Toward a Pedagogy of Writing Immersion:
Using Imitation in the Composition Classroom

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In his article “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae suggests that in order for student writers to use the discourse of the academic community, they must learn to speak its language (5). Although he says that writing can be more problematic for students than “describing baseball to a Martian” (10), Bartholomae stops short of calling it a “foreign” language. Yet perhaps he should have. With the lack of exposure to academic discourse that some students bring to the composition classroom, writing can often seem like a foreign language to them. If that is the case, then students could benefit from the foreign- or second-language acquisition approach to developing fluency through “immersion,” the constant interplay of writing, reading, speaking, and listening. This view of the writing process, which relies on what Bartholomae calls “mimicking . . . language” (5)—or imitation—supports the contention of first-century orator Marcus Fabius Quintilian that the four language arts “are all so connected, so inseparably linked with one another, that if any one of them is neglected, we labor in vain in the other[s]” (125). Thus, drawing upon both classical rhetoric and modern language learning theory, I propose that composition should adopt an immersion approach to writing that uses the imitation of models as its central methodology.

The argument for teaching writing as immersion suggests that writing, reading, speaking, and listening work together by providing “comprehensible input” to writers. Comprehensible input, a term coined by linguist Stephen Krashen, theorizes that we acquire language by understanding oral and written messages whose linguistic forms and structures are just beyond our current level of competence (Lightbown and Spada 28). The interplay of language that provides this input, says linguist Julia Falk, constitutes an important part of the composing process. “In normal writing,” she says, “as in natural examples of speech, the language user is involved in all aspects of the language as these interact with one another” (439). In other words, by reading both silently and aloud, activities that involve listening and speaking, students absorb language structures.
Through repeated practice, they automatize some of these underlying forms in their writing, a result of both conscious and unconscious processes. The imitation of writing models serves a similar function by providing another form of comprehensible input. As Donna Gorell suggests, “With use, imitated forms become internalized [and] incorporated into cognitive structures” (54).

The case for writing immersion, of course, assumes a close nexus between oral and written language acquisition. Although theorists recognize differences between orality and literacy, they also see important links between them. For example, in studying oral language development, researchers have demonstrated that children undergo long exposure to the speech of others before they begin to produce their own speech. According to Falk, a similar phenomenon occurs in writing. She states, “Long exposure to the writing of others prior to the production of one’s own writing provides the learner with examples and, ultimately, with an understanding of the nature and the structure of written English” (438). In suggesting that “examples” reside at the core of writing production, Falk clearly draws another link between language acquisition and imitation. She indicates that learners mentally process various models of writing as they assimilate language in different contexts.

Despite its role in language acquisition studies, however, the use of imitation in teaching writing often draws disdain today from two sites of composition theory: the process movement, based on cognitive science, and the expressivist idea of individual “genius,” which is an extension of Romanticism (see Farmer and Arrington 22-25). In their article “Problem-Solving Strategies and the Writing Process,” Linda Flower and John Hayes argue that offering students examples of good and bad writing simply gives them a “product” to analyze, without concentrating on the process of writing (449). Expressivist rhetoric, as developed by Peter Elbow, William Coles, and others, generally sees individual self-expression as intended to “help students find their own voices” (Sullivan 17). The Romantics’ emphasis on individual genius is regarded as being at odds with the idea of conformity, which is often associated with the practice of imitation. Although the precise objections of the two approaches differ, the common complaint seems to be that imitation is inconsistent with rhetorical invention, the process of creation and discovery—the so-called “creative fire of writing”—so important to modern composition studies (Bender 113). Yet those who see imitation and invention as somehow antithetical might revisit Quintilian’s Institutio oratoria, where he suggests that emulating models is a necessary and important part of the invention process. He writes, “It cannot be doubted that a great portion of art consists in imitation—for even though to invent was first in order of time and holds the first place in merit, it is nevertheless advantageous to copy what has been invented with success” (132). Similarly, Longinus, despite his emphasis on “genius,” advocates imitation as a valid pedagogical tool in his rhetorical treatise On the Sublime. In articulating a view at odds with the Romantic belief in self-expression to the exclusion of imitation, he writes, “Another road to sublimity . . .
is the way of imitation and emulation of great writers of the past... The genius of the ancients acts as a kind of oracular cavern, and effluences flow from it into the minds of their imitators" (19). Quintilian takes the idea a step further when he implies that invention and imitation go hand in hand with immersion in the language arts. Arguing that “energetic” speech requires practice in writing, he goes on to say that reading and writing also have a synergistic relationship. “The labor of writing,” he says, “if left destitute of models from reading, passes away without effect, as having no director” (125).

