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Ever since I first realized that some people could write better than others, I have wondered why, and since my high school years, I have been firmly convinced that those who do write well do so because they have read more than the others. This conviction is based not on experimental data, but only on my casual observations of people I know. I am not referring here to great writers--I am not sure that I have ever known one--but only to those who seem to know unconsciously when a certain punctuation mark or a particular word is appropriate or not, and who exhibit a variety of sentence patterns in their writing.

Halfway through my first semester as a Freshman English teacher, I realized that it was these skills of diction and syntax which were still the least developed in my students. They understood and could effectively use the rhetorical strategies presented in the class text, James M. McCrimmon's Writing With a Purpose. They could write a unified paragraph with a topic sentence and supporting examples. They could punctuate their sentences properly, but they seldom needed any marks other than the apostrophe, comma, and period. Their papers consistently lacked sentence variety, inhibiting not only the paper's readability but also its depth. Depth of meaning was also inhibited by the prevalence of awkward and imprecise diction. These problems in style were not addressed in the course outline that all new instructors were expected to follow. Moreover, how was I to teach in one semester those abilities which, as stated above, I believed were acquired in the year-in, year-out of process of reading?

Then, in the course of some reading for my own studies, I became acquainted with Edward P. J. Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student. Corbett advocates using the same principles to teach modern discourse as the ancients did to teach rhetoric. He tells us that the classical rhetoricians taught that the oratorical skills were acquired in three ways: through the study of theory, through practice, and through the imitation of others.¹ Imitation struck home. Acquisition of style from reading is imitation of an unconscious sort.

Corbett proceeds by suggesting some exercises in imitation for the purpose of improving style, one of which is to copy verbatim short passages from accomplished writers. First, to capture the thought of it, the student should read the entire passage before copying it. The passage should then be copied slowly and accurately by hand, never by typing. No more than fifteen or twenty minutes should be spent copying at any one time; this seems to be the limit of the students' attention spans. Too much time should not be spent with any one author lest one fall into the rut of mimicking someone else's style rather than developing one's own style by accumulating a variety of others' techniques. Finally, this exercise should be practiced regularly over a long period of time as opposed to concentrating the work into a week's effort.² This, I had hoped, would be a means for my students to improve their style and for me to test my hypothesis.

On their own time, the students were to copy a short passage once a

day for three weeks. For sources, they were allowed to use those articles that I had selected from the required reading text, Popular Writing in America, or any other prose passage that they desired to use other than a news-story. The articles in Popular Writing prohibited from use were also news-stories. The students were also required to give the proper bibliographical citation for passages from sources other than Popular Writing.

By exposing my students to diverse styles, I had hoped to foster the growth of their own styles. Because three weeks of reading is nowhere near the time needed to assimilate unconsciously the elements necessary for good style, I had to make the students consciously aware of the elements of style in the essays they copied. Thus, I gave the students guidelines for a close study of a writer's style:

- 1) What kind of diction does the writer use? Is it abstract or concrete, formal or informal, common words or jargon?
- 2) What is the average length of his sentences, measured in number of words?
- 3) What kinds of sentences does he use? Grammatically, are they simple, compound, complex, or compound-complex sentences? Functionally, are they generally statements, questions, commands, or exclamations?
- 4) Does he use different sentence patterns? Does he ever invert the normal word order of the sentence? Does he use sentence openers? How often? What kind: infinitive phrases, participial phrases, absolute constructions, or conjunctive words?
- 5) How does he articulate his sentences? Does he use transitional words, pronouns, conjunctions?
- 6) Does he use figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, irony, hyperbole, or oxymoron?
- 7) What is average length of his paragraphs, measured in number of words and in number of sentences?
- 8) What type of transitional devices does he use between paragraphs?³

After copying a passage, the student was expected to answer the questions applicable to it. This not only helped the student in discerning elements of style, but was also a way for me to quantify the project. By reading their comments, I could gain some idea of how much they had learned from the copying.

