



# WAC in an Urban and Bilingual Setting: Writing-to-Learn in English y en Español

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Responding to a 1999 City University of New York (CUNY) Board of Trustees resolution mandating a five-year university-wide WAC Initiative, Hostos Community College/CUNY, an urban, bilingual community college with a predominantly Spanish-speaking, low-income student population, has established a comprehensive WAC program. The Hostos Initiative reflects the University-wide philosophy that writing ability is developed through extensive writing practice across a broad range of academic experiences at all levels of a student's academic life and draws on research which illustrates the inter-relationship between language and learning (Barnes, *et al.*, Britton, Emig, Martin *et al.*).

Engaging in campus-wide dialogues on pedagogy and collaborating with seven, on-campus CUNY graduate student Writing Fellows, by spring 2002, over forty Hostos faculty had implemented WAC strategies and assignments in a variety of disciplines ranging from the liberal arts and math and sciences to allied health professional programs. At least thirty-five courses had been modified to incorporate or refine writing assignments, including both low-stakes "writing-to-learn," and "high-stakes," (Elbow) formal graded assignments. In addition, seven courses were, for the first time, designed and designated Writing Intensive (WI). Pleased with the progress of our work, it seemed that the WAC Initiative had at least minimally affected almost all academic areas of the College. Yet if Hostos were to remain true to its bilingual mission, an important application of WAC still remained.

## **Bilingual WAC**

As a college committed to providing academic and career opportunities to all who seek it, Hostos provides a transitional bilingual education program offering English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) students college-level courses in English or Spanish along with graduated levels of ESL instruction. The planned outcome of this model is that eventually all of a student's courses will be taken in English.

While the pedagogical effectiveness of writing-to-learn and speaking-to-learn practices for advanced and post-ESL students mainstreamed into English-language content courses was established over the course of a four-year study through both quantitative and qualitative measures (Hirsch), little research has been undertaken to see if a WAC pedagogy would be useful to those elementary ESL students taking coursework in Spanish. Recognizing our bilingual mission and desiring all students to use writing not merely to demonstrate knowledge, but to create it, we began to explore the use of WAC principles and practices in courses taught in Spanish. Our goals were to: 1) provide writing practice and improve writing proficiency for students in their native language; 2) use writing as a means of learning and making sense of course material; and 3) contribute to research on the connections between proficiency in the native language and the acquisition of the second language (Cummins, Roberts).

Here we examine two sections of "Introduction to Humanities," one offered in English and the other in Spanish, taught in spring 2002 by Professor Carmen Marin. Professor Marin's sudden and untimely death in August 2002 meant not only a great personal loss for all her colleagues but also left it to others to undertake the difficult but essential task of sharing her pioneering work. Our close collaboration with her in our roles as WAC Coordinator and Writing Fellow allowed us to actively participate in these evolving endeavors. Though having lost the invaluable opportunity to consider with her some of the implications of this work, we will examine the approaches used by Professor Marin to implement WAC in her Spanish-language section along with some of the ways she utilized writing in her English-language section of "Introduction to the Humanities." Portions of assignments written in Spanish have been translated into English, and full-length copies of all assignments are available on the Hostos WAC website: [www.hostos.cuny.edu/wac](http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/wac). From our perspectives and hop-

ing to convey some of Professor Marin's enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity, and self-reflective teaching practices, we consider the effects of writing in these classes as well as the implications for WAC in a bilingual setting.

### **Introduction to the Humanities in Spanish**

Professor Marin, a self-proclaimed "WAC convert," was a well respected and long time faculty member who was familiar with WAC theory and practice, believed in its tenets and was eager to be one of the first to explore the introduction of WAC to the bilingual component of the college's offerings.

The students in her Spanish-language section of Introduction to the Humanities were enrolled in the first level of ESL and had limited English-language proficiencies. When asked her goals for her students and how the Fellow could help her attain these, Professor Marin replied, "I would like you to help me get my students to think through writing in a logical, clear and individual manner. Once they have learned the facts, I would like them to think for themselves. I want them to feel empowered, to develop their own voice, to understand that their thoughts, their intellects, are as valid and as important as anyone else's. I want my students to feel good about themselves." Drawing on Fulwiler's "Why We Teach Writing in the First Place," both Professor Marin and Writing Fellow Carolina De Luca agreed that the scope of their effort would not be the production of a final product or a final term project, but rather an engagement with writing to initiate and sustain a cognitive process. The focus of writing would be an undertaking of either a personal, exploratory, or critical analysis of the subject matter. This kind of writing, often termed "writing-to-learn" or "expressive function" (Britton, 1975), is language close to the self, revealing the speaker as well as her topic. Often the language of a first draft, it recognizes that, "language facilitates discovery by crystallizing experience" (Fulwiler 27). For this class, then, writing was a means of inspiring students to learn through the act of writing with the expectation that given time and practice, their writing would also improve.