It seems, then, that the immersion approach to teaching writing may serve as a bridge between invention and imitation, thereby allaying some of the concerns voiced by expressivist and cognitive rhetoricians. In order to test the idea of writing as immersion, I will evaluate some imitation exercises from the classical orators, including those known collectively as the progymnasmata. These exercises show a close affiliation between imitation and invention, as evidenced by Isocrates’ discussion of the connection between them in Panepyricus: “[S]ince language is of such a nature that it is possible to discourse on the same subject matter in many different ways—to represent the great as lowly or invest the little with grandeur, to recount the things of old in a new manner or set forth events of recent date in an old fashion—it follows that one must not shun the subjects upon which others have composed before, but must try to compose better than they” (8-9 qtd. in Crowley 291-92). At the same time, the exercises rely on all four language skills and thereby support the idea of an immersion approach to developing effective writing. In their fundamental design, the imitation exercises of classical rhetoric are stamped with the imprimatur of language learning theories. For example, some of the most basic exercises—reading aloud and copying—find a justification in the way we acquire languages. In her textbook Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students, Sharon Crowley suggests that reading aloud helps students “develop an ear for sentence rhythm” and also allows them to absorb stylistic variations (293). In addition, she intimates that copying by hand is useful in producing coma, or the abundant supply of arguments. Although these methodologies have largely disappeared from today’s writing classroom, they are a regular part of foreign- or second-language instruction. Furthermore, language acquisition theorists view reading aloud—or listening—as a process in which listeners interact with the information they hear, make inferences, and create a unique meaning that they can later draw upon (Omaggio 126). In this sense, then, listening is a creative act that can provide input for the writing process. This view is supported by Quintilian, who sees a direct connection between reading and oral expression. Under his pedagogy, students first learn by listening to their teacher (praeblectio) before reading aloud the same passage on their own (lectio) (Murphy xxiv). Edward P.J. Corbett suggests that the act of verbatim copying, much like dictation exercises in French high schools, helps students internalize rhetorical forms. “Some of them were obviously conscious,” he says, “but for others, the students had internalized the structures from just
steeping themselves in traditions" ("Theory" 177).

In addition to reading aloud and copying, memorizing—another form of imitation from classical rhetoric—has the effect of immersing students in the writing process. According to Corbett, who bemoans the disappearance of memorization from American classrooms, the practice was once especially helpful to writers who, after reading the King James version of the Bible, "unconsciously and spontaneously reproduced much of the rhythm, the phraseology, and the structures of the Biblical passages" ("Theory" 185). As Corbett makes clear, the practice of memorization hails from classical rhetoric, where Quintilian praised it, stating that pupils who memorize "will form an intimate acquaintance with the best writings, will carry their models with them and unconsciously reproduce the style of the speech which has been impressed upon their memory" (qtd. in Corbett, "Theory" 185). Thus, memorizing is a form of internalizing language that has its counterpart in behaviorist theories of language acquisition. Through the repetition of sounds and structures, it provides another form of comprehensible input to writers. In her textbook, Crowley proposes three other imitative exercises from classical rhetoric. The first involves students borrowing the structures from a sentence and substituting their own words in place of the original ones. The second is translation; in classical rhetoric, this generally meant translating Greek into Latin or Latin into Greek, but modern "translation" exercises involve transforming "passages into dialects or across levels of usage" (Crowley 303). A third exercise is paraphrase, where writers express the "gist of the original passage" in their own words. Crowley argues that paraphrase can have the added benefit of "jump-starting invention" (308). According to Corbett, the idea of teaching paraphrase started with Erasmus, who advocated the practice of "turning poetry into prose and of turning prose into poetry" ("Theory" 187). Although many variations of paraphrase have been used, Philip Arrington argues that it is useful primarily because "it presupposes interpretation, revising another's vision, a creative translation of one text into another" (186). Thus, as Arrington envisions it, paraphrasing requires invention as well as imitation. What's more, the skills involved in paraphrasing require a careful interplay of reading and writing, an understanding and manipulation of language forms that fit the idea of writing as immersion.

