

STUDY ABROAD IN WRITING CENTERS IN COLOMBIA AND THE USA: LESSONS IN TRANSLANGUAGING, DECOLONIAL THEORY, AND PROGRAMMING

ESTUDIOS EN EL EXTERIOR EN CENTROS DE ESCRITURA EN COLOMBIA Y ESTADOS UNIDOS: LECCIONES SOBRE TRANSLANGUAJE, TEORÍA DECOLONIAL Y PROGRAMACIÓN

ÉTUDES À L'ÉTRANGER DANS DES CENTRES D'ÉCRITURE EN COLOMBIE ET AUX ÉTATS-UNIS : LEÇONS SUR TRANSLANGAGE, THÉORIE DÉCOLONIALE ET PROGRAMMATION

ESTUDOS NO EXTERIOR EM CENTROS DE PRODUÇÃO TEXTUAL NA COLÔMBIA E NOS ESTADOS UNIDOS: LIÇÕES SOBRE TRANSLINGUAGEM, TEORIA DECOLONIAL E PLANEJAMENTO

Rodrigo A. Rodríguez-Fuentes
Assistant Professor, Universidad del Norte, Barranquilla, Colombia.
rodrigof@uninorte.edu.co
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7055-0794>

Harry Denny
Professor, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA.
hdenny@purdue.edu
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1544-1752>



ABSTRACT

As a product of both Universidad del Norte and Purdue University engaging in a partnership around shared academic interests, academic study exchanges, and multilingual education, this case study reports on a grant-funded student exchange that used a translanguaging approach to explore how aspects of English and Spanish have an influence on tutor education around writing centers. The first section of the paper describes in detail the exchange program and its background, including how the student research projects consciously emphasized the way this partnership could foreground practical approaches to translanguaging informed by decoloniality views. The second section acknowledges that our project emphasized pragmatic needs and institutional goals but should have better embedded guidance and lessons from decolonial theory. The third section of the paper includes the lessons that complement both decolonial theory and translanguaging pedagogy in study abroad contexts and the programming intricacies of an academic exchange conditioned by institutionality and local contexts. The last section is a brief conclusion about the exchange program, its ideological impact on both universities, and the need for future collaboration to foreground decolonial insight on planning and proposals for cross-institutional projects, especially in the context of mentoring writers at the intersection of nationality and cultivation of voice, agency and rhetoric.

Keywords: writing center studies, study-abroad programs, grant funding, translanguaging, decoloniality

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RESUMEN

Como producto de la colaboración entre la Universidad del Norte y Purdue University en torno a intereses académicos compartidos, intercambios de estudios académicos y educación multilingüe, el presente estudio de caso expone un intercambio de estudiantes —financiado con una beca— que utilizó un enfoque translingüístico para explorar cómo los aspectos del inglés y el español influyen en la formación de tutores en centros de escritura. La primera sección del documento describe en detalle el programa de intercambio y sus antecedentes, incluyendo cómo los proyectos de investigación de los estudiantes hicieron énfasis a propósito en la forma como la colaboración podría poner en primer plano enfoques prácticos de *translanguaging* modelados por visiones decoloniales. En la segunda parte, se admite que el proyecto puso por delante necesidades pragmáticas y objetivos institucionales, pero que debió haber incorporado mejor las orientaciones y lecciones de la teoría decolonial. La tercera parte incluye las lecciones que complementan tanto la teoría decolonial como la pedagogía translingüística en contextos de estudios en el extranjero y las complejidades de programación de un intercambio académico condicionado por la institucionalidad y factores locales. La última sección es una breve conclusión sobre el programa de intercambio, su impacto ideológico en ambas universidades y la necesidad de que la futura colaboración ponga en primer plano la visión decolonial en la planificación y las propuestas de proyectos interinstitucionales, especialmente en el contexto de la tutoría de escritura en la intersección de la nacionalidad y el cultivo de la voz, la agencia y la retórica.

Palabras clave: estudios sobre centros de escritura, programas de estudios en el extranjero, becas financiadas, translenguaje, decolonialidad

RÉSUMÉ

Comme produit de la collaboration entre l'Universidad del Norte et Purdue University autour d'intérêts académiques communs, d'échanges d'études académiques et d'éducation multilingue, cette étude de cas décrit un échange d'étudiants financé par une bourse qui a utilisé une approche translinguistique pour explorer comment les aspects de l'anglais et de l'espagnol influencent la formation des tuteurs dans les centres d'écriture. La première partie de l'article décrit en détail le programme d'échange et son contexte, y compris la manière dont les projets de recherche des étudiants ont volontairement mis l'accent sur la façon dont la collaboration pouvait mettre en avant des approches pratiques translanguagières modelées par des visions décoloniales. Dans la deuxième partie, il est reconnu que le projet a donné la priorité aux besoins pragmatiques et aux objectifs institutionnels, mais qu'il aurait dû mieux intégrer les orientations et les leçons de la théorie décoloniale. La troisième partie comprend des leçons qui complètent à la fois la théorie décoloniale et la pédagogie translinguistique dans les contextes d'études à l'étranger et les complexités de la programmation d'un échange universitaire conditionné par l'institutionnalisme et les facteurs locaux. La dernière section est une brève conclusion sur le programme d'échange, son impact idéologique sur les deux universités et la nécessité d'une collaboration future pour mettre en avant la perspective décoloniale dans la planification et les propositions de projets interinstitutionnels, en particulier dans le contexte de l'encadrement d'écrivains à l'intersection de la nationalité et de la culture de la voix, de l'agence et de la rhétorique.