The class proceeded on the further assumption that improved proficiency in one's native-language would lead to greater proficiency in acquiring English, the second-language. The expectation was that through working on both form and content in their native language, adult ESL students would

translate this improved writing proficiency in Spanish into their writing in English, a concept of great interest to researchers in bilingual education.

The thirty lower-level ESL students in this class, ranging in age from 18 to 35, and speaking little or no English, came from a variety of Hispanic cultures, extending from the Caribbean Isles to Central and South America. Most of them held jobs, had families and children to take care of, and went to school full time. One of the more difficult hurdles in teaching a class united by language yet radically diverse in cultures, dialects and experiences, was to find appropriate textbook materials that spoke to these different backgrounds. This was particularly difficult to do as there were few course materials written in Spanish. Professor Marin located a general reader with primary sources (*Obras Maestras*) and a cultural/historical textbook (Fernandez, *et al.*), both edited in Spain. Each inevitably read culture and history through an essentially Iberian slant. The paucity of appropriate materials and the narrow, cultural visions of both readers resulted in instructor-generated materials and the need to create a series of low-stakes, informal assignments that would make sense to a culturally diversified, yet linguistically unified student population.

Introducing students to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* provided challenges for all. Professor Marin had been dissatisfied with a previous assignment that had led to largely "Yes/No" student responses. She now revised the assignment to engage students on a more personal level and lead to more thoughtful writing. Though lengthier, the original assignment, excerpted below, had actually provided less opportunity for writing:

¿Por qué dicen que Hamlet está loco?  
¿Cree que sea cierto o no?  
(*Why do they say that Hamlet is crazy?*  
*Do you think that this is certain?*)

In the revision, only one question was asked, but it was more relevant to the students' lives and unthreatening as an ungraded low-stakes writing assignment:

- *Considere el monólogo de Hamlet Ser o no ser ... como ejemplo de auto-valoración/examen de vida, y haga tanto con la suya. Tome en consideración los*

*puntos discutidos en clase y su relación con los valores relativos en los códigos personales.*

- *(Consider Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be..." as an example of self-evaluation/examination of one's life, and apply it to your own life. Take into consideration the issues discussed in class and their relation to your own personal values.)*

While this one question may have been more difficult, the results of this revision were impressive. While a few students worked at home on their own, most approached either the Professor or the Writing Fellow asking questions about the meaning of Hamlet's soliloquy. One-on-one, they went over the assignment—low stakes, students learned, does not necessarily mean easy. Confronting student difficulties with accessing *Hamlet* and drawing on research which underscores the need for learners to make a connection between new and known material for learning to occur, (Britton, 1982; Bruner), another low-stakes assignment was developed asking students to think and write about a period in their lives when they, or someone they knew or read about, had to make a crucial decision. They were then to write about the moral implications and responsibilities arising out of such a decision. All of the students wrote extensively, and as a result of this self-reflective writing activity, they returned to Shakespeare with a new understanding of Hamlet's soliloquy.

For example, a twenty-two year old Cuban student wrote about his journey from Cuba to the U.S., which took place on a raft over a period of days. Out at sea he had almost lost his life. Some of his travel companions never made it to the shores of Florida. At the journey's outset, he had to choose whether to stay in Cuba and face the prospect of a grim future or to leave his family behind, and come to the U.S. to get an education and a job in order to send money back home. His touching and moving account titled "Amleto el Cubano," ("Hamlet the Cuban") while syntactically awkward and grammatically imprecise, was logical, reflective, and analytical. Significantly, it permitted him to now identify with Hamlet's dilemma:

*"Yo me sentía como Amleto. Un Amleto Cubano, encadenado entre dos opciones muy difíciles.*

*¿Combatir y partir por los Estados Unidos, o morir de una muerte espiritual en Cuba?*

*(“I felt like Hamlet. A Cuban Hamlet chained between two very difficult choices. To fight and leave for the United States, or to stay and die of a spiritual death in Cuba?”)*

The Writing Fellow’s role as collaborator was not limited to faculty. As the mediator between student and professor, she was able to gauge what skills students needed to hone as well as to see where assignments succeeded and failed. Viewing the Writing Fellow as more of a peer, students felt comfortable confiding their confusions or difficulties. This ability of a Writing Fellow to identify areas of student concern and provide valuable information to faculty has been mirrored throughout our project by other faculty/fellow partnerships. The collaboration between Professor Marin, students and Writing Fellow produced great gains in pupil comprehension and interest in *Hamlet*. Yet both professor and Writing Fellow shared the view that, in spite of their success, students felt estranged from “white” Western texts and characters who, from ages past, spoke a different, almost unintelligible language to them.

