Imitation pedagogy: The ongoing debate

Nancy Joyce Snow

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IMITATION PEDAGOGY: THE ONGOING DEBATE

A Thesis
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Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Nancy Joyce Snow
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ABSTRACT

Imitation was one of the five teaching methods passed down from the Greeks and was, from antiquity down to the nineteenth century, highly respected among scholars and educators. However imitation has lost status as a viable pedagogy, and especially perhaps in the field of composition studies. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the historical use of imitation, consider imitation's role in learning, present some of the concerns contemporary compositionists have with its use, compare past and current debates over imitation, and suggest a rationale for formal research and evaluation of the use of imitation pedagogy in the teaching of composition.

The historical overview in chapter two demonstrates who or what was imitated and why. It also shows that imitation was seen as a necessary means of learning language, grammar, and style, and the primary way of internalizing method, organization, and rhetorical technique.

Imitation's historical role in learning generally and its obvious role in learning to read and write initially discussed in chapter three raises questions as to its potential in learning formal composition. These are
questions that have remained largely unaddressed in recent composition theory.

Questions over imitation's decline are explored in chapter four, along with some of the major concerns postmodern compositionists have regarding imitative practices such as issues of intellectual property and plagiarism, style development, creativity, discourse community membership, and student empowerment.

In many ways the goals of past rhetoricians are the goals of today's teachers. Throughout history educators have valued competence, excellence, and originality in writing. In many ways even those averse to imitation and to its formal practice actually use models in practice. Thus, composition researchers may want to seriously explore the uses of imitation pedagogy as they continue to search for effective tools to use in the teaching of composition.
First, I would like to acknowledge my ninth-grade English teacher, Miss Anne Juhl. Her dedication to teaching had a profound influence on my decision to become a teacher, and her teaching style and techniques were ones worthy of emulation. I still reach back to use her examples to demonstrate a particular genre or sentence construction. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Saundra Kamusikiri, Dean of Graduate Studies, for her encouragement and help. I am also grateful to my professors at San Bernardino Valley College and California State University, San Bernardino for their knowledge and encouraging words. More specifically, I want to thank Judith Hert for her help in discussion and editing sessions. I want also to thank my thesis readers, Carol Haviland, Bruce Golden, and DeShea Rushing for their kind patience and expert advice throughout this project. Special thanks also goes to my children–Bill, Christine, and Brandon–who have been my inspiration; my success is largely due to their faith in me. Finally, I want to thank my dear friends, DeAnna and Marten Jensen, for always being willing to listen.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the use of imitation as a legitimate pedagogical tool for teaching composition was piqued when I sensed the differences of opinion about its effectiveness among four of my professors. One, a poet, encouraged his students to imitate those poets whom they admired and told them to "read, read, read to learn what good poetry is." Another, a teacher of rhetoric, argued that imitation pedagogy was beneficial when used effectively. The other two professors, both compositionists, contended that imitation was of little or no value in teaching students how to write effectively.

Whatever its present status, imitation once played a prominent role in antiquity in teaching both oral and written composition. Later, Renaissance educators continued to believe that imitation was an integral part of learning. They also entered into an intense debate over the role of imitation, arguing not only about its multiplicity of meanings but also about whether imitation should be based on the single classic model, Cicero, or on a variety of models. In the Ciceronianus, Erasmus
demonstrates the restrictions imposed upon writers who insist on imitating only one model. Although Erasmus admires Cicero’s artistic qualities, he maintains that the primary objective of imitation should culminate in more than a "veneer of mechanically copied Ciceronian mannerisms, but [in] a new synthesis reflecting each writer’s own personality and concerns" (Knott 328).

While this use of imitation, which includes the writer’s own voice, folds comfortably within some contemporary composition goals, most theorists continue to disagree about how, or even whether, to use imitation in teaching writing. Some composition instructors value imitation, seeing it as essential, while others shun the practice altogether, seeing it as stifling creativity and transmitting practices that should be interrogated and transformed. This diversity of opinion about imitation within the field of composition invites investigation, especially as many compositionists who are opposed to imitation frequently practice it.

These differing views suggest that issues related to the purpose and appropriate use of imitation have not been resolved. It may be that some review of the early concepts of imitation and the neoclassical 16th century debate over
its use, which hearkens back to specific teaching techniques grounded in the rhetorical tradition, may provide a better understanding of how past educators used imitation. Such a review might also help determine the *raisons d'etre* for the current controversy over the use of imitation pedagogy in composition studies. Moreover, an examination of the issues lodged in the contemporary discussions about imitation may move us toward a reconsideration of imitation's place in the writing process.

