Imitation as Freedom
(Re)Forming Student Writing

PAUL BUTLER

True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance,
As those move easiest who have learnd to dance.
—Pope, An Essay on Criticism

My life changed in important ways when, as a high-school junior, my English teacher assigned the third edition of Edgar V. Roberts's now-classic Writing About Literature. The popular college textbook, which features chapters like “Writing About Character,” “Writing About Point of View,” and “Writing on Prosody,” shows students how to write compositions about various elements of literature, offering student-written essays as guides or models. As a new academic writer, I found that these sample “themes” helped me give form to my ideas, to construct essays that were organized, clear, and coherent. For example, I still remember using the author’s description of explosive consonant sounds in a Shakespearean sonnet to guide my analysis of discord in Donne’s sonnet “Batter My Heart.” Stated differently, Roberts’s book of models and explanations helped me make new discoveries on my own and showed me that form and content are inextricably linked in the writing process. They gave me the freedom to develop ideas by offering a form for me to imitate, a model from which to structure my own essays.

Today, as I recall this significant moment in my writing education, it seems appropriate that I have conjured it from the past, because that is precisely where most discussions of imitation, form, and so-called sentence rhetorics have been relegated within the field of composition. In a recent article, Robert Connors argues that our field has lost something by its near-universal rejection of formalism and pedagogical practices like generative rhetoric, imitation, and sentence combining (118-24). Similarly, in their admirably complete survey of articles on imitation since the early 1960s, Frank Farmer and Phillip Arrington suggest that the most damaging aspect of formalism’s fall from grace is the way imitation has been ignored by the field, hidden in composition’s dark closet because of disinterest and disdain. Defining imitation as “the approximation, whether conscious or unconscious, of exemplary models, whether textual, behavioral, or human, for the expressed goal of improved student writing” (13), the authors show convincingly how compositionists offer apologies for using imitation, then try to justify its use by linking it to “process” approaches. Both
articles claim that many formal aspects of composition instruction have disappeared because they are associated with the much-maligned "product" approach to writing, the cornerstone of a traditional rhetoric that has been apparently locked away for good as process approaches have come to dominate the field.

Despite Connors’s contention that most of those with professional backgrounds in imitation and other formal rhetorics have "cut their losses and gone on," ostensibly to greener pastures in composition studies (122), I argue that our abandonment of these approaches is at our students’ peril. For while we profess our faith in process techniques and practice them widely in the classroom, we still expect students to produce essays with good style, form, and organization, the very hallmarks of "product." In other words, we are trying to achieve "product" results using "process" methods, an attempt that has resulted in criticism from scholars like Lisa Delpit as well as from students. While process pedagogies have been successful in accomplishing some important things in teaching writing, they cannot do everything for us. As Donna Gorrell suggests, we are sometimes faced in the classroom with "unskilled writers who ... lack a sense of form at all levels—word, sentence, paragraph, and entire work" (53). If this is in fact the case, I would argue that valuable imitative approaches should be used widely and unapologetically in the composition classroom. Using the writing of others to teach writing can yield effective and long-lasting benefits that give students confidence to write convincingly on their own.

As Roberts says of the use of models in Writing About Literature, now in its ninth edition, "The illustrative sample themes are presented in the belief that the word imitation need not be preceded by adjectives like slavish or mere. Their purpose is to show what might be done—not what must be done—on particular assignments" (vii). Perhaps most important, using models in the teaching of writing can free students to concentrate on ideas, enabling them to concentrate on the content of what they are writing without being unduly restricted by concerns of form.

The first reason that we should reintroduce imitation in the composition classroom is that it would enable composition teachers to teach students what we expect them to write. In her challenging book Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom, Lisa Delpit argues that sometimes process approaches have the inadvertent effect of taking students’ knowledge of writing rules for granted. She writes that "in some instances adherents of process approaches to writing create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them" (31). Delpit also asserts that in writing situations outside the classroom, students are always held accountable for their work, a reality that argues for making product important in the classroom. "Teachers do students no service to suggest, even implicitly, that ‘product’ is not important," she writes. "In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it" (31).