The challenge of further engaging students in texts important to a study of the humanities was better met in an assignment based on a visit to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art which revised an older “Museum Visit” project that had been prepared, years earlier, for an English speaking, “Introduction to the Humanities” class. That project had been quite extensive and required student responses to Egyptian, African, Greek, Japanese and European art and artifacts.

Before re-writing this assignment, students were asked if they had ever been to the Metropolitan Museum. Professor Marin was surprised to discover that not only had students never been to the Metropolitan, but also they had also never been to a museum of any kind. Indeed, her students rarely even traveled to the wealthy neighborhoods of Manhattan’s Upper East Side, for as a thirty-year-old Mexican mother of two expressed, “We have no business down there.”

The original assignment assumed that the English speaking class had already been exposed to art. It asked specific,

technical questions such as the uses of light in Rembrandt, *chiaroscuro* technique in Vermeer, and aesthetic and theoretical questions. It assumed that students knew where the works of art were located within the huge building of the Metropolitan. Yet while the assignment implied a level of sophistication on the student's part, it was, in essence, a factual listing of observations with little space for analytical reflection.

For the revision of this assignment for her Spanish-speaking class, Professor Marin decided that nothing was to be assumed: No previous contact with art, no familiarity with the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and certainly no knowledge of the physical space of the Metropolitan Museum. The assignment's goals were to provide: 1) exposure to art, 2) more opportunity for writing in Spanish, 3) an awakening of the senses and initiation into an aesthetic process, 4) an articulation of feelings deriving from aesthetic observation and analysis, and 5) opportunity for individual student work.

Professor Marin and her Writing Fellow engaged in much discussion as they revised this assignment. Now divided into four instead of six parts and prefaced with an introduction, it included a cover picture of the Metropolitan, directions by subway or bus, a floor plan of the museum *in Spanish* with markings above the location of the works they were to find, admission fee information, student ID policies and rules of appropriate museum behavior. Before distributing the project, both Professor Marin and the Writing Fellow tried it themselves, a key step, they had discovered, in creating effective assignments. This preview of responses allowed Professor Marin to organize the assignment logistically and to assess its manageability. Selections are presented below:

Arte Romano:

*Roman Art:*

Busca el "Cubiculum from Boscoreale"  
(*Find the "Cubiculum from Boscoreale"*)

¿Te gustaría vivir en un cuarto así?  
¿Por qué o por qué no?  
(*Would you like to live in a place like this?  
Why or why not?*)

Caminando de la Galería Greco-Romana en dirección a la Galería Africana, se encontrará con una serie de bustos/cabezas a su izquierda. Considere las siguientes definiciones de arte:

*(Walking to the African gallery from the Greek and Roman section, you will find a series of sculpted busts/heads on your left side. Observe these works. Now think about these two definitions about art:)*

Arte Representativo- una representación fiel y veraz del objeto copiado.

*(Representational art: a faithful, real-life representation of a copied object.)*

Arte Figurativo- una imagen que simboliza un concepto o idea, sin ser fiel o real.

*(Figurative art: an image that symbolizes a concept or idea, without being real life-like.)*

¿Definiría estos bustos como arte representativa o figurativa? ¿Por que?

*(Would you define these busts as representational or figurative art? Why?)*

## **Analysis**

The rationale in selecting this visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art was a desire for students to *use* the city, to read their urban setting as a textbook they could discover and decipher. The Metropolitan is for many the quintessential New York, urban museum. Professor Marin, a Puerto Rican with a strong sense of education as a democratic right for all, believed that simply to enter such an august building would allow her disenfranchised students to feel the awe of being a part of something new and obviously important. In addition, she wanted her students exposed to the art of the dawning of Western civilization. Yet it was also important that students become acquainted with the abstraction of African Art, and with a culture, which much like their own, was not mainstream or politically part of the status quo. In the months following September 11, 2001, it was relevant that students walk through the “Arms and Armor” gallery and observe that objects of self-defense and destruction could be beautiful and considered, paradoxically, “art.” In a culture plagued by gun-toting fanatic-



ics and to an inner city audience often familiar with shoot-outs in their own backyards, such a paradox resulted in many reactions:

“Ahora se lo que significa la palabra paradoja. El diccionario la describe como una cosa imposible a definir sin encontrar una contradicción. No es una consecuencia de el arte la destrucción de 9-11. ¡Pero las armas en esta galería son tan bellas!”