In addition to imitation exercises, another set of elementary composition exercises used by classical rhetoricians are the progymnasmata, which Donald Leman Clark says are characterized by their sequence of increasing difficulty for students. The graduated rhetorical exercises were intended to increase proficiency in writing and speaking, two of the language arts that Quintilian sees as interrelated, as evidenced in his statement that "writing makes speaking precise; speaking makes writing easy" (157). According to Clark, the overall design of the elementary exercises contributed to their success: the progymnasmata are designed for the mental and moral development of students: One thing, common to all the progymnasmata, accounts for their success and
hence for their continued use at least through the seventeenth century. They all give patterns for the boys to follow. They present a graded series of exercises in writing and speaking themes which proceed from the easy to the more difficult; they build each exercise on what the boys have learned from previous exercises; they repeat something from the previous exercise, yet each exercise adds something new (181). The structure of the progymnasmata itself suggests a consistency with language immersion methodology. First, the exercises offer a "pattern" or model to follow and repeat. For example, the first exercise, called fable or mythos, asks students to retell a folktale in a simple, direct style. By copying the structure of the fable, students engage in repetition, or imitation, a common feature of language learning. Later, when they build on what they have learned, they manipulate the form in what language theorists call "practice" (Lightbown and Spada 2). This ability to manipulate the parameters of the original exercise to arrive at something new constitutes invention. Both activities can thus be seen as an important part of language acquisition. By gradually increasing the difficulty of the exercises, and repeating the skills already developed, these exercises result in comprehensible input. According to this theory, acquisition occurs when learners encounter structures that are "a little beyond" their current level of competence (1 + 1), but are understandable because of context and other skills they have developed (Omaggio 25). Thus, as applied to the progymnasmata, students strive for meaning first in interpreting the exercises, and language structures naturally follow. Furthermore, the pedagogical practices involved in teaching the exercises include all four language arts: listening (as the instructor reads aloud), reading (as students read the text over for interpretation), writing (as students imitate the text), and speaking (as they recite it from memory).

The specific applicability of the progymnasmata to writing immersion can be illuminated by examining a specific exercise. The chreia, or anecdote, is defined by Hermogenes as "a concise exposition of some memorable saying or deed, generally for good counsel" (Baldwin 26). Thus, the exercise generally involves a maxim centered around a moral or designed to teach a lesson. Crowley cites an example from Aphthonius, author of the most complete manual of elementary exercises. In creating an exercise of chreia, Aphthonius borrows the following saying from Isocrates: "The root of education is bitter, but sweet are its fruits" (qtd. in Crowley 327). As a rhetorical exercise, students must amplify the statement in a number of ways that build on earlier exercises. According to Clark, Aphthonius required pupils to develop the theme of the chreia as follows: "begin with praise of the sayer or doer; then give an exposition or paraphrase of the chreia; tell why it was said or done; introduce a contrast; then a comparison; add an example; support with confirmatory testimony; conclude with a brief epilog" (186).