Mots-clés : études sur des centres d'écriture, plans des cours à l'étranger, bourses d'études financées, translanguage, décolonialité

RESUMO

Como resultado da colaboração entre a Universidad del Norte e a Purdue University, com foco em interesses acadêmicos compartilhados, intercâmbios acadêmicos e educação multilíngue, este estudo de caso relata um programa de intercâmbio de estudantes financiado por uma bolsa de estudos. O intercâmbio utilizou uma abordagem translíngue para investigar como o inglês e o espanhol influenciam o treinamento de tutores em centros de produção textual. A primeira seção do artigo descreve o programa de intercâmbio e seus antecedentes, destacando como os projetos de pesquisa dos alunos enfatizaram a colaboração para promover abordagens práticas de translanguaging, informadas por perspectivas decoloniais. A segunda seção reconhece que, embora o projeto tenha atendido a necessidades pragmáticas e metas institucionais, ele poderia ter integrado as orientações e lições da teoria decolonial de maneira mais robusta desde o início. A terceira seção aborda as lições que complementam tanto a teoria decolonial quanto a pedagogia translíngue em contextos de intercâmbio acadêmico, discutindo as complexidades de programar um intercâmbio condicionado pela institucionalidade e pelos contextos locais. A última seção é uma breve conclusão sobre o programa de intercâmbio, seu impacto ideológico em ambas as universidades e a necessidade de futuras colaborações para dar destaque à visão decolonial no planejamento e nas propostas de projetos entre instituições, especialmente no contexto de orientação de produtores de texto na interseção de nacionalidade e cultivo de voz, agência e retórica.

Palavras-chave: estudos de centros de produção textual, programas de estudo no exterior, bolsas de estudo, translíngua, decolonialidade

Introduction

As the old proverb says, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” And yet another aphorism in writing centers advocates that consultants “meet writers where they are.” In this paper, the authors document the tensions that arise when these bits of sage wisdom collide against one another and represent the pitfalls of what Grunch McKinney calls “grand visions” in writing centers, where uncritical practices can lead to problems challenged by theoretical innovations, especially in the context of international literacy programming. What began as an innocent attempt, albeit naïve, for colleagues to revive collaboration between institutions became a case study, in retrospect, for the need to think deeply about the theoretical as well as sociocultural and political implications of international study abroad programs with an eye toward encouraging students and faculty alike to take up lessons around translinguaging and writing centers. This article reports on a writing center exchange program between Purdue University, in West Lafayette, Indiana, USA, and the Universidad del Norte (Uninorte) in Barranquilla, Colombia, supported by the 100,000 Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund (<https://www.100kstrongamericas.org/about/>). The authors critically examine the exchange around writing centers and our two institutions with lessons learned for future exchanges that should recognize and resist the reinscription of colonialist thinking around writing centers and study abroad language literacy programs.

The 100K Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund

Purdue University and Uninorte have engaged in a long-term partnership around science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), as part of Purdue’s broader support of Colombian universities and their development of academic programs. The dynamic between our universities has been rooted in the best of intentions, even as

we cannot escape our complicity and role in the colonialist history of land-grant partner universities in other nations (Altbach, 1971). In the early 2000s, Uninorte approached the current Purdue OWL faculty director, the late Linda Bergmann, to seek out support for its fledgling conversations about writing across the curriculum (WAC), writing centers, and online writing labs, in the wake of her delivery of a series of WAC workshops across Colombia. The budding partnership stalled after Bergmann’s death, as Purdue pursued a faculty search to fill her position and awaited that replacement to get up to speed. Harry was hired into that senior faculty role, and when he arrived at Purdue, its intergovernmental liaison with Colombia writ large sought to rekindle the partnership.

Delegations came for visits during which there were sustained conversations about the creation of a Spanish-language version of the Purdue OWL. That project never progressed because of the problems of translating a site so rooted in US-based academic vernacular and cultural references. In addition, we came to realize national and regional differences in Spanish usage would themselves make a global site impractical. Just as important, we were worried about positioning the OWL as regulatory and standard-bearing for academic writing. At the time, Rodrigo was a graduate student in Purdue’s Second Language Studies program, a concentration within its larger English department. When he graduated with a doctorate, he returned home to Colombia and became an Assistant Professor at Uninorte.

After the constitution of the Centro de Escritura Eficacia Comunicativa (ECO) at Uninorte in 2016, national and campus resources dried up during a financial crisis, so Uninorte turned to American resources to support progress on developing its own campus writing center. This budget shortage was felt most acutely around the establishment of staff education protocols for writing teaching and learning as well as establishing databases to track the efficacy of the center’s work and pushing an

expansive research agenda forward. Concurrently, the Purdue OWL has witnessed a notable expansion in the proportion of its clientele comprising multilingual writers. This demographic has grown from constituting 30% of the OWL's traffic in 2005 to 70% by 2013 and remaining stable at this level until COVID-19 pandemic. This shift can be attributed to the institution's recruitment of international undergraduate and graduate students. Meanwhile, at the Purdue OWL, multilingual writers have grown as a portion of its client-base (from 30% to 70% of traffic in the OWL by 2013) as the institution recruited international undergraduate and graduate students.¹ These students began to reveal the limitations and gaps of existing tutor education in the OWL, forcing it to deepen its understanding of multi- or translingual experiences around writing. Between its perceived expertise around multilingual mentoring and writing centers more broadly, the OWL offered Uninorte a credible partnership with significant resources to support the creation and development of writing centers through a variety of modalities (face-to-face, websites, online tutoring). On the flipside, Uninorte offered lessons to the OWL around a culture of translanguaging, which the Purdue campus lacked. Despite being a linguistically diverse campus, everyday practice of multilingual exchanges between students, faculty, and staff is rare. From this drive for both sites to learn from one another, we developed a proposal and won a grant from 100K Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund, a program sponsored by Partners of the Americas. The 100K Strong in

the Americas program started during the Obama administration to foster study abroad, strengthen innovation and leadership, and improve international relations across the continent, particularly in Central and South America. The goal is to get at least 100,000 students going between the US and Latin America or the Caribbean, regions where historically large study-abroad programs had not been happening. Purdue and a wide range of institutions in Colombia have won grants across the eligible disciplines, but our partnership appears to be innovative in fostering connections around the creation and building of writing centers. The authors recognize that this program, funded by the US State Department, cannot be separated from a long colonialist history, even as the initiating US administration sought to undo the historical harms with albeit repackaged colonializing aims.