The problem with raising the whole issue of considering imitation as a part of the pedagogy of teaching writing, however, is that it has had no clear or formal place in modern studies. The term as we use it today has not been defined. There has been no formal debate, perhaps no real debate at all, about its value. Certainly uses and methods of imitation have not been clarified, and research is regretfully lacking. Perhaps those who used it and those few who still do use it simply have assumed its value. And perhaps those who have considered it outmoded thought that that determination was equally self-evident. The best that can be done at this point is to consider its history and attempt to suggest
that imitation's place in the ongoing research by compositionists may need to be evaluated as we continue to search for effective tools in the teaching of composition.

Although no accepted definition of imitation exists in composition studies, for the purpose of this paper, the term will be defined as referring to the use of models of all kinds and in a whole range of ways for the purpose of improving student writing. For instance, imitation may include using essays as models for writing in specific genres. It may include learning diction and syntax by analyzing prose models. And it can even include physically copying models as a way to internalize grammar, vocabulary, and style.

To begin, let us first look to the past and ask this question: Who or what was imitated and why?
CHAPTER TWO
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Aristotle (384-322 BC) viewed imitation as a "part of human nature," and he concluded that it was the means by which the human, as "the most imitative creature in the world," (226-7) was inducted into learning. In fact, imitation was used as a learning tool throughout the classical era.

Moreover, Aristotle’s authority established an imitation pedagogy that was still thriving in the first century. Endorsed by Quintilian (AD 35-98?) and outlined in *Institutio oratoria* (AD 95) as one of the five teaching methods handed down from the Greeks, imitation was considered a primary and fundamental activity of learning language and writing. Quintilian's handbook on education represents a valuable collection of pedagogical methods that scholars and educators embraced well into the 16th century. Even today educators use many of the precepts outlined in Quintilian’s work.

Quintilian, speaking of imitation as it relates to language acquisition, warns against exposing infants to "dumb nurses" who might speak ungrammatically because children are influenced as readily by what they hear as by
what they see. And he further maintains that imitation continues to be a significant component of learning as children begin formal instruction:

The chief symptom of ability [to learn] in children is memory, which the excellence is twofold: to receive with ease and to retain with fidelity. The next symptom is imitation; [sic] for that is an indication of a teachable disposition. (25)

Not only is imitation necessary to early learning and the beginning of formal instruction, it continues to play an important part as older students develop and advance toward more difficult learning challenges and, ultimately, toward the development of their own writing styles. In short, Quintilian considers imitation essential to early learning as well as necessary in subsequent learning.

Quintilian also discusses the role of imitation in adult learning. He maintains that adult learners, equipped with imitative techniques learned as children, can use the writings of others freely to innovate rather than remain within the confines of their early instruction. Distinguishing between the learning patterns of children and adults, Quintilian explains that where children merely
follow the example of the teacher, which is designed to
guide them in learning "how" to proceed, adults need to
know the "why" of what they are shown (Murphy xxxv).
Stressing the importance of using writing models and a
continued use of imitation to produce effective writing,
Quintilian thus defines the relationship between writing,
reading, and oratory:

I know that it is often asked whether more is
contributed by writing, by reading, or by
speaking. This question we should have to
examine with careful attention if in fact we
could confine ourselves to any one of these
activities; but in truth they 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 two—for our
speech will never become forcible and energetic
unless it acquires strength from great practice
in writing; and the labor of writing, if left
destitute of models from reading, passes away
without effect. (X.i.1-2)

Quintilian obviously believes that reading is
important in acquiring writing skills; in fact, "assiduous
reading," is essential to learning the various meanings and proper uses of words. He thinks that reading also provides the examples students need to go beyond the "rules which are taught" toward an independence that allows them to explore subjects by their "own unassisted efforts." Furthermore, he urges students to "let what [they] read be committed to the memory and reserved for imitation" (129). He advocates a thorough examination of what is read to the point of "digestion." However, this encouragement to digest written material does not imply that readers should examine works chosen indiscriminately. On the contrary, none but the best authors should be explored, those who would be "least likely to mislead." The purpose of careful examination is designed to develop readers' abilities to pay "attention" to the various rhetorical techniques writers use.