In her argument, Delpit refers specifically to the situation of many minority students, particularly African Americans, who have not had the same access to the "rules" and "codes" of grammar that other students have. Nonetheless, her argument has a broader appeal. While freewriting, journal keeping, conferencing, and other "process" techniques are helpful at what they do best, that is, enabling students to discover what it is they really want to say, none help students write strong sentences, improve their style, or arrange their essays to appeal rhetorically to specific audiences. In other words, as Richard Coe asserts in an article on teaching form in composition, we have lost what the traditional approach to composition did: it "essentially taught good form" (235).

One reason why Delpit’s claim rings true on a broader level is that, as Connors argues, there has been a tendency to erase imitation and sentence rhetorics with the disciplining of the field of composition. Thus, in its attempt to achieve disciplinary status, composition has lost its affiliation with these traditional techniques while, by contrast, embracing critical theory and other markers of intellectual rigor, this race toward disciplinarity has occurred especially within English departments, where composition programs are often housed (Connors 121). Composition has achieved respect as a field in part by embracing the process approach, with all its attendant
theoretical categories like expressivist, cognitive, and social-epistemological rhetorics. As Farmer and Arrington suggest, “If imitation is to be found acceptable, it must be justified according to the prevailing norms and values corresponding to process approaches and sanctioned by the disciplinary community at large” (23, italics in original). However, the exclusive use of process approaches comes at the expense of some beneficial aspects of product approaches, like imitation. Thus, the almost unfeathered drive to bring “theory” within the purview of composition has meant the discarding of apparently “untheoretical” product.

Yet claims that product approaches are not theoretical must be questioned at their most fundamental levels. Imitation and other sentence-level strategies emanate from rhetorical theories about learning and writing that have just as much justification within the composition field as any others. For example, the idea of imitation itself finds support in the language theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin, who states that “the word in language is always half someone else’s,” proposes a dialogic approach appropriate to the discussion of imitation. In suggesting that language is made up of colliding ideas, words, and “answering words,” a heteroglossia of language and dialects, Bakhtin intimates that everything we speak or write is in some sense an imitation, a transformation of what others say, do, and write. Unlike critics who consider imitation an “authoritative word” that closes off the conversation, Bakhtin argues that it is, on the contrary, a way of responding, whether consciously or unconsciously, to what has been written before. Thus in looking at imitation as a kind of answering word, as a way of entering the conversation, it seems that the theoretical underpinnings of the practice can be established.

A second reason for restoring imitation to the composition classroom is that it is a creative practice that has the paradoxical effect of liberating, rather than enslaving, students. Many composition scholars originally lodged complaints about imitation being rote and unchallenging. As Daniel Bender suggests, “Imitation is still tarred with epithets: ‘copying’ or, worse still, ‘slavish copying’” (119). Edgar Roberts alludes to imitation’s undeserved reputation of being static when he defends the use of models against charges of constituting “mere” imitation. He makes this claim in stating that he designed Writing About Literature as a “rhetoric of practical criticism” for students:

I believe that true liberation in a liberal arts curriculum is achieved only through clearly defined goals. Just to make assignments and let students do with them what they can is to encourage frustration and mental enslavement. But if students develop a deep knowledge of specific approaches to subject material, they can begin to develop some of that expertise that is essential to freedom. (ix-x)

In making this suggestion, Roberts effectively contends that imitation can be both creative and generative. Roberts’s views echo those of W. Ross Winterowd, who sees imitation as a productive way of “forcing” meaning and thereby learning to manipulate language (163). Both scholars counter the complaint of those who favor expressivist rhetoric and hold that individual self-expression helps students find their own voices, while imitation merely encourages conformity. In many ways, it seems that the expressivist’s idea of an individual, solitary genius has harmed composition studies as a field. The notion is based on romantic-period notions of the self and the idea that nothing is more important than individual genius. However, the belief that all creative powers lie exclusively within the individual and that each person is a self-contained vessel has been largely discredited. Social approaches to composition have shown the opposite: that often we gain from interaction with other texts, people, and environments. That is why the notion of intertextuality, so important in literary studies, also makes sense in composition and affects the idea of imitation. The fact that students may imitate other texts and in doing so produce something original has been reiterated by Bakhtin and others.