After the first four days, I collected their work to make sure they were off to a proper start. They had all made an attempt to answer the questions, some people more thoughtfully than others. Yet, all the answers were very mechanical. Everyone could determine the average length of sentences and paragraphs, most could identify the kind of diction and sentence patterns used, and a few recognized some figures of speech, but no one linked these various techniques of style to the overall effect of the particular passage from which they were taken. It was then that I realized that although my goal had been to

make the students aware of the correlation between what one says and how one says it, I had not made this explicit to them. This is not to say at this time that they were not aware of the relationship. I thought that they may have been and just didn't write it down because they were not required to do so. So, for the rest of the entries, I not only had the students answer the mechanical questions, but also had them explain why they thought the writer used the devices that he did. In doing this, they were to keep in mind who the writer's audience was; what his medium was (e.g., a newspaper article or a novel); and what his situation was, or more specifically, where and when did he write. If the student could see some similarities between the writer's needs and his own, then perhaps the student would realize that the devices of style that the accomplished writer uses are also available to him.

In this second series of entries, my students again proved to be adept at counting words. They were equally perceptive in determining the writer's vital statistics, but few established any connections between a single component of style and the effect of the passage as a whole. In other words, most of the students were able to record their observations adequately enough but, for the most part, were unable to make any deductions from their observations. What could be done to remedy this situation? Unfortunately, nothing for this group; their semester was coming to a close.

To check further the effectiveness of this project, I compared the paper the students wrote immediately before beginning the assignment with the one they wrote afterwards. Overall improvement by the class was indiscernable. Even individual improvement often seemed to have no direct dependence on the copying exercises. Such improvement could just as justifiably be attributed to the difference in topics, the difference in formats (the first paper being a classification paper and the other a persuasive essay), and the difference in environment (one paper being an in-class assignment and the other an out-of-class one). I suppose that the results of any experiment in teaching composition are arrived at subjectively and thus may always be considered inconclusive to a certain extent, but "inconclusive" in this case would only be a euphemism for failure. My goal had been to improve my students writing by making them aware of the different techniques of good style available to them. Not only did my students not attempt to use any of the techniques they observed in those writers they copied, they often were not aware of how much a good prose piece depended on these elements of style, as evidenced by their comments on the passages they copied.

What went wrong? Was the fallacy inherent in imitation as a teaching method? Corbett suggests that this system has worked effectively for him. Why, then, was my particular program so weak? Or was I just being too harsh with my students and with myself? Maybe there had not been enough time for any visible improvement, but the students might have noticed some improvement in their own writing processes or even in their attitude. Thus, for more data in determining the experiment's effects, I asked my students to write a paragraph about whether or not they thought the copying exercises were valuable in any way in improving their writing. Did they notice any features of style of which they had not previously been aware? Had they tried to imitate any of these features in their own writing?

Of the fifteen responses, eleven people thought the entire project was worthless. Their biggest complaint was that it was time consuming at a time of the semester when time was most precious--its end. Two students did not know if the exercise had helped to improve their writing or not, but they did enjoy it because it had forced them to read extracts of books they had been wanting to read but had felt they had never had the time to do. Finally, two students did think the exercises had helped their writing. One of these students wrote: "After writing my journal, I noticed a few things. I learned a lot about punctuation and grammar. After writing the same thing over and over, you just remember what you saw. My spelling was also improved." The other student also felt his spelling was improved. Even though improvement of spelling was not one of the primary objectives of the unit, I have no reason to doubt the testimonies of these students. In fact, the student quoted above made an accurate appraisal of how he was expected to learn from the exercise. However, two claims of improvement out of fifteen cases are not indicative of a useful, much less a successful, method of teaching composition, especially when eleven others considered it valueless.

My students' opinions had confirmed what I had already come to believe: imitation, at least not in this form of word for word copying, by itself, is not an effective way of teaching college composition in a classroom environment. I still believe that one can acquire good style in writing by reading voraciously. Many elements will be assimilated unconsciously, and for those who are really serious about developing their style of writing, what better way is there than to study the techniques of the masters and then to experiment with their methods in one's own writing? However, this is a habit one has to cultivate on one's own and out of a real desire to write better. It cannot be forced upon students and be expected to be an effective means of producing better writers. As one student commented: "The English Journal Project that we did was absolutely worthless. It was a waste of time, energy and paper. I'm sure that most of the class, myself included, just carelessly copied a few paragraphs to get the assignment out of the way."