However, Quintilian does not suggest that readers accept everything written by the best authors as accurate in content or perfect in reason, so he urges them to be aware of the human condition that sometimes causes writers to err (130). His main concern, of course, is that students might choose to imitate the weaker features of an
author's work or, even worse, choose to imitate them for the wrong reason. He has found that it often happens to those, who think that whatever is found in such authors is a law for eloquence, that they imitate what is inferior in them--for it is easier to copy their faults than their excellences--and fancy that they fully resemble great men when they have merely adopted great men's defects. (130)

It is clear that Quintilian does not suggest that writers blindly imitate other writers without careful attention to the quality of their work, nor does he approve of the superficial motive of appropriating a writing style with the express purpose of producing something close to that of a well-known person. Instead, students should imitate in order to acquire an expanded vocabulary, collect an assortment of figures of speech, and, most important, learn the "art of composition" (132). To achieve these goals, Quintilian urges students to judiciously select features they want to imitate from a large sampling of writers.

Of course, imitation is not the ultimate goal in Quintilian's view. Although he sees imitation as necessary
for learning, he admits that it is not "sufficient of itself" and implies that writers should not be content in merely "equaling what [they] imitate" (132-133). He argues that they should strive to surpass rather than simply follow those whom they have chosen to imitate. Above all, Quintilian urges that the purpose for imitation should always be fore grounded. He maintains that "[t]he first consideration, therefore, for the student, is, that he should understand what he proposes to imitate, and have a thorough conception why it is excellent"; next, he urges students to "consult [their] own powers" to either add to or take away from the models as necessary (135). This choice of accepting or dismissing certain aspects of the writing models is, of course, pragmatic when one considers various genres and content of discourses. Quintilian's examples of poetry, history, comedy, and tragedy support his view, as does his declaration that

[e]very species of writing has its own prescribed law, each its own appropriate dress
[. . .] yet all eloquence has something in common, and let us look on that which is common as what we must imitate. (136)
His reference to the variety of tone and audience as it pertains to distinct genres suggests that students could not possibly acquire the variety of what they need to know about composition from only one writer. He also presents the reasonable argument that it is impractical to think that by imitating only one author that a student could "master" even one particularly excellent trait demonstrated by that singular author. Because students aren't able to reproduce or imitate completely any one author's particular style or technique, Quintilian offers the following advice:

> Let us set before our eyes the excellences of several, that the different qualities from different writers may fix themselves in our minds, and that we may adopt, for any subject, the style, which is most suitable to it. (137)

His reference to "style" here not only involves what is written by the writer but how it is written. Even though content is an important aspect of writing, such elements as tone, purpose, and rhetorical techniques also need to be examined by the student. The effective delivery of an argument with its emotional appeal, supporting evidence, and effective refutation are also matters to examine. Only
after attending to all of these considerations will students become "such imitators as [they] ought to be" (137). The successful imitator, then, is one "who shall add to these borrowed qualities excellences of his own, so as to supply what is deficient in his models and to trim off what is redundant [. . .]" (137).

It is evident that Quintilian's view of imitation is broad and complex. It includes the writer's voice as well as specific methods, techniques, and styles from a wide selection of authors, which, of course, includes Cicero. In Controversies Over the Imitation of Cicero, Izora Scott claims that Quintilian was "the first great and ardent advocate of Ciceronianism," and she goes so far as to say, "Ciceronianism as it developed in later times really began with him" (5). Whether the development of Ciceronianism can be assigned to Quintilian or not, the increased practice of imitating Cicero's writings that continued through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance certainly would not have been in accordance with Quintilian's own position on imitation.

Indeed, many writers began later to question the issues surrounding imitation pedagogy, especially during the first half of the 16th century. The debate in early
modern Europe focused primarily on whether imitation pedagogy should be limited to one classic model, Cicero, or whether it should include a larger selection of models for students to examine. Many scholars questioned the efficacy of having students imitate the same model that had been used for hundreds of years. They recognized that changes such as increased knowledge and language evolution would require modification of model choices. But other scholars held tenaciously to the classical teaching methods that had worked for so many years. As this debate grew, manuscripts and letters began to flow back and forth between the opposing camps. Two such manuscripts, that of Pico della Mirandola (De imitatione) and Pietro Bembo (Prose della volgar lingua), written in 1512 and 1513 respectively, clarify the argument over whether one should imitate one or multiple models. Pico, according to Thomas Greene, argued,

Every student [. . .] should expose himself to a wide spectrum of authors, subjecting each to a respectful scrutiny that recognizes his shortcomings as well as his unique strengths, and out of this eclectic reading the students should form that style congenial to his own
makeup and to that particular idea of eloquence which is his own [...]. To choose a priori a single model is to violate this distinctive personal standard. (172)

Pico's argument favors allowing students to maintain their own voices as well as to learn from diversity. Pico recognizes that "a man possesses a greater power of imitation than all other creatures" and encourages his readers not to disregard the "native genius and spiritual propensity" with which each person is endowed (qtd. in Greene 172).