Purdue's focus on engagement, both within its US state and globally, reflects its mission as a land-grant university.² The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 leveraged formerly federally-controlled lands for the creation of colleges, many of which later became known as research-intensive state-supported universities, like Purdue. Most had a technological and agricultural focus, with an emphasis on equipping citizens for the demands of the rapidly changing economy of the time (Washington State University, 2011). Purdue aspires to be Colombia's "preferred partner" in its international outreach and views sending its students to Colombia as "a place to gain valuable new

1 This increase in international students has been controversial. Some pointed to the recruitment strategy as part and parcel of a cynical budget gambit to tap the "full ticket" tuition revenue that came from these students: along with non-Indiana students, international students pay out-of-state tuition as well as language instruction "fees." In lieu of sustained state support, the criticism centers on the awareness of the lucrative revenue that international students promise. Today, multilingual international student traffic has fallen back to about 47%, the result of dropping numbers of those students at Purdue and higher profile space for the OWL.

2 We recognize the problematic nature of the term "mission," particularly in the context of a discussion of colonialism broadly speaking and about writing centers in particular. The Western history of literacy education is replete with examples of indigenous people's languages and cultural artifacts being erased or assimilated throughout the Americas. In fact, the lands' naming as the Americas reflects the ideological consequences of colonialism, along with the imposition of nation-states on top of the geography of the landscape. Moreover, the notion of land-grants themselves is the residue of land-grabs by the US federal government, often in locations where indigenous tribes had long-since been driven off their lands.

perspectives, insights and cultural intelligence” (Colombia Purdue Partnership, 2022). Alongside this laudable set of goals, the authors now recognize, once again, the best of intentions can perpetuate colonial systems and potentially do harm.

For the Purdue-Uninorte 100K Strong Americas Grant, we proposed a two-part exchange. First, Purdue graduate students, who were also experienced writing consultants at the on-campus writing lab, would spend a semester on location at the Uninorte campus in Barranquilla, Colombia. The Purdue OWL writing consultants would mentor writers at that campus’ writing center as well as support faculty initiatives around writing in the disciplines, coaching them on writing assignments, syllabi and everyday lesson plans around writing. The graduate students would also have the opportunity to learn from the Colombian students and faculty at Uninorte, particularly by being immersed in an academic culture of teaching and learning different from the one they had been accustomed to in West Lafayette.

In the second part of the exchange, we planned to provide Uninorte students with opportunities to reflect on their own position as cultural, intercultural, and linguistic agents, through journaling and meeting to talk about everyday OWL experiences, shadowing, and participating in courses on campus related to tutor education in the OWL. They would also have the opportunity to conduct research internationally in order to promote inclusion, cultural diversity and translanguaging practices. This particular program also promoted the combination of academic research to support students’ creative and scientific skills with a focus on writing. Eventually, this exchange program built new academic networks, developed decolonizing alliances, internationalized problem-solving skills among the students and faculty, and strengthened sustainable partnerships in areas of mutual interest between Uninorte and Purdue University.

Once Partners of the Americas awarded us the grant, we moved on to selecting the appropriate students.

For the Purdue-to-Uninorte part of the study-abroad exchange, Harry turned to students who seemed interested in translanguaging and international study. All three students had taken courses in second-language acquisition, possessed interest in multilingual education, and were invested in intercultural learning. One student, a Ph.D. candidate in rhetoric and communication, seemed like a good fit because he was interested in multilingual issues and had taken courses in our second-language studies program. Another student, a master’s candidate, was also interested in multilingual issues and cultural rhetoric. A final student, a new master’s student who had done her undergraduate work at Purdue also seemed like a good fit because she had been invested in Spanish-language learning and website content development. In January 2020, these three graduate students headed off to Barranquilla. All seemed to mostly go well. We had one student who did not adjust well to the cultural difference, so they returned to Indiana. The other two students immersed themselves into the campus culture and seemed to be having a rewarding experience.

They participated in their own Purdue coursework remotely, supported writers in the Uninorte campus writing center, and began working with faculty to refine curriculum, writing assignments, and assessment protocols related to writing in the specific academic disciplines. They also attended cultural events and shared social media particularly about Barranquilla’s carnival season and nightlife. As fate would have it, what we now know as the COVID-19 global pandemic was already creeping around the world. By late February, the situation was looking more and more bleak. Harry was summoned to a college-wide study-abroad meeting, where he was told that US national borders would be closing soon and that we were to work with Uninorte and the US Embassy to pull students out of the country as soon as possible. Within the following week, both students were evacuated and returned to their homes. Purdue classes would continue to meet in-person until

our spring break two weeks later, but the university shifted to online instruction and the campus was emptied. The Purdue graduate students continued to support Colombia/Uninorte faculty remotely, but that part of the exchange had essentially ended.

The following fall of 2020, a group of Uninorte undergraduates were supposed to travel to Purdue for the semester. Travel was still prohibited at that time, so the exchange was delayed until fall 2021, when coronavirus travel regulations eased. Five undergraduates arrived at Purdue in August and settled into off-campus apartments just as the new academic year was kicking off. They got to witness a somewhat conventional campus season, albeit still affected by pandemic precautions. Harry never actually got to meet students inside campus buildings without them and him being masked up. The students participated in their Uninorte courses remotely, took English courses through our campus program for international students, and immersed themselves into the everyday life of the OWL. Harry met with them weekly to imagine individual research projects that they wanted to explore, and the students audited our course-based writing consultant education program. One of their instructors for this part of the exchange happened to be one of the graduate students who had been on site at Uninorte, so his familiarity with them also helped their transition. As part of their course-based audit, they read theories and methods about writing consultations, shadowed live and online sessions in the OWL, and debriefed. In their conversations in and outside of class and weekly sessions with the Purdue faculty director, they often spoke about the similarities and few differences between the two writing centers, particularly the conversational nature of sessions and the dynamic of acting as curriculum/cultural informant for their clients. Most writing consultations happened in Spanish at Uninorte's writing center, while English was the dominant language at Purdue. The campus life experience was a bit tough coming out of the

COVID-19 lockdown. The students connected with Purdue campus activities, from the Latino Cultural Center and student activities to off-campus religious experiences. As the fall season began in earnest, they attended Purdue football games, which was a unique experience compared to Colombia's national soccer (football) culture.