In looking at intertextuality, it is clear that part of the process of writing is unconscious. In this sense, writing is similar to speaking in that we internalize some of what we hear and see around us. Hence, in the composing process, the internalization comes not only from listening, but also from reading—and no one has criticized the importance of reading in becoming a good writer. The idea behind imitation, then, is not that we merely read something that someone else has written, but that we read it and appropriate it in ways that become “original” in the process of producing it ourselves. That is one way that imitation can be considered a creative act. It is not merely copying or reproducing the work of another, but transforming it in some important respects.

What’s more, it seems that one objection to imitation, based on the idea that only an individual genius alone can produce a competent work, is unsound. When we see Imitation as Freedom, page 30 (also see related articles, pages 28–29).
write, we are not drawing exclusively upon what is within us but also upon many other factors in our lives: our environments, upbringing, past readings and writings, and conversations in many different contexts. All of these factors mix and match and affect what comes out on the page. Thus, writing is truly intertextual, and whether we mean to or not, we are drawing upon those other and prior texts when we produce what we write. How, then, is imitation any different from these intertextual influences? Could it be that the only real difference is that with imitation we are openly acknowledging the source of intertextuality? Do we dislike imitation simply because it is like the alcoholic who drinks during the day instead of hiding her bottle behind closed doors, where it isn’t visible to others? Are we comfortable with imitative practices as long as they stay in the closet, silenced and unacknowledged?

W. Ross Winterowd, Edward P. J. Corbett, and ancient rhetoricians as far back as Aristotle and Quintilian have complained about the same treatment of imitation. For even though imitation requires imagination, no one wants to admit it. Nor will others admit the generative power of imitating model texts. As William Coe says, “Faced with the emptiness of a form, a human being seeks matter to fill it. Form becomes, therefore, a motive for generating information” (238). For example, Coe suggests, the form of the five-paragraph essay, because it contains “three empty slots, motivates students to continue inventing until they have discovered subject matter to fill three slots” (238). Winterowd argues that language structures not only carry meaning but force meaning. Corbett continues the idea of imitation generating meaning when he writes, “It is the internalization of structures that unlocks our powers and sets us free to be creative, original, and ultimately, effective. Imitate that you may be different” (190).

Yet it is not enough to say that imitation offers structure and unlocks the creative process. Another benefit is that it allows students to learn about composition as a developmental model. For example, as a professor who uses the prose models approach to teaching writing, Paul Eschholz suggests that using models of good writing exposes students to good organization, effective thesis statements, paragraph structure, coherence, logic, exactness, and unity (28). These so-called “qualities of good writing” can be explained more effectively if they are demonstrated to students through the use of models and by using an incremental process. In his work with imitation, Michael Flanagan argues that using models during the prewriting stage and focusing on form, organization, arrangement, and style are part of the active process of discovering ideas. While the prewriting stage is normally considered solidly a part of the writing “process,” Flanagan suggests that models are actually part of the process of invention. He contends that it is the process of not only looking at models but actively manipulating them that allows learning to take place.