Arguing against the imitation of only one model, Pico attends to issues of outmoded material that can result in purposeless copying.

[Pico, according to Greene,] was alert to the danger of anachronism, that worm in the bud of classicism. Not only is each writer unique in his eyes; each age is different from every other; given the variety of times and individuals, it is futile to imitate a model religiously, since the product of this effort will either fall short of true resemblance or else reproduce the model mechanically. (173)
Because language is also subject to change over time, Pico claims that obsolete language can result in an anachronism that might result in confusing "a soldier's coat for a toga" or choosing a "doublet" for a "sheepskin" (173).

Pico also believes that students should be allowed to freely appropriate those elements that would enable them, through invention from what they had "gleaned and internalized," to go beyond imitation toward self-expression and, ultimately, transcend their models. Thus, Pico does not see the mastering of another writer's style as the purpose or final goal of imitation. Greene succinctly states Pico's general position on the benefits of imitation:

By allowing ourselves the freedom to recombine spontaneously the elements gleaned and internalized from our reading, we will not merely follow our masters, writes Pico; we will be able to surpass them. (173)

Bembo's view of imitation, on the other hand, differs from Pico's. Bembo's main objection to Pico's argument that "all good writers should be imitated" is that the overall structure of students' writing will be neglected if they try to imitate several writers. Furthermore, Bembo
contends that imitation should consist of following only that which is "best and most perfect" (9). The model he suggests imitating, the one he feels comes closest to perfection, is Cicero. Bembo argues that because examples are necessary for imitation, the better the example, the better the imitation. He also maintains that one example is superior to many because "imitation includes the entire form of writing; it demands that you imitate the individual parts but it deals too with the whole structure and body of style" (11). Numerous models, in other words, would distract rather than help students appropriate the skills they need to develop their own individual styles. Bembo is concerned with an adequate appropriation of organization or format skills in addition to language, grammar, and stylistic techniques. He argues that collecting techniques from different writers will also discourage students because they would have to continually revise their skills as they abandon already learned techniques in favor of new ones.

Another argument Bembo advances for using only one model over many is that learning from one model instills confidence in the student, much as a traveler who proceeds to a destination successfully with the aid of a guide. He
also maintains that learning by example is natural and conducive to alleviating stress caused by uncertainty. He writes:

Now, since it has been arranged by nature that whenever men are busied with something great and arduous, their anxiety, labor, doubt, and difficulty is decreased, if they have an example of the work by others who have tried the same thing sometime before [. . .]. (13)

Although there is little in this conclusion that Pico would disagree with, Bembo also insists that it is far better to imitate one model rather than many as Pico does. Bembo argues that by imitating only one exemplary model, writers can avoid imitating mediocre models that will "infect" their minds with "blemishes that they will have blot out of their memories" before any productive imitation can take place. He contends that it is better to start with a model that is likely to lead a writer "more nearly to perfection than with any others" (15).

Bembo's theory of imitation follows closely that of Pico's, with the main exception of an agreement on the number of models to imitate. Essentially, Bembo agrees
with Pico about what a writer's aim should be when imitating. He responds to Pico:

Wherefore in all this theory, Pico, this can be the law: first, to place the best before us for imitating; second, to imitate in such a way that we strive to attain; and finally to try to surpass. (16)

In addition to encouraging imitation, which he defines as the appropriation of "style and method," Bembo approves of "borrowing," which he describes as "legitimate" if "done sparingly and wisely" (17). He writes,

This imitation of Virgil, Cicero and other excellent writers, I do not wish to be considered in such light that nothing is to be taken except the style and method; for who can fashion any legitimate work who borrows nothing, who takes nothing from any one to introduce into and scatter along in his writings? who does not take thoughts, figures, and brilliant sayings, descriptions of places and times? who does not take some examples of war or peace or storms or loves or other things from those whom he has
read much and long, not only in Latin but in Greek and also in the vernacular? (17)

Bembo sees history as common to all humans; he asserts that we are influenced by and learn from all that goes on around us. His view of imitation differs from Pico's in that he feels imitation does not include such aspects of writing as "material, arrangement, and other things outside of style" (17).