In the early stages of planning and development, we found that a translanguaging approach (García, 2012; Qin & Llosa, 2023) to the exchange reinforced an intentional transactional dynamic at linguistic and cultural levels. There is evidence that translanguaging views, when applied in the right study abroad contexts, can bring about positive outcomes for all stakeholders, especially in those programs that explicitly acknowledge social networks as part of the dynamics (Anya, 2017; Diao & Trentman, 2021). In our exchange, all products (research projects) were designed keeping in mind the balance between the type of experiences the students could bring into the context they visited and an expected understanding of such context. Adaptation over prescription was explicitly encouraged during the preparation stage, and the profile of the students was chosen, among other factors, based on their adaptability skills and open-mindedness. In both universities, the exchange students were encouraged to be aware of their biases and positioning in order to make their experience and products as respectful of the local culture as possible while making a meaningful contribution for the host academic department and themselves. The conditions of the grant led to an imbalance in the exchange because more students were encouraged to come to the US than those to head to Uninorte/Colombia.

The US exchange students were both in a Rhetoric and Composition graduate program housed in an English department. They had a background in translanguaging, and their study-abroad goals and activities were designed to bring such an approach to mind. For example, one of their outcomes would include consulting on the creation of a syllabus for

an undergraduate academic writing course with a focus on language and culture. Elements such as the structure of academic papers in English and Spanish were brought into the conversation, plus special attention was brought upon the intercultural issues that may arise from the contact of the two languages. This new syllabus, currently in use, includes the acknowledgement of the position that English has in the academy and also the importance of the rhetorical resources of Spanish as a representation of a culturally specific writing style. Furthermore, the syllabus includes elements that make room for translanguaging endeavors, deviation from native-like forms and experimenting with approaches of each language to structure an academic paper in the other language.

8 The strategies to instruct exchange students on their own control of cultural biases played a key role in the type of research projects they created. The research projects were diverse, but advisors (and exchange coordinators) led discussions that had the students include the general elements that operationalized translanguaging in the exchange: active interaction with writing center users, inclusion initiatives and positioning of individuals in a global conversation. In this way, while writing their research papers, the writing center tutors—at both stages of the exchange—promoted spaces in which writing center users could actively use their own voice to express their cultural markers as a sign of individuality in a foreign context and to understand the writing process as a highly subjective one, always influenced by the conventions of the genre in which they are writing.

The five Colombian exchange students came from three different undergraduate programs, but all were experienced tutors at Uninorte's ECO. The nature of their products (verifiable outcomes of the exchange that were closely linked to the accountability of the project) responded to the main goal of the grant call: to plant seeds for undergraduate research in Colombia. Their research projects involved writing an empirical

academic paper based on a problem of the host writing lab and acknowledging the importance of translanguaging and interculturality for multilingual writers. The titles of the papers reflect the importance of establishing a horizontal connection between universities:

1. *Plagio: Un momento para enseñar y no para castigar*
2. *Comunicación estratégica en sesiones de escritura*
3. *Ayudando a los guías de escritura a trabajar con escritores multilingües en Colombia*
4. *Hacia técnicas de enseñanza de inglés más inclusivas en Latinoamérica*
5. *Estrategias y recursos para apoyar usuarios de centros de escritura con discapacidades*³

The undergraduate research projects, supervised by faculty from both schools leading the exchange, were successfully completed and present an affirmative precedent in terms of the dialogue that can be established between writing centers that across contexts are likely to share many more challenges than initially thought. All projects kept one foot in Colombia and one foot in the US. On the Colombian side, the projects were a means by which “otherwise thinking” (García, et al., 2021) was embedded into the Purdue OWL context to explore options to establish an intercultural dialogue between writing centers in which both were equally valued in their complexities and strengths. The outcomes of the research projects contributed to both writing centers, with all of them representing impact or change in the procedures of both centers to assist their users. As a plus, students had the opportunity to share their projects as presentations in academic events for

- 3 — Plagiarism: A moment to teach, not to punish
- Strategic communication in writing sessions
- Helping writing tutors work with multilingual writers in Colombia
- Towards more inclusive English teaching techniques in Latin America
- Strategies and resources for assisting writing center users with disabilities

undergraduate research projects in both countries (during and after the exchange).

In general, the institutional goals of the exchange were met, and the exchange students were able to create academic products that reflected the use and influence of two languages while becoming empowered by leading a practical contribution in both writing centers involved. Recognizing coloniality endeavors and disempowering them through tools that provide respect and understanding across contexts and languages might be a step in the right direction to bond cultures without patronizing or genuflecting to one of them or to each other. All the exchange students acted as decoloniality agents while reinforcing their ownership of disciplinary knowledge by addressing shared challenges. It was indeed a bilateral exchange of students between the countries.

Shoulda, Coulda, Woulda: Programming with Broader Theoretical Commitments

The authors of this article ran headlong into this exchange with purely pragmatic goals rooted in translanguaging and a long history of writing centers and writing center theory guiding us. But lurking at the core of writing center theory, and writing studies, were lessons about decoloniality that we failed to heed. Our neglect of this theory and its history is even more ironic given our own positionality and the recognition that positionality (Grosfoguel, 2007) is central to critical work of decolonial praxis and everyday activism (Diniz De Figueiredo, & Martinez, 2019). Rodrigo is a Colombian male, cisgender, first-generation, emerging scholar in the field of applied linguistics in a private university in Northern Colombia. Despite coming originally from an underprivileged background, mainly due to its indigenous roots (as these are traditionally neglected communities, politically speaking), he had access to educational opportunities that allowed him to obtain a degree in a public university and to carry out graduate studies abroad. This journey, which is not over yet, has deeply impacted his identity,

unavoidably influenced by the tensions and conditions of academic demands, tokenization and his belonging to multiple communities. His privilege, while present, is solely tied to his current status as faculty member and is more easily recognizable in the Global South than anywhere else. Harry has built a career as a first-generation queer academic precisely because of the liberatory and empowering potential of writing centers. He also recognizes that, as a cisgender white male full professor at a top-tier US research university, his body signifies tremendous privilege and passing that mitigates the precarious nature of other aspects of his identity that might not be readily legible. Harry empathizes with learners whose experiences and knowledge are not validated in their educational journeys. Subsequently, he works to ensure that his scholarship, teaching, research, and administration challenge canons, genres, and conventions.