The use of the chreia as an imitative exercise suggests that immersion in writing can be beneficial to students in several ways. First, in examining the exercise from a
linguistic perspective, students are asked to “write, memorize, and speak” about the theme of the anecdote or maxim (Clark 186). Thus, as with other types of imitative exercises, writers use all forms of the language arts to complete their assignment. Yet the design of the chreia, by its very nature, provides additional instruction in writing methodology. According to Clark, the anecdote, along with the proverb, serves as highly structured models for students: chreia and proverb, the first exercises in exposition, called for definite, though frankly conventional, sequence. The boy was conducted by leading strings in his first halting steps in speaking and writing, was coached in how to go from the opening praise of sayer or doer to the final admonition to go and do likewise (211).

In this sense, the immersion comes for students from repetition of the writing process. As Clark explains, “In exercise after exercise the boys were directed to an exploration of the topics or commonplaces where one looks for arguments” (210). Not only does the repetition of exercises provide an avenue for development in writing; it also results in invention, as the learners discover “arguments appropriate to the theme under discussion” (Clark 210). Thus, with this and other progymnasmata exercises, students practice through repeated imitation, a process that immerses them in the language arts and results in their invention of different arguments. The end result, as Clark indicates, is “an exercise in what is sometimes called the methods of developing the topic sentence of a paragraph” (186). However, the process is not completely formalized or formulaic. As Sean Patrick O’Rourke argues, the overall structure of the progymnasmata is designed to help students move toward a communicative approach that considers the needs of everyone involved in writing. He states, “The student moved from strict imitation to a more artistic melding of the often disparate concerns of speaker, subject, and audience” (562). Hence, from completing elementary rhetorical exercises, students are able to anticipate the greater rhetorical purpose of their written and oral work.

The problems faced by student writers in the college classroom have been documented by many composition scholars. Although diverse reasons may account for this situation, the end result is often that “unskilled writers . . . lack a sense of form at all levels—word, sentence, paragraph, and entire work” (Gorrell 53) and hence are unable to express their ideas effectively. David Bartholomae attributes the problems writers face to the specialized language of the university’s various discourse communities and suggests that students must learn to speak a new language when they enter college. If we regard this language as similar to a foreign language in certain respects, then we arguably should teach writing using theories and pedagogies that have been successful in foreign- or second-language classrooms. Although the methodologies differ to some extent, they can be grouped under the umbrella of “immersion,” an approach that relies on the interaction of writing, reading, listening, and speaking. When applied to writing, immersion suggests that all of the language arts provide comprehensible input that the
learner assimilates and reproduces in his or her writing.

In order to facilitate the immersion process, students benefit from the imitation of models in their writing. Although imitation has been ignored by many rhetoric scholars, it serves as the central methodology of a classroom based on writing immersion. Bartholomae considers it important in helping writers learn academic discourse. He says that mastering academic discourse “is more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention or discovery” (11). Yet imitation and invention are closely related, and the former often leads to the latter when students do imitation exercises. From reading aloud and memorizing to paraphrasing, the exercises help students internalize written structures for later use in their own writing. The same idea applies to the progymnasmata, a sequence of exercises of graduated difficulty intended to lead students systematically to a certain proficiency in writing. Thus, all of these imitative exercises rely on the interaction of the four language arts, bringing them solidly within the context of writing immersion and second-language acquisition theories.

While articulating their enthusiasms for the uses of imitation in the writing classroom, a number of commentators have suggested that the practice has the paradoxical effect of liberating students. Thus, in contrast to the opposition of cognitive and expressivist rhetorics, these theorists suggest that imitation need not be slavish. W. Ross Winterowd argues that it helps students “learn to manipulate the system of language” (163). He goes on to say that language structures not only carry meaning, but force meaning (163). Edward P. J. Corbett agrees. He says, “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” (‘Theory’ 190).
Works Cited