Thus, the first weakness of my program was that the students did not take it seriously. A solution to this lack of student concern might be to make the project worth a grade. I did not grade their transcriptions nor their stylistic analyses, but I did make completion of this project mandatory for a course grade. I decided not to grade the completed project in its own right first because I did not know how to distribute grades for copying someone else's work, and also, I did not want to believe that the will to learn was dependent solely on the threat of grades, good or bad. Even now, I do not think that grading the project would make it any more worthwhile for the students.

Hence, I still need a way to make the project more pertinent to the students' needs and mindset, but what are the ways? I think a few students' final comments may have helped me in this respect.

One student wrote: "I thought the copying assignment was stupid. All I did was sit down and read a couple of paragraphs and then write them out. I noticed things about style, but I didn't learn anything. I can't learn through osmosis." And indeed, they were expected to learn through osmosis, that is through the unconscious, to a limited extent, but because of my doubts about the dependability of the unconscious, they were also expected to be made aware of techniques of style by consciously analyzing a professional writer's work. Because of my ambivalence they did not know what to expect from the assignment and consequently came to expect nothing.

A stand on the method of learning must be taken before the project is implemented, and this methodology should be made evident to the student. If one intends to depend on unconscious learning, the period of copying will have to be extended, probably to encompass the whole semester. However, as I stated above, the student must understand what is expected of him, and yet, the students quoted, who do represent the majority opinion of my students, cannot comprehend, or at least cannot take seriously, learning through the unconscious. Therefore, I doubt if three months of nothing but copying would be any more useful than three weeks were.

The alternative is to make the students conscious of everything they are expected to do, and that they are capable of doing it themselves. This must be done by bringing the project into the classroom. Analyze a passage with the students in class so they know with some certainty what to look for, and then have them do their own analyses of other writers out of class. Move next to analyzing one specific sentence structure in class, and then have them write similar sentences using their own topics but having the same pattern as the model.⁴ Do this with various sentence patterns, and then follow the same procedure with larger units of writing, such as the paragraph. Another method of instruction by imitation is to give the students a sentence and have them phrase it in different ways so they can see the importance of structure and diction to meaning.⁵ The copying exercise is probably as beneficial in helping the students to become aware of various elements of style as the methods listed here, but these are superior because they also force the students actually to practice the techniques themselves. After all, the purpose of a composition course is not just to teach the student to recognize various techniques of style in others' writings, but also to teach them to use these techniques in their own writings. A student comment made evident to me the necessity of practice, not just imitation, in teaching composition: "I felt the exercise helped very little in improving my writing technique. The authors that I copied wrote complex sentences with a lot of semicolons, [sic] I would never be able to write like that. It didn't really help much." Thus, the students must not only be made aware of new techniques, but they must also be made to use t

Although this project was definitely not useful for the students, it was not a complete failure. It was successful for me because I learned something about teaching. It seems apparent to me now that any successful teaching unit must have two parts: first, it must present that new thing which is to be learned, and then, it must make the students use or practice the new skill or behavior. A teacher cannot assume the student will have the initiative to experiment on his own.

Finally, the project also made me reconsider my original hypothesis that the best writers are best because they read the most. That there is some relationship between the two activities, I have no doubt, but that it is a causal one, I now wonder.

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NOTES

¹Edward P. J. Corbett, "The Theory and Practice of Imitation in Classical Rhetoric," CCC, 22, No. 3 (1971), 243.

²Edward P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 510.

³Edward P. J. Corbett, "A Method of Analyzing Prose Style with a Demonstration Analysis of Swift's 'A Modest Proposal,'" in Reflections on High School English, ed. Gary Tate (Tulsa: Univ. of Tulsa, 1966), pp. 109-11.

⁴Corbett, Classical Rhetoric, p. 533.

⁵Corbett, "The Theory," p. 248.