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FREEDOM TO WRITE— THROUGH IMITATION

Imitation watchers have been noting with satisfaction a resurgence of interest in that ancient practice of observing and replicating the writing of others as a means of internalizing a sense of written language. Whether their approach is process-oriented, cognitive-based, rhetorical, or any combination, many teachers are using imitation in their classrooms, finding it to be effective in teaching form and sense of language while encouraging rather than stifling creativity. It is in fact part of the writing process. For writers imitate other writers, just as surely as painters imitate other painters, violinists imitate other violinists, golfers imitate other golfers. It's one of the ways beginners learn how it's done.

Unskilled writers do not have a clear sense of form. For them that sense is all mixed up with jumbled, half-remembered rules, unsuccessful trials at writing, heavily marked papers, and insufficient and ineffectual reading. When basic writers come to the college writing program, most of them have had very little experience with writing, and they have been singularly unsuccessful in applying the rules of grammar to their writing. Because they lack a sense of form at all levels—word, sentence, paragraph, and entire work—their ideas are thwarted. They think more about form than about what they want to say. Compared to skilled writers, for whom a sense of form is almost unconscious, basic writers spend a disproportionate amount of time thinking about how to spell their words and phrase their sentences. In the process, ideas get lost.

One solution often suggested is to disregard form in order to encourage the free expression of ideas. Through free writing, unskilled writers often

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become fluent writers—but they are still unskilled. At some point, if their writing is ever to go to an audience beyond their supportive teacher and classmates, they must learn to phrase their ideas in sentences structured like those written conventionally. Their paragraphs and essays will need to be unified, coherent, and complete.

Imitation offers a way for unskilled writers to learn form and structure while generating and finding expression for their own ideas. Imitation can assist them in learning to shape their sentences, develop their paragraphs, express their own voices, and perform many of the complicated tasks that the writing process involves. Imitation, I suggest, is part of the processes of writing and learning to write; it frees creativity rather than stifling it, and its specific practices can be taught.

Acknowledging that psychologists still do not fully understand the nature of the developmental changes that occur in imitation, Yando, Seitz, and Zigler take the position that imitation is "built into the human species much as language appears to be built in" (4). As children must be taught a specific language but apparently do not need to be taught how to learn a language, so they need not be taught how to imitate even though specific imitative acts may be taught (5). Like language, imitation is used both for communication and for learning and is an indisputable means for increasing problem-solving competence (15).

Piaget rejects the notion that imitation is an innate ability, claiming, "The child learns to imitate." At the same time, Piaget describes a "tendency" to imitate that is transmitted through heredity and assists acquired "techniques" that make learning possible (5). With use, imitated forms become internalized, incorporated into cognitive structures. By the act of imitating, the learner interiorizes the model, causing the formation of images (77). The image, or interiorized imitation, then "acquires a life of its own" (75), so that the person who imitates is "often unaware that he is doing so" (75).

Throughout the writing process, writers refer to their internalized representation of what writing looks like. When writers read, they pick up not only meaning but also the way in which that meaning is expressed. In the words of Smith, they "read like a writer" (562). Writers notice how other writers phrase sentences, choose vocabulary within those sentences, shape paragraphs. They develop a sense of the idiom of written style, and when they write they produce a similar idiom, utilizing similar ways of putting words and phrases and sentences together. Most of the time this process of assimilation and imitation is unconscious; if asked why a sentence is phrased in a particular way, a writer would most likely not attribute the reason to something he or she had read.

Many teachers who stress free expression over form have reservations about using imitation for teaching writing. They fear that the model will become a pointless end in itself. They are afraid that, if their students are asked to ape someone else's style, creativity will suffer, thought will be subordinate to form, and the act of imitating will not transfer to other writing tasks. Such instructors see imitation as being product-oriented when attention needs to be given to the process.

