when facing institutional challenges such as covering many disciplinary contents.

4.3 ACTIVITY PLANNING MUST BE A MORE INTENTIONAL EXERCISE

I learned that it is not enough to have just several hours of planning to jointly design the writing activities within the process and then guarantee the alignment of the activities with learning outcomes. This experience made me understand that many more actions are required. Identifying both the students' needs (writing to learn with peers, focusing to learn, or processing what they have just learned) and finding the suitable moments to do so (at the end of a unit, after teaching a specific skill, at a point in the course where they have to integrate knowledge, at the end of the course, etc.) are important actions. It is essential to identify all these needs and moments in advance before implementing any action. Additionally, the process should achieve more reflective moments with the students on their responses to the writing activities, and with the professor on the outcomes of each activity. Unfortunately, none of these occurred as intentionally as I wished in this process.

4.4 PROCESS WRITING IS AN ESSENTIAL TOOL IN MY INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT MODELS

My experience at DIDACTA has allowed me to propose specific instructional support methodologies. Two examples of these can be the instructional support for improving teaching when a professor is below institutionally established conditions, and the support for designing their teaching portfolios. I have no doubt that reflection favors transfer; that is, what faculty can learn in workshops or instructional support can be transferred to new contexts if they reflect. However, in the instructional support models I propose, reflection remains invisible within the space of interactions and experiences. Writing about what they learn and how they learn during the processes would make reflection a habit for faculty and make them more aware of what else they need for their professional development.

4.5 ESTABLISHING A STRONG RAPPORT WITH THE PROFESSOR IS FUNDAMENTAL TO EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

Establishing a strong rapport with the professor is fundamental to effective instructional support: This connection, built on trust and active listening, formed the foundation with which to experiment with writing-based teaching. Without this crucial bond, the writing activities would have lacked the necessary support and

understanding to be successful. It was my duty to create and maintain this relationship, ensuring the professor felt heard and appreciated. This bond was the core of our collaboration, allowing us to overcome challenges and celebrate achievements together. In summary, the rapport we built was not just a part of the process; it was the essence that made the instructional support truly effective and impactful.

I have much to learn about writing-based learning and how to guide faculty in integrating writing into their teaching. This experience was a great beginning, thanks to the IWT and the support I received from all the professors and my program peers, as well as María, the professor who allowed me to learn alongside her. I am excited because, through my participation in CLASP, I have been able to apply what I learned to other areas, such as the Basic Uniandes Cycle (CBU by its initials in Spanish) and the Thesis Camp.* I am grateful that, at this point in my life, writing offers me opportunities to pause and connect with deep interests that I cherish for my personal and professional development.

* The CBU is a set of mandatory courses that all undergraduate students at the Universidad de los Andes must complete as part of their comprehensive education in basic areas of knowledge: Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, and Science and Technology.[8]

The Thesis Camp is a space designed to facilitate significant progress in the structuring and writing of research products for graduate students at the Universidad de los Andes.[9]

NOTES

1 Universidad de los Andes, 2024b
2 Brockbank & McGill, 2002; Michelle et al., 2017
3 Bard College IWT, 2024
4 2009
5 2009
6 Mananasrik Wan Wetotrik. Document of the indigenous people's council, 1998. Taken from: Javier Baena Espinel, 'Aesthetic Dimension in the Design of Paeces and Guambianos Chumbes'. Universidad Icesi
7 Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, 2024.
8 Universidad de los Andes, 2021.
9 Universidad de los Andes, 2024a

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