*(Now I know what the word paradox means. The dictionary describes it as a contradiction. The destruction of 9-11 is not a consequence of art. But the weapons in this gallery are so beautiful!)*

The task to view Bronzino’s “Portrait of a Young Man” and pose questions they would ask if he suddenly came alive, connected students to the work of art:

“¿Cuales materias estudias a la universidad? A mi me gustaria estudiar economia. Veo que estas leyendo un libro. ¿Cual es su titulo y te gusta leer? A mi no me gusta mucho leer. Prefiero escribir.”

*(What do you study at the university? I would like to study economics. I see that you are reading a book. What is its title? I don't like to read. I prefer to write.)*

In choosing and explaining their selection of a favorite painting, students not only engaged intellectually, but also formed a personal relationship to the aesthetic. Not surprisingly, all the students chose religious icons from the High Middle Ages or early Renaissance as their favorite piece. Mostly Catholic and born to Christian cultures, it perhaps seemed natural to choose something to which they could so closely relate.

The assignment concluded with the pivotal question Professor Marin wanted her humanities students to consider:

¿Que es el Arte?

*(What is art?)*

When the students returned to class a few weeks later, there was much enthusiasm. Most had gone to the Museum twice, the second time bringing either siblings, children, parents or friends. Though the assignment required a long trip downtown and extensive writing, there was a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

## Introduction to the Humanities in English

This English-language section was comprised of thirty Hispanic students who were enrolled in the upper levels of Hostos' Intensive ESL Program, which provides content-based instruction in all language skills and is designed to bring a selected group of students through three semesters of ESL in just two.

Though the syllabus for this class was almost identical to the Spanish one, for this section, Professor Marin and Writing Fellow Adrian Wisnicki, took a very different approach. Greater in scope and radically altered in structure, the English-language arts appreciation assignment was not limited to a museum trip, but added a visit to student-selected architectural sites and theater performances as well as Internet research. It also required students to write five-paragraph essays at the end of each section. For example:

### Theater Assignment

During the play I want you to be as observant as you can...and whenever you notice something interesting, make sure you note it down.

*For example, before the play starts, be sure to think about things such as:*

- What does the theatre look like?
- Where is your seat in regards to the stage?
- What is people's behavior like at the theatre?

*And when the play is on:*

- What is the audience's attitude and behavior?
- What did you notice about the play?  
Do any parts stand out?
- Is it convincing, real, familiar or strange to you?

After seeing the play, write a five-paragraph essay including your personal feelings about the experience.

In comparing the two assignments, we observed that the English speaking class was perceived as having greater access to both cultural sites and technology and a greater sense of aesthetics. They had choices with regard to selecting sites and a broader range of subjects to discuss. The required essays demanded higher levels of expressive communication than the Spanish-language assignment to answer a series of ques-

tions. Professor Marin also assumed capabilities on their part extending beyond language use. She viewed them as better prepared to handle difficult cognitive tasks and better able to negotiate the intricacies of New York City. The English speakers were expected to know more and to do more than their Spanish-speaking counterparts.

### **Implications**

Professor Marin's idea of the classroom as an arena providing freedom of expression for all students, and her understanding of writing as a tool for accessing intellectual and social emancipation, was highly democratic. To her very diverse Spanish audience – mostly new to this country and its language – writing in all its critical and creative capacities, meant entering and challenging a system that often dismissed and excluded them. The differences in the assignments, based on assumptions about students and their preparedness, do not obscure the fact that in both classes students were given opportunities to use writing to make meaning and to make sense of course material.

For Professor Marin, the humanities were a fundamental part of everyone's education. Responses to the class assignments demonstrated that aesthetic experience reported and translated into writing allowed the work of art to become tangible and relevant. Grappling with artwork was no longer an abstract assignment to be rushed through and submitted for a grade, but was rather intended to be a meaningful process of growth and discovery. Art was not a means to the end of expressing judgment, but the beginning of a process of inquiry—a process of discovering meaning, a process of discovering self. Writing was a means of engaging in this exploration. For the students in both these classes writing-to-learn and learning to write were part of an ever-evolving process. Our examination of the pedagogical practices undertaken in these classes indicates that in a bilingual setting, there appears to be a place for bilingual WAC.

*Dedicated to the memory of our beloved friend and colleague, Professor Carmen Marin.*

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