My position is that form and meaning develop hand in hand, that attention to form is part of the process of generating and expressing ideas, informing and aiding writing at all stages. Attention to form aids invention, it promotes the satisfaction of knowing how to put words down on paper, it assists revision and editing. As to transfer to other writing, the imitation of particular written sentences, paragraphs, and larger pieces is no more restricting than the imitation of spoken sentences in first-language learning. On the flexibility gained from internalizing models, Corbett states: "It is that internalization of structures that unlocks our powers and sets us free to be creative, original, and ultimately effective. *Imitate that you may be different*" [italics his] ("Theory and Practice" 250).

D'Angelo states the paradox this way: "Imitation exists for the sake of variation. The student writer will become more original as he engages in creative imitation" (283). Juxtaposing imitation and invention, he conceives of imitation as "the process whereby the writer participates not in stereotypes, but in archetypal forms and ideas" (283). Imitation can be viewed as a shortcut to learning new styles and structures, giving the learner a wider choice among alternatives for expressing individual ideas.

One of the primary functions of imitation is its problem-solving capacity. It makes use of experience—one's own and that of others—to find solutions. Applied to writing, imitation means that we do not need to invent a new form every time we want to express an idea. Trial-and-error writing depends too much on reinventing the wheel. Much more efficient is to ask: How has this problem been solved before? What are some of the possible ways of stating this idea? How have other people reported their research? How do other people write clear instructions?

Basic writers, who so often have not internalized the modes of expression required for writing to a formal audience, have their flow of ideas halted in the absence of a form for expressing them. Because of deficient reading and writing backgrounds, they refer to inadequate internalized models as they try to proceed with the writing. This block to expression results directly from their struggle with form. Imitation can enter the process in an enabling, heuristic function.

It is enabling when the internalized form derived from reading and writing experience provides a structure for the expression of ideas, showing in what ways such ideas have been expressed to similar audiences before. It is heuristic when it serves as the vehicle for development of ideas. "Form is heuristic," says Coe, "for it guides a structured search. Faced with the emptiness of a form, a human being seeks matter to fill it" (18).

Imitation is not plagiarism, nor is it slavish attention to "how it's done." Originals and copies exist side by side quite reputably in our world. Witness fashions—in clothing, automobiles, home appliances. In fact, as Gere observes, originals exist to be imitated, and the very term "original" implies the possibility of imitations. Originals, she notes, are both models of how something can be done and challenges for improve-

ment. The creator of an imitation competes with the original, trying to improve on it.

Imitation has been successfully taught. Using what he calls "the simple yet powerful idea that we could teach students to write by examining how real writers write," Gray developed an approach for teaching the cumulative sentence (185). His students examine numerous examples of cumulative sentences written by professional writers, noting salient features, being led "to 'see' what they too have seen but not noticed before" (188). Then they imitate the methods of modification employed by the professionals. Finally, "students apply these now-familiar structures by writing longer, extended sequences" (186). As a result of this practice, his students become "secure in the knowledge of what they can do. Their use of cumulative structures is now natural and intuitive, and they write with a mature and easy style" (202).

Another form of imitation that is often effective with inexperienced writers is exact sentence imitation. This approach begins with a model sentence, illustrates and explains the structural pattern of that sentence, presents a sentence that imitates that pattern, and then requires the student first to copy the model exactly and then to write an imitation of it. In this way, beginning writers learn how to use unfamiliar syntactic structures and conventions of punctuation. I have taught students to recognize and avoid sentence fragments by requiring that they write them intentionally, mimicking those written by professional writers. And students can learn to use semicolons in compound sentences, not by the usual method of correcting errors but by composing sentences from models that utilize those structures (Gorrell, *Bridges* 3).

Controlled composition is another type of imitation that I have used for enabling inexperienced writers to take an upward step to new levels of performance. Students copy passages while at the same time altering them syntactically or semantically. A passage may be rewritten from first person singular to third, from past tense to present, from passive voice to active, and so on. By rewriting the passage, students practice not only the targeted features but all the related ones as well (Gorrell, *Copy/Write*). They write generally correct sentences and practice forms they have been using ineptly or not at all. Through this practice, they concentrate not on errors but on correct writing, internalizing written language.