The general view that both Bembo and Pico hold of first imitating, then equaling, and finally surpassing a model is echoed by the great Dutch Humanist, Desiderius Erasmus (1466? -1536). Erasmus's argument over whom and what should be imitated is closely aligned with Pico's argument and skillfully developed in the Ciceronianus. Erasmus further argues that time stands still for no generation; knowledge increases, and along with this increase comes development of and advancement in technology. These changes, in turn, bring about a need for language to accommodate new terminology, which, of course would not be possible using only language that was centuries old. Although this general theme had been voiced by many educators and writers up to Erasmus's time, it had never been so cleverly expressed before. Erasmus provides
a convincing argument that writers should not model their writing upon one particular writer. He also shows how imitation, used correctly, can be both creative and effective.

When Erasmus wrote the Ciceronianus in 1528, the debate over imitation had been gaining momentum. Cicero’s writings had continued to dominate education as the preferred and quite often only example used for modeling or imitation in the instruction of both oratory and written composition. Arguing against those who had chosen to slavishly follow Cicero, Erasmus addresses what he considers limitations to the time-honored tradition of using Cicero as the only model for imitation. Not wanting to produce a dry, boring treatise, he captivates his audience by using the classical dialogue and the rhetorical technique of Socratic questioning, practiced earlier by Plato and others, because he feels it “will hold the reader’s attention better and make more of an impression on the attitudes of students” (Erasmus 338).

Erasmus, using a disease metaphor and assuming the role of counselor through the protagonist, Bulephorus, sets out to convince his readers through the plight of the ailing would-be Ciceronian, Nosopronus, that imitating
Cicero is detrimental not only to one's health but also to one's writing style. Both Bulephorus and his friend, Hypologus, who has agreed to play a "supporting role," labor earnestly to cure Nosopronus.

As the dialogue opens, Bulephorus and Hypologus are engaged in conversation about the unhealthful appearance of their mutual friend, Nosopronus. Once energetic and imaginative, Nosopronus now appears "more [. . .] ghost [. . .] than man" (Erasmus 19). Erasmus skillfully captures the reader's interest from the outset by stimulating curiosity as to what has caused poor Nosopronus's debilitated state. Soon after Nosopronus enters the conversation however, the reader learns the nature of the ailment that is consuming him: Ciceronianism, also known as "style addiction" (Erasmus 342). Wanting to help free Nosopronus from the dreadful disease, Bulephorus encourages Hypologus to play along with his plan to make Nosopronus think that they, too, suffer from the same malady, that of aspiring to become "true Ciceronians."

In this way, Erasmus demonstrates the drastic lengths some would-be Ciceronians have gone to in order to acquire the coveted title of "Ciceronian." Nosopronus confesses
that he has read nothing but Cicero for seven years, having removed all other books from his library "lest somewhere some foreign phrase should creep in and, as it were, dull the splendor of Ciceronian speech" (23). Working late into the night in the dark recesses of his house, he also neglects his diet, which often includes only ten raisins and three sugared coriander seeds (Erasmus 353). Of course, Erasmus is using hyperbole, but the lack of sunlight and a poor diet easily explain Nosopronus's ghost-like physical appearance, which corresponds to his internal deficiency of not allowing himself to exercise his own natural bent of writing. In addition to limiting his reading, working into the night, and eating insufficiently, Nosopronus spends most of his time memorizing and cataloging Cicero's writings.

Memorizing long passages, cataloging phrases, and creating lexicons of verb inflections, derivatives, and compounds was common among imitators of Cicero, and Erasmus uses Nosopronus's "arduous task" to demonstrate the uselessness of the effort. Sadly enough, it seems that Nosopronus, even amid the vast volumes he has compiled, cannot sit down and compose a letter in a timely manner because he is so careful to guard against using any
"counterfeit" words. So consumed is Nosopronus with using only Cicero's words that one night's work might result in the production of only one sentence (354). To stress further the futility of this kind of compulsive activity, Erasmus has Nosopronus talk at length about how he will not even allow himself to say things that Cicero had not said in his writings. To illustrate, if Cicero had used the phrase "I used to love" but not "you used to love," Nosopronus would never even consider using the second phrase in his writing (348). Such omissions profoundly limit writers, which is exactly the point Erasmus wants his readers to consider. But Nosopronus, determined in his exactitude, cannot see how restricted his writing has become and declares that