While we offer no excuse for our lack of engagement in decolonial theory or attending to the problematic history of writing centers in Latin America, we now draw attention to a proliferation of conversations in our field that have taken place *after* beginning this collaboration. Of course, Bawarshi and Pelkowski (1999) published one of the foundational pieces of scholarship in writing centers that should have explicitly guided us. In our defense, Harry has always taken their tenets as central to any of his writing center programming. In other words, our interaction always implicitly channeled Bawarshi and Pelowski (1999), Grimm (1999), Young (2011), Green (2018), and Canagarajah (2013a), because they informed everything that we have done in our writing centers as spaces for anti-racism, political economy awareness, the complexities of sex, gender, and sexuality in teaching and learning, as well as the dynamics of nationality and the politics of linguistic justice. Specifically, we just assumed our role was to foster a critical mindset among learners and instructors alike so that they can have agency and navigate the power and consequences

of academic discourse, in Colombia, the US, or anywhere else. We always refuse(d) to reinscribe the role of the Other or marginality or to fetishize “academic” literacy as a marker of “civilization” (Barwashi & Pelkowski, 1999, p. 49, as cited in Hotson & Bell, 2023, p. 119). In concurrence with Hutchinson and Torres Perdigón (2024) in their introduction to a special issue of the *Writing Center Journal* on decolonization, we never approached the exchange with the mindset that what happens at the OWL in West Lafayette must happen everywhere, or as if it gets all mentoring around writing right all the time. The OWL does not and likely never will get it right all the time. Instead, we echo Ron Martínez’s (2024) thoughts that writing centers grow but are not imported. In his case, Brazilian writing centers are necessarily tools of US educational colonizing efforts through US State Department grants like the one we were awarded and that have been vociferously critiqued (Hotson & Bell 2024). To our credit, we unwittingly took up Hotson and Bell’s resolution, their call to action for the US-based writing center community to engage in research authored, in part at least, by non-American authors. Rodrigo, to be clear, is Colombian. Our goal was never to create a mini-version of the OWL; instead, it was to learn with and find opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and students at Uninorte and Purdue.

Assuming that universities are institutions that have historically reproduced coloniality (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2022; Shizha & Makuvaza, 2017) begs the question of whether decoloniality efforts can succeed in higher education institutions. More specifically, how can decoloniality be achieved in higher education if those who intend to make change are conditioned by their dependence on social institutions that sustain modern tenets physically and symbolically? The question in itself proposes a conundrum that we do not attempt to solve in this study, but we dare to suggest that a nuanced answer requires not only the inclusion of post-modern concepts, such as transdisciplinarity, transculturality —and in our

case, translanguaging—but also epistemological challenges to acknowledge that there is no such thing as unbiased knowledge and that individuals are also part of the social phenomena or “experiments” they are observing. We aimed to go from multilingualism—which acknowledges the languages in contact as separate structures and identities—to translanguaging (the practice of translingualism)—an integrative, interactive approach in tune with the goals and ideologies behind the academic exchange (Quan et al., 2024).

We approached the idea of translanguaging from Canagarajah’s (2013a) perspective, conceived as a new competency-based linguistics that is required in diverse communicative contexts, where the semantic, rhetorical and pragmatic components of language are given emphasis over grammatical ones. In this view, supported by van Lier (2008), successful interaction arises from the result of establishing a balanced and symbiotic relationship between the languages in contact. Translingual competence allows elements of every language in contact to contribute to new understandings and worldviews based on the respectful integration of different sets of priorities, styles and values on a sociolinguistic level (Canagarajah, 2013b). In the exchange program, we not only acknowledged the “privileged” status of English over Spanish in academic writing but also took practical measures to strive for a balanced negotiation of meanings. We did this as an attempt to reconcile, in a practical manner, the ideological divide and contradictions of translanguaging approaches largely discussed by Wei (2018). At a micro-level, this negotiation might take the form of using Spanish concepts that lack a direct translation in English (and vice versa) and establish its use in the students’ projects as a learning opportunity for them and their readers. While basic, this practice stimulated metalinguistic competence, positionality, and required students to do research to have a good conceptual understanding of the themes they chose to write about. We based the decisions about the exchange and its products on the symbolic power

(Bourdieu, 1991) that the English language (and the US as a collective construction) exerts across academic fields. The implications of the well-established colonial practices of using English in writing studies in Colombia left the exchange leaders with the challenge of creating a transnational hub to experience writing studies from a more open perspective that gave some voice and power to the other side of the coin: the intricacies of writing in Spanish. In this way, we were, in terms of Fairclough (2014), bound to raise exchange students' awareness of "how language contributes to domination of some people by others" (p. 1).

When we structured the academic exchange reported in this paper, we gave up any ambitions of neutrality. Instead, we focused our efforts on creating a coherent narrative that could be transmitted to all stakeholders in a clear way. Although our academic exchange originally did not intend to address all the aspects of decoloniality or translinguaging, it is an example where it is possible to examine how the principles of such ideas might be operationalized in the university. Far from being a model to follow, it is a testimony of the tensions that co-exist when participants bring up ideas that challenge the prevalent models to approach knowledge. We mean to bring difference (and not uniformity) back into the spotlight by staying away from practices that measure their progress by overrepresenting some people or communities over others. The measure of progress or failure is (and always has been) arbitrary and based on the "truth" that best fits the model proposed by those who have the power to create and define such constructs.

Theoretical & Practical Lessons Learned

Rodrigo and Harry look back on this study-abroad exchange and realize critical lessons that would guide us if the experience were to be replicated in the future. They offer these important insights, as well, for universities planning their own experiences abroad, particularly for those differentially positioned or for those who possess different sorts

of privilege or standing. We clustered these lessons around theoretical and practical considerations that should underwrite any next iteration.

On the Theory

Decoloniality is, in its essence, a criticism on modernity. Most Latin American countries and the United States have undergone decolonization processes—i.e., political independence from imperial powers—but most are still far from achieving decoloniality—i.e., a more complex process that includes questioning ideological practices inherited from imperial powers in which hierarchies, humanity, knowledge and practices need to be reevaluated (Maldonado-Torres, 2016).

Decoloniality initiatives are part of a radical-reform space which requires the recognition of rights and advantages of soft-reform spaces (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015). When the spaces proposed by decoloniality are not acknowledged, recognized or encouraged, the actors in the system might resort to some practices beyond reform, such as hacking, i.e., the creation of spaces "within the system, using its resources, where people can be educated about the violences of the system and have their desires re-oriented away from it" (De Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 27). For many scholars and other members of well-established colonialist systems, hacking is a dignified way to play with elements of radical-reform within the soft-reform space.

The academic exchange reported in this paper shows our incipient, yet optimistic, enterprise to collaborate with the materialization of decoloniality in academic practices beyond the classroom. In the study-abroad program reported here, the authors came to the realization that we approached the challenges in our modern and capitalistic contexts by using radical-reform and beyond-reform elements in which we acknowledge our vulnerable positions in the power structure, but we also make use of the privileges we have in these spaces. This juggling of margin/center (or Other/same)

is possible by using the soft-reform elements of most universities today (e.g., recognizing the need for a more dialogic and decentered epistemologies) and combining them with system hacking. The potential result of an approach like ours is the production of more agents of social change who, in turn, support initiatives that conceive decoloniality as a practice and not a metaphor that serves only modern ideals that conform to spaces where change is not desired (Tuck & Wayne-Yang, 2012).

Given that colonial endeavors are part of modernity, the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) is then an integral part of an ideological influx that has allowed institutions on the Global South to participate in enterprises shaped by modern institutions. For example, in the case of Colombians, Mignolo (2011) argues that the only contact they have had with the concept of modernity has come from definitions related to colonizing endeavors. Taking distance from colonizing practices also means resisting modern ideals which, in the short term, might not be perceived as convenient for individuals or institutions (in the great scheme of things). The fact that mostly colonial and neo-colonial ideas are perceived as modern, as opposed to any ideas related to the pre-Colombian past, can be a reasonable explanation of why European values (Quijano, 2000) and their products are still held in high regard despite all the issues attached to capitalism, a by-product of modernity. As in many other aspects of qualitative social studies, the authors of this paper have limited resources to give responses to the current crises that society is experiencing because the “valid answers” have been laid out by a system that prioritizes and has naturalized its own ontology, epistemology and metaphysics.

Approaches to decoloniality initiatives have many inconsistencies in a modern environment, and such conflicts are reflected in everyday practices. However, all this complexity could also help to explain the contradictions we might experience or generate when decoloniality and translanguaging

are operationalized in contexts mediated and conditioned by social institutions we do not necessarily indulge ideologically speaking. Elements of this positionality may be extrapolated to other “conflicts” of faculty members when individuals are heavily conditioned by the system itself and the options to overcome systematic injustices are far beyond reach of immediate change. In short, hacking coloniality acknowledges that an individual might “belong to” a system but their ideas and actions are intended to produce individuals that challenge such system. As mentioned earlier, beyond integration or collaboration between two universities, our exchange program explicitly thrived for epistemological, metalinguistic and political reflections at a level that may not align with the ethos of the host institutions or countries.

Writing centers themselves have a complicated history that parallels the colonial project around education and efforts to dismantle it or at least bring critical awareness to its consequences. The longer history of writing centers in the US and other developed countries pivots on their use to inscribe “normalized” outcomes on learners deemed recalcitrant or elusive of typical pedagogy (Lerner, 2009). Modern writing centers since the 1970s arose as sites to warehouse “problem” students who eluded typical mass education programming; these students, unsurprisingly, presented needs that often referred to broader institutional and systemic failures related to class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, and other makers of difference that depended on normalized binaries. With this scenario, spaces for critical pedagogy (Giroux & Giroux, 2006), such as translanguaging, have been recently encouraged in study abroad programs that historically favored monolingual (target language) perspectives (Castañeda-Peña et al., 2024; Diao & Trentman 2021). Research supports the use of translanguaging approaches in study abroad programs to improve the language learning process and communication, while providing students with agency for complex social and cultural meaning-making strategies (Mori & Sanuth, 2018; Trentman, 2021).

In our minds, decolonizing work in writing centers involves what García (2017) names as the spatial and temporal factors that contribute to contemporary colonization (or reify it), awareness of the role of power differentials, and recognition of how colonized peoples are positioned as “problems” to be solved and tutors/administrators/writing centers as the “problem-solving agents” (p. 38). García cites Henry Giroux (1992) to challenge change agents to avoid seeing colonized peoples/Others in deficient terms. While García was writing about the experiences of Mexican Americans in a Texas and broader US context, his insight is critical for transnational collaboration because we needed to be aware and sensitive to the positioning of Purdue vis-a-vis Uninorte, the Purdue OWL and the mentoring units at Uninorte (Harry as full professor/faculty director vis-a-vis Rodrigo as a junior professor/faculty researcher, West Lafayette-based writing consultants vis-a-vis Barranquilla peers, etc.).