These approaches suggest that imitation can be an important part of invention; it is true that the imitation exercises advanced by scholars are substantive, geared toward helping students discover their own voices through the voices of others. This inventive approach, in fact, is part and parcel of the generative rhetoric advanced by Francis Christensen in the 1960s and 1970s. His practices, after enjoying widespread use for a certain amount of time, eventually died out—a death, according to Connors, that has no reasonable justification. Christensen developed a theory of sentence modeling in which students imitated the structure of complex sentences in order to become stronger writers. In using Christensen’s model of writing cumulative sentences after identifying base clauses and additions, James Gray developed a sequential approach that teaches students to identify patterns in sentence writing and then to use them in their own sentences. Gray asks students to look at many different sentences written by professional writers and to imitate their methods by modifying them in sentences of their own. For example, he asks students to write sentences based on phrasal modifiers, as in the following sentence by Saul Bellow: “He lay for a quarter of an hour without thinking, lips parted, legs and arms extended, breathing quietly as he gazed at the figures in the wallpaper until they were hidden in darkness” (quoted in Gray, 189).

Eventually, students look at longer passages in order to see sentences used in context. According to Gray, this is the most important step in the process. “The extended sequence assignment is the most important step in my approach to teaching writing,” he states. “To be able to use these previously unfamiliar modification patterns, students must apply what they have learned” (196). In his approach, Gray is teaching a process of writing based on structures commonly found in professional writing and used by professional writers. While the approach does not come completely from within students, there is nothing to suggest that students do not benefit from the instruction. Again, in this form of imitation, students interact with others’ writing and use it to strengthen their own skills. Who is to say that this methodology—which may
be compared to the step-by-step approach of teaching, say, algebra or geometry—does not have valuable applications in the writing classroom? Even if the exercise asked for a precise duplication of the model, we would be hard-pressed not to consider that valuable. In her new textbook on ancient rhetorics, Sharon Crowley calls for the “time-honored practice of copying by hand” as being still useful to students (294). With Gray, however, a different kind of imitation is anticipated. Gray asks his students to use models to transform their own writing, and it is a process that he pursues incrementally, so that it emerges logically from students’ writing.

The developmental approach has widespread support. As Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky writes, “In the child’s development . . . imitation and instruction play a major role. They bring out the specifically human qualities of the mind and lead the child to new developmental levels” (quoted in Flanagan, 213). Michael Flanagan cites research confirming that imitation and the transformation of information begin early for humans. Language is acquired through active imagination, and there is a natural tendency to imitate even written forms. Flanagan uses this research to suggest that imitation works best when students manipulate models and transform them instead of merely analyzing them. This form of imitation fits well with the language theories of Piaget, who wrote, “To my way of thinking, knowing an object does not mean copying it—it means acting upon it” (quoted in Flanagan, 213). In the case of imitation, that seems to be the key. It is important for students to be shown what to do and not merely told to imitate. “People learn through activity,” Flanagan states, “that is the way of life. They do not passively wait to be filled. They seek out, engage, manipulate, transform their surroundings and are transformed” (218).

While the major arguments for restoring imitation to composition practice revolve around its differences from process approaches, one argument anticipates a rapprochement between the two. Paul Rodgers, Jr., suggests that imitation and attention to form are actually part of a discovery process, the same kind of discovery generally touted as a reason for favoring process approaches to writing. Rodgers suggests that because many different considerations—tone, emphasis, and appearance on the page being a few—affect the shape of individual paragraphs, it is important to look at the work as a whole. As such, paragraphs collaborate; one paragraph depends on the other, and finding the way the paragraphs go together is necessarily discovered by writers:

Paragraph structure is part and parcel of the structure of discourse as a whole, a given [unit of discourse] becomes a paragraph not by virtue of its structure but because the writer elects to indent, his indentation functioning, as does all punctuation, as a gloss upon the overall literary process under way at that point.

Paragraphs are not composed; they are discovered. To compose is to create, to indent is to interpret. (Rodgers 69, emphasis added)

Rodgers’s emphasis on the important relationship between structure and the discovery of ideas suggests that there may be more connection than was first imagined between traditional ideas of process writing like freewriting and brainstorming. Rodgers’s idea is similar to Winterrowd’s: that the form forces the meaning and that the two are inseparable in many respects.