No one will be Ciceronian if even the tiniest word is found in his works which can't be pointed to in Cicero's opus. I shall judge a man's entire mode of expression spurious and like counterfeit money if even a single word which doesn't bear Cicero's stamp finds a lodging there. Heaven granted to no one but him, the prince of eloquence, the right to strike the coin of Roman speech. (349)
Nosopronus's attitude is not unlike the Ciceronian audience Erasmus wants to reach in order to attack the servile imitation of Cicero. Further, Erasmus points out through Bulephorus that Cicero's writings are not perfect. He reminds Nosopronus of the many "blemishes" in Cicero's work that had been pointed out, not only by Cicero's contemporaries but also by other writers throughout history. For instance, some people did not approve of Cicero's definitions and his translations of various passages. Others criticized his inappropriate use of humor, his weak handling of aphorisms, and his lack of brevity (358-359). This catalog of particular complaints gives Bulephorus the evidence he needs to support his argument that writers should not rely on only one author as a model.

Bulephorus does not point out Cicero's flaws merely to discredit his work, but to show Nosopronus that it is not reasonable to consider any single writer's work a representation of stylistic perfection. "What mortal man," asks Bulephorus, "has ever been so blessed by nature, even in one single discipline, as to excel everyone else in every aspect of it?" (361). After giving another catalog of names, this time of well-known orators who had surpassed
Cicero in technical aspects of delivery, Bulephorus asks Nosopronus another pragmatic question: "Wouldn't you choose from each individual speaker the feature in which he surpassed all the rest?" (361). This question, of course, leads Bulephorus to his main point: imitating many models is more advantageous than imitating only one model. To reinforce his position, Bulephorus paraphrases Quintilian's view, which was voiced fifteen centuries earlier:

[students] must not read just one author, nor all authors, nor any and every author, but must select from among the best authors a number of particularly outstanding ones [. . .]. (361)

But Nosopronus is not ready to accept Bulephorus's view of imitation; consequently, Bulephorus continues to try to convince Nosopronus that Cicero's writings are not always the best examples to follow.

Also, Nosopronus's determination to use only the words and subject matter that Cicero used is cause for concern because such devotion to imitating only one model can only result in extensive limitations to a writer. To counter Nosopronus's argument, Bulephorus points out that many of Cicero's writings are no longer extant or exist
only as fragments (361-362). Furthermore, there is the possibility that many of the texts have been altered by editors who tried to "patch the holes in Cicero" (363). Besides altering the texts, some people have awarded Cicero authorship of books and speeches that were most likely not his. Bulephorus then adds that Cicero did not speak or write about every subject, which indicates that his corpus was not as complete as Nosopronus believes it to be. Additionally, Cicero himself had not been entirely satisfied with all that he had written, and, recognizing the deficits in his writing, he criticized his own works. With these arguments, Bulephorus shows that some of Cicero's writings have unquestionable deficits in content, form, and completeness.

Returning to the main point of his discussion, Bulephorus reminds Nosopronus that Cicero himself imitated other writers and did not "derive his wonderful eloquence from one single source" (368). Earlier he had asked Nosopronus the following question:

But what need is there always and in every way to be identical, when it would often be preferable to be as good but different, and would sometimes be easier to surpass than to
equal, that is, to write something better rather than something similar? (366)

Bulephorus stresses the point that writers need to express their own voices. Yet he does not dismiss the value of imitation and asks Nosopronus a rhetorical question about Cicero's method of imitation: "Did he not from all writers of every kind assemble, fashion, and bring to perfection his own characteristic and divine idiom?" (368). Bulephorus argues that Cicero took what he considered best from the many models he used and omitted what he considered not worthy of imitation.

By the end of the dialogue, Nosopronus finally agrees that using only Cicero as a model is not the most productive way to develop his own writing style, but he tells Bulephorus that it will take some time to develop new study patterns to include more models. Through his dramatic dialogue, Erasmus argues that the imitation pedagogy that resulted in Ciceronianism should be abandoned for a less restrictive and more progressive imitation pedagogy that would be more conducive to teaching students the "art of composition" that Quintilian spoke of in the first century.
Clearly the historical debate over imitation focused primarily on whom to imitate, Cicero or others who may have surpassed him. On the issue of imitation itself, there was a clear consensus: imitation was a necessary means of learning language, grammar, and style, as well as the primary way of internalizing method, organization, and rhetorical technique. Thus recognized as the necessary pedagogy, imitation was thought to play the major role in helping students learn how to write effectively—that is, with power and conviction.