We also foregrounded a recognition that, while our governments positioned Purdue as an institutional “standard” to which Colombian universities aspired (Purdue News Service, 2010), we did not subscribe to such notions. Instead, we tried a more balanced approach. At Uninorte, we wanted to create spaces where faculty and students alike raised their consciousness about educational *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1991), everyday interactions that signaled institutional systems around the conferral of knowledge. For example, to support and solve the problem of how writing happens, students and faculty alike spent time learning about their Uninorte colleagues’ rationale for approaching the tutoring sessions (what was the role of writing for learning and learning to write before we suggested interventions, if any). We believed that teaching and learning around writing, especially in a writing center context, needs to be as transactional as possible: Purdue participants had as much (if not more) to learn about Uninorte and Colombia as vice versa.

The exchange was structured in such a way that the students’ required everyday writing,

conversations, and research projects—and their process—included as much active agency of translinguaging ideas and acts as possible. As faculty, we created the program all the while recognizing the asymmetrical dynamic between our two institutions and countries. We refused to fetishize English in either country and students on both sides of the equation deepened their awareness of languaging in both contexts. The Purdue graduate students moved between code-switching and code-meshing in Barranquilla and on campus at Uninorte, and the students of the latter were invited to participate in and move between languages and cultures within the OWL, across campus, and beyond. For the Purdue graduate students, their weekly debriefs centered on creating metacognitive conversations about how their experiences in Colombia were challenging pre-existing notions of best practice. Instead of always posing non-directive questions with Uninorte faculty about writing assignments, the two students turned to modeling how to write syllabi and writing assignments that created transactional learning-to-write/writing-to-learn experiences in courses, regardless of the primary language. Upon returning to the US, both deepened their own research projects based on the need to decenter English for one of the students and to challenge the marginality of neurodiversity.

Programming Lessons

Alongside the significant theoretical and political lessons around decoloniality that we learned and should have known to lead with, we reflected on our exchange, obtaining insights into study abroad from a faculty perspective. Sustainable exchange programs between higher education institutions (HEIs) in different countries require significant effort to design and execute them in ways that satisfy all the stakeholders. The conditions for sustaining exchange programs need to be consciously created by HEIs. Once the partnerships are formally established between HEIs, sustainability depends on plans of study and curricula to integrate students

and faculty. Beyond “let’s do it,” institutional commitment needs to translate from a big vision to everyday action. Our partnership started at the institutional level, moved to the “seeding” front where grants and external funding result in program development, but it stalled out when integration did not happen.

We do not blame for this situation; instead, we recognize that institutions must embrace culture shifts to ensure that programs flourish. Such change requires the generation or reallocation of resources, both in terms of finance and personnel. The former can determine the size and scope of the exchanges in the first place, but the latter needs to recognize competing demands on participants. One of the cases where this is evident is when tenure-stream faculty in research positions might not have the same institutional reward system as other individuals who might facilitate study-abroad programming whether at the same or a different type of college. For example, Rodrigo was a pre-tenured faculty member, whose promotion is predicated on conventional research, with less value placed on service work like curriculum development or study-abroad partnerships. Harry, as a full-time professor, has greater freedom to choose his priorities but, also as part of the disciplinary faculty, is not connected to curriculum implementation on a broader level. In other words, Harry’s positionality is not as one who can drive students to a semester-long on-site based curriculum experience, similar to Rodrigo. For undergraduate institutional coordination, it is necessary to ensure that plans of study motivate cohorts of students to participate. With respect to graduate students, they do not typically drive curriculum exchanges in the same way; they usually represent individual curriculum programming. At Purdue, exchange programs are successful when a group can participate in a cohesive academic program tied to a college or departmental curriculum (e.g., theater arts or STEM disciplines). The Purdue OWL, while globally-recognized and popular, is autonomous from an academic department; in

turn, Harry is a member of the English department and the Rhetoric & Composition program. None of those are possible “draws” for academic cohorts at Uninorte. The cohort of students we drew from Uninorte was cross-disciplinary and lacked easy companion programs in West Lafayette, so they continued their “home” studies abroad. Similarly, the graduate students from Purdue, who went to Barranquilla, continued their academic studies from the Uninorte campus. Ideally, both sets of students would have had companion coursework in which they could participate.

Exchange programs challenge students’ academic experiences and performance. When students are aware that the study abroad opportunities and resources are limited and may be granted only to those who meet specific grade performance or academic record metrics, the programs may push them toward doing better in order to gain access to the travel experiences and cultural capital and experiences that accrue with them. Furthermore, when study abroad opportunities are part of an academic plan, students are more likely to commit and integrate their personal goals to those that are valued by the program. When study abroad programs, academic/curriculum, and student needs are in line, everyone benefits, but that integration promises to be one of the most challenging aspects of exchange programs (Brewer, & Cunningham, 2023).

Figuring out the details at a curricular level of the exchange is a taxing endeavor that requires matching or aligning the curricula of both programs. Depending on the scope of the exchange program, some students might need to take some courses in the target institution that have limited availability or were not part of the original exchange design. In our case, we based our exchange around writing literacy, but students came from different programs, each of which interpreted the concept differently. For example, a law student from Uninorte approached writing literacy from a view that prioritized cohesion and syntax over some other components of language. Carrying out the

curricular mapping, within and across institutions in a way that was convenient for students from three different programs, was extremely demanding for all parts involved. One way to solve this would be to limit the application to the study abroad program to the extent to which the curricular alignment has been already done and the possible “deviations” from the initial plan that the parts have agreed on.

Also, HEIs need to create nurturing environments for the exchange programs at the administrative level. This includes an efficient dialogue and rapport with a partner institution that might have a different ethos, different leadership style, or that simply is bound in its procedures by a country’s legal framework. Besides faculty engagement in study abroad programs, international students’ offices and provosts are key to keeping the exchanges running and resolving issues that might arise in a timely manner. A strategic distribution of leadership and administration enables faculty to focus on the teaching and learning elements of the academic exchange program. Exchange programs with a supportive administration on both sides are the most likely to keep students and faculty engaged. As we have suggested, for both of our institutional contexts, a stronger curricular connection between academic programs would have made for a richer experience. We also found ourselves taking on logistical and administrative roles that created tension with our faculty positions. Aside from mentoring and meeting with our students, our work as liaisons with the university bureaucracies pulled us away from our own coursework and time for research and writing.