Rodgers’ point that the meaning comes in the paragraphs working together simply emphasizes the idea that imitation cannot be separated from thinking. In looking at an entire essay, students are forced to look beyond the imitative practice and think about meaning—the way the parts fit within a whole. This view simply reinforces the importance of imitation as a discovery tool. It suggests that meaning can be determined at least in part by looking at the overall structure of a piece of writing.

One other way of looking at the discovery aspects of both process and product techniques is that both involve inductive learning. Inductive learning, with its long history in rhetoric as well as general educational theory, posits that students learn most effectively when they draw generalizations from particular instances. As early as Piaget’s theories of development, the strength of inductive learning has been widely discussed. With the basic theoretical position that knowledge is best learned when it is discovered, inductive learning includes several approaches. A dialectical approach, where students compare different views and arrive at a conclusion; an experimental approach, where students set up hypotheses and draw conclusions; and an experiential approach, in which doing something involves learning about it in the process, are all part of inductive learning. All of these elements, I suggest, are present in both process and product approaches to composition, and therefore it seems that imitation and the use of models—most often associated with product pedagogies—could be usefully restored to modern practices of process in composition.

For many years now, the use of imitation in the composition classroom has been waning. As Connors points out, articles on imitation, sentence combining, and
Imitation as Freedom

Generative rhetoric have steadily declined and have been almost nonexistent since 1995. Yet in composition classrooms all over the country, as we adopt various process techniques, we still hold our students accountable for the fundamental elements of good writing: organization, coherence, unity, and clarity; among others. Lisa Delpit has pointed out that our expectations are sometimes "hidden," that they remain invisible to students as we encourage them to explore their ideas and work within the process model of teaching. Delpit's argument, though intended to address the situation of minority students, also applies to students in composition classes around the country. Indeed, it seems the height of hypocrisy to use strictly process techniques when we expect high quality "products" from our students' writing.

Therefore, it seems highly logical to argue for a return to some aspects of so-called product pedagogies. In particular, the use of imitative exercises seems to be an ancient practice that should be restored. Imitation allows students to see models of successful writing from either professional or student authors and gives them a chance to work with the text, transforming it in meaningful ways. Even though the word "imitation" implies something stale—a copy instead of an original—it is a kind of heuristic that allows students to be creative, to find their own voices as they imitate certain aspects of other voices. Finally, imitation and the modeling of structure have similarities to the process of discovery so often touted as the most significant aspect of process approaches. It seems clear that both rely on an inductive approach because they ask students to derive general ideas from particular instances. The models from Writing About Literature that I used profitably in high school still have value today, and I suggest that as a field, we should look to see the general value of using models and imitation in composition. Nothing less important than the future of our field depends on it.

References


Paul Butler teaches English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He is a teacher-consultant with the National Writing Project of Acadiana based there.

Waiting It Out

continued from page 21

look at an old topic can help us find the fresh voice we seek to express ourselves and impress others.

Given the time to write every day, the time to consider and then reconsider ideas and how language works, children like Delia begin to understand that revision is a possibility. If I hold the door open to that possibility, they will step through and experiment.

Each child comes to school with an individual version of literacy, a variety of experiences, and a complex social network, all of which influence everyday classroom performance and the propensity to learn. But in spite of these differences, I am convinced that all kids benefit from the opportunity to stretch their imaginations, to apply the skills of literacy to their personal narratives, to engage in composing the stories of their lives.

Teachers today are presented with "new and improved" scripted teaching guides, additional curriculum mandates emphasizing isolated skill development, and an increased focus on standardized tests. Yet, my experience has shown me that none of these programs and demands will replace the key elements that make writers out of first-graders: lots of writing and lots of time.

Debra Weller is a co-director of the Tidewater Writing Project, Norfolk, Virginia, and a fifth grade teacher at Windsor Woods Elementary School in Virginia Beach, Virginia. This article was written while she was teaching first grade at the same school.

An earlier version of this article was published in The Journal of the Virginia Writing Project (January/February 2001).