This is, of course, the same goal—helping students to become effective writers—of contemporary composition teachers. Yet, imitation is not a generally recognized part of most postmodern pedagogues. In fact, today imitation is a source of contention between rhetoricians and compositionists. Rhetoricians see imitation as desirable and a natural consequence of reading and studying literature. The majority of compositionists, on the other hand, appear to view imitation as an outdated pedagogy with potentially stifling effects. This difference of opinion over the usefulness of imitation pedagogy may be due to a resistance to what is conceived
of as antiquated pedagogical practice, but it may suggest more clearly a misconception about imitation generally.
CHAPTER THREE
IMITATION AND LEARNING

In seeking to explore the place of imitation in the teaching of writing today, it is useful to look at the large role imitation plays in human socialization and in learning generally.

From a cultural perspective, imitation is a foundational process through which creatures seek to belong. Social creatures imitate actions that are accepted among the members of a family or community, and those actions become the customs by which they reckon cultural normality. As a result, the community remains intrinsically tied to these familiar cultural traits that grandparents, parents, and others have adopted largely through imitation. Frank Smith describes the strength of these learned cultural bonds in this way:

Infants not only learn to talk like the kind of people they see themselves as being; they also learn to walk like them, dress like them, groom and ornament themselves like them, eat and drink like them. They learn to perceive the world in the way the people around them perceive it, and
to share their hopes and fears, their beliefs and expectations, their imperatives and values. They learn a culture. (Insult to Intelligence 40)

In fact, as noted by Aristotle, imitation is a natural process inherent in all learning. This is evident when one attempts almost any new activity.

Children learn many of their activities through imitating each another, older children and adults. In fact, children’s play, which is such an important part of their learning to interact with others, to use their bodies, and to manipulate tools, is learned almost entirely from imitation. The playground, for instance, is an important part of a child’s learning, and most of that learning is through imitation.

Teenagers learn their young adult social skills and practical skills through imitation as well. Younger teens imitate older teens at school and in other social settings. Teens imitate their parents at home as they learn how to manage their lives, their belongings, their space, their money, their time.

Adults, too, learn through imitation, which plays a role in learning professional roles and skills. For
example, student pilots cannot fly after having taken only the written part of a flight course. Several observation and ride-along sessions are required before students are allowed to actually manipulate the controls and fly. Without theory, observation, and practical training, students could never become licensed. The same principle holds true in the medical field. Surgery residents, for instance, cannot perform surgical procedures on patients until they have learned anatomy and physiology, observed surgeries performed by qualified surgeons, and practiced the procedures on cadavers.

But it is not only in learning practical, complex skills that imitation is essential. Imitation is also a basic part of learning in the arts. In all the arts—visual arts, music, theater, and dance—imitation is almost the central learning and teaching tool. Art teachers demonstrate. Students copy and imitate. Painters copy famous paintings and drawings. Musicians are asked to repeat a phrase over and over until they can replicate the master's sound. Writers copy masters. Arthur Miller talks about copying Shakespeare's plays. T.S. Eliot observes that a young poet copies his heroes, while a mature poet steals from them. The fact that the most original artists
are those most steeped in the work of the masters who preceded them is not a contradiction. Originality appears to grow out of a deep competence and understanding gained in part and initially through imitation. Why shouldn’t this kind of complex learning and competence apply to student writers?

As a foundation for a discussion of the relationship between imitation and writing, it is important to have an understanding of how imitation works to facilitate language acquisition generally, for before one learns to read or write, one must learn a language.

There are different levels or degrees of imitation at work as one learns a language. Even before infants can understand the meaning of words, they begin to make vocal sounds in response to their environments. At first, they cry when they are hungry, tired, or cold. Then around one month of age, they start to coo and smile when someone talks to them, and a little later they start babbling. These early forms of language acquisition are associated with what Douglas Brown calls surface-structure imitation. With this type of imitation, infants merely respond to a phonological code rather than to a semantic code because they cannot yet assign meaning to the language they hear.
The next level of imitation Brown identifies is deep-structure imitation. Children engage in this more advanced type of imitation only when they become aware that the sounds they hear have meaning, and at this time they begin to internalize the semantic code (38). Indeed, Frank Smith, an noted expert on how children learn to read, states,

"Meaning comes first—the process of understanding written language starts with understanding entire stories or statements and then goes on to understanding sentences, words, and finally letters, the reverse of the way most children are expected to learn to "read" in school. (Insult to Intelligence 33)"

This same principle of deep-structure imitation can be applied to how children learn to read and write. Parents usually remember how their children tried to "write" around the age of two. Seeing their parents write grocery lists or notes to other family members sparked their interest in this curious form of communication, and they naturally wanted to participate. After a while, they began writing horizontal wiggles with periodic spaces
(sometimes called mock-writing), mimicking the handwriting they saw in the notes. A similar mimicking takes place soon after adults begin to read stories to children; and, around the age of three or four, they are able to reconstruct complete stories verbatim after hearing them only a few times. Children will strongly protest if parents try to hurry through the stories and leave out a sentence or two or, for that matter, even a word. Proud parents often think their children are gifted by being able to read at such an early age, but this memorization is only a form of imitation that children use until they can actually read for themselves.