Brooks uses the "persona paraphrase" to teach variety and style. She selects a passage of prose that illustrates a structure she wants to teach— like parenthetical expression, modification, or parallelism. Distributing copies of the passage, she reads it and guides her class to an awareness of what makes the passage work—main stylistic features, syntactic features, "particular little tricks" (215). Then the students in her classes copy the structure of the passage, phrase by phrase and sentence by sentence, substituting a completely different subject matter (214-15). She sees a distinct improvement in style:

The structure of the paraphrase, rather than limiting student imagination, provides the crutch that makes it possible for him to give his imagination free rein, without the worry about how to finish a sentence he has once started. The paraphrase, since it is such a close copy structurally of a polished original, rarely shows any mechanical errors. . . .Almost inevitably the next formal essay he writes will contain some turn of phrase, some sentence structure that he has "learned" from his model. (216)

Imitation is effective beyond the sentence level. Many college freshmen don't know what a well-wrought essay looks like. They may, in fact, be already practicing a type of imitation, patterning their own immature writing or that of other unskilled student writers. When students have no clear sense of what they're striving for, they need an exemplary model, a guide, a shortcut through endless trials and errors. The model can be either professional or effective student writing, but its structure and method of development must be evident and attainable.

In presenting a model essay, the teacher must attend to its distinctive features (Bandura 136). Discussion may center on the clarity of the thesis statement and its focusing and cohesive effects on the essay. Or the model may be a particularly apt representation of paragraph unity or interparagraph coherence. Students given a model essay within their range of ability are likely to produce a comparable piece of writing that is carefully organized, clearly expresses its controlling idea, and uses specific details and concrete words to support that idea. In short, they produce whatever receives attention in the model essay. Consequent imitations can be as free or as loose as the need demands, but generally the imitations become freer as the writer gains confidence.

Sometimes imitation is ineffective as a teaching device for improving student writing. Kehl, quoting a Burmese proverb, warns, "Sparrows who emulate peacocks are likely to break a thigh," and from the Japanese he cautions, "The crow that imitates a cormorant gets drowned" (137). To Kehl the lesson is clear: "Models should be congenial to the students; perhaps, at least initially, the sparrow might emulate an effective sparrow, the crow a proficient crow" (137).

To be effective, imitation assignments must be appropriate to the students' level of competence. If the assignment represents skills that students already know and practice, they will be bored. If it is beyond their present abilities, they will be frustrated. In either case, there is no transfer to their own writing.

Instructors who use imitation to teach writing report that skills acquired through imitative practice transfer to other writing on the level of sentences, paragraphs, and essays. Brooks and Gray, as noted, have observed improvement in sentences and paragraphs, as have D'Angelo (284) and Corbett (108). Gibson sees benefits to style and voice (106). The effective use of essays as models for imitation has been reported by Rodrigues (26). Williams, having done one of the few empirical studies on imitation and writing, compares imitation with sentence combining:

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> [In] an analysis of flaw counts among this most competent group, . . . evaluators found fewer flaws in logic/organization and style among the imitators. This result supports our original thesis: When students are provided with model structures to impose on experience of their own devising, they will be better able to impose similar structures on self-generated content during real writing tasks. (37)

Attention to form, rather than impairing creativity, encourages it both in thought generation and in extension to new forms. Imitation allows inexperienced writers to learn from those who are more experienced, frees them from the inhibiting anxiety of striving for correct form and appropriate style, and functions as the vehicle for generating new thoughts. By enabling students to write in conventional and appropriate ways, imitation permits access to the community of writers. Only when basic writers have the freedom that comes from knowing the acceptable forms can they participate fully in that community. Only then, as a matter of fact, does rhetorical stance have any meaning for them. For only then can they adapt form and meaning to particular audiences. Only then can they express their personae as writers. Only then can they say what they want to say.

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