From a further distance, the institutional and curricular issues might seem smaller when confronted with the ideological identities of the HEIs. Our lessons learned will mostly be valued in contexts that acknowledge difference as a leverage point and confront institutional identities as part of a bigger diverse system. Most HEIs in the world need internationalization but leaders need

to be reminded that internationalization could take different forms and those forms depend on an institutional agenda. How these concepts are imagined in a Purdue context differs profoundly from those in its Uninorte counterpart. Faculty need to be aware of the mission and vision of the HEI, but university and college-level administration must be as involved as the study abroad students. This view includes the possibility of making more than one attempt matching institutions that fulfill the formal requirements and that might also be complementary in their ideological profiles. At the same time, we continue to struggle with the material reality of decoloniality theory and practice: A profound paradox seems to call on faculty like us to eschew sources of governmental and non-governmental funding, which our institutions prize and reward, yet the financing of study abroad remains elusive, except for students and faculty alike from monied backgrounds or castes. To do this work in a morally pure manner means reverting to an early modernist mindset that only the wealthy and established get to study abroad. The social justice possibility of international study abroad grants seem to complement the economic realities of the students and faculty involved in this program, many of whom are first-generation college students, and/or come from working-class backgrounds. To have refused the funding would have meant denying our students and ourselves a valuable experience, whether educational, cultural, or sociolinguistic.

Closing Thoughts

Issues of decoloniality and acting as agents of decolonization are complex in principle and even more so in everyday institutional practice. When this program started, we were initially drawn to García’s (2017) insight in his project about Latinx students in Texas: Sometimes people take up identities and practices that imprint them with colonialistic practices of domination as a means of material improvement. LeCourt (1996) makes a similar argument about first-generation students

and writing across communities. She argues that sometimes students seek the codes and cultural practices of domination or the privileged, not because they seek to leave behind home and community, but because they see economic improvement. That is, the Faustian bargain in post-industrial economic systems proposes that educational achievement leads to better financial opportunities.

We believe these lessons are part of the equation for students, faculty, and institutions in Colombia; they all recognize the power and possibility that comes from engaging systems of international power. We were struck that the students never sought out or performed within a mindset that English as lingua franca signaled an adoption of an assimilation or “either/or relationship” to Colombian and US academic culture. Instead, everyone involved recognized the deep complexity of both and of maintaining one’s own postmodern identity kit, as Grimm (1999) would term it, in which national and regional identities were one among a multitude of communities. While the world is distant from a solution to this conundrum with all the tensions beyond the academic fields involved, we strongly believe that writing across fields has great potential to fight neo-colonialistic forces from a dialogue that acknowledges and acts upon the issues that operationalize such colonialistic initiatives. This dialogue could be achieved by taking the best elements in the policies of all parties involved and making them work in such a way that all stakeholders see recognizing differences as an opportunity to expand their worldview, as we meant in the exchange program.

Harry and Rodrigo are already mindful of their own privilege and marginality when it comes to conversations about power and domination. Harry is still a tenured full professor at a research-intensive university in the US who never stops being white or male or solidly middle class, yet he experiences the world through the lens of a first-generation academic and queer person. Rodrigo is similarly privileged in terms of his work with

writing/writing centers/literacy education, but has oppositional characteristics as well. As a multilingual scholar, he gets the power and pressure of English, and the possibilities of code-meshing and translanguaging through his own lived experiences. Both authors might easily be agents and supervisors of the regulatory nature of academic English writing instruction as well as writing centers. We seek to use our position of agents to actively subvert the smooth operation of power that our units could embody, that our work with students might enact, and that our mentoring of writing consultants could install.

Instead, we foreground our partiality and the institutional realities we face; we also encourage everyone we work with to act as cultural informants in a culture of collaboration that weds with a dynamic of subversive tactics, as De Certeau (1984) would term them. More than resistance, we thrive for re-existence (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) as faculty in contexts that encourage change in conflicting manners. Consultant education and everyday sessions encourage staff and clients alike to disclose and foreground individual and collective identities and communities when appropriate, to share their negotiations of the institutions, and to empower mutual mentoring around the logics and *habitus* that work to govern and dominate.

We still think about how we might assess the lingering effects of this project on both sets of students and both institutions. For the two US students who went to Colombia, their own scholarship was deeply imprinted by their experiences in the country; one significantly developed his dissertation with what he discovered about empathy and intercultural exchange. He has taken that knowledge forth into his academic career as a mentor for graduate writers seeking to gain prestigious national and international scholarships. While we cannot know whether he cautions applicants on the neocolonialist implications of international scholarships, we do know he carries his complicated experiences with him.

The other Purdue student returned to complete his MA thesis and moved on to doctoral work exploring colonialism and literacy in a Polynesian context. The Uninorte undergraduates all now seem destined for graduate school experiences (one year after the exchange, three of them were already in graduate school in Colombia)—all of which is a powerful contribution given the impact of that higher level of education for students anywhere. These patterns confirm what Rodríguez-Fuentes (2018) found in his own doctoral dissertation: undergraduate students who had internships or experiences with intensive research are more likely to apply to graduate programs.

However, beyond these students and us, what is the trendline for study-abroad students and the cultivation of decolonial agents on both campuses? Even deeper, what are the prospects for the future broadly? Both of our campuses remain invested in study abroad, but we continue to piece together a cohesive vision that bridges both the STEM focus of our institutions and the more peripheral educational programs we both represent. As the two countries slowly edge out of the global pandemic and travel begins to become popular again, our campuses must rebuild energy and infrastructure around study abroad, projects both of us are committed to but assigned to campus units outside our control. Conversations on campus about how our institutions represent possibilities to intervene in problematic histories continue to be nascent, yet both of us invite problem-posing regarding the everyday practices of mentoring writers as well as the more abstract dynamics of coloniality and other systemic forces and institutions of domination, relations we are never either outside nor completely inside of.

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