Part of reading readiness begins with learning the alphabet, a heavily imitation-dependent process. It is doubtful that any of us could have learned to print and then write the letters of the alphabet without the practice of imitation. Students carefully study the letters in their handwriting books and then try to form the same patterns on wide, green-lined paper. Furthermore, they have to do it in a certain way. By following the small arrows adjacent to each letter, they are instructed to trace the direction of the lines from top to bottom, not bottom to top. After many hours of practice, their
painstaking efforts are rewarded when they hear the teacher say something like “What an excellent job you’ve done! Your letters look exactly like the letters in your book!” Yet, even though these imitative attempts come very close to the appearance of the model letters, most of them have deviated from the models somewhat, others more than somewhat, as evidenced by the wide variety of handwriting styles that exist today.

After learning to read and write the alphabet, children progress to learning words, which also involves using imitation, as they memorize the sounds of letters and how the letters are put together to form words. Starting with the small word at, they can, by the magic of adding only one letter, make many words: bat, cat, fat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat, and the like. With these and a few other little words in between, they are soon able to construct whole sentences. This example, of course, is just one of many reading theories and not intended to be representative of all. Nevertheless, by reviewing this one traditional example of early instruction, it is clear how important memorization and imitation are to learning, concepts that Quintilian recognized AD 95:
The chief symptom of ability [to learn] in children is memory, which the excellence is twofold: to receive with ease and to retain with fidelity. The next symptom is imitation; for that is an indication of a teachable disposition. (25)

No doubt this "teachable disposition" depends upon the learner's experience with surface-structure imitation in the early learning phase and the ability to engage in subsequent deep-structure imitation, both of which are necessary for learning to take place.

Of course, central to the process of learning to read and write is the role of books themselves. Cynthia Holton maintains that "[books] are the master teachers" (qtd. in Silberman 109). Holton, a 2nd grade teacher in New York, encourages her students to read, and she also encourages them to imitate when she tells them "If you have a book you love, read it over and over again and figure out what makes it good. Then try to write the way the author did" (109). Holton, however, does not randomly choose the books for her students to read. When she teaches the concept of dialogue, for example, she selects sample readings where dialogue is demonstrated well. After the
children read the selection, she has class discussions on what the author did to make the conversation effective. She also conducts writing workshops in which students discover mechanical errors collaboratively and work toward the advancement or development of each writer's ideas.

Holton's success in developing the students' sense of style, according to Silberman, comes from using carefully selected books that demonstrate the best writing features in children's literature.

Frank Smith also recognizes the teaching power of books:

Reading seems [...] to be the essential fundamental source of knowledge about writing, from the conventions of transcription to the subtle differences of register and discourse structures in various genres. (177)

Though imitation clearly has a role in learning generally and in learning to read and write at the most basic level, questions related to imitation's role in teaching composition remain largely unaddressed. What, for instance, is the specific relationship between reading and writing? And if imitation is useful in other forms of relatively sophisticated learning, as cited earlier, could
it be useful in improving specific composition skills? And if so, how? And finally why, if imitation was once and for so long revered by rhetoricians and practiced by many pedagogues, has it been ignored or rejected by modern studies in composition? There are no definitive answers to these questions. But if imitation has not played a large or important role in recent research, there are some possible explanations, which are worth consideration.
CHAPTER FOUR
A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

The contemporary debate over imitation pedagogy differs significantly from the historical debate. In fact, it is doubtful that the contemporary discussions about imitation could be called a debate. While questions of which and how many models to imitate were the chief arguments in the past, the question now is whether imitation should be used at all. For the most part, imitation theory and pedagogy is not taken seriously enough by contemporary compositionists to argue formally against it. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to find sources that define and describe the opposition to imitation. However, the negative attitudes toward imitation and its use are obvious and worth examining, for they suggest why imitation is no longer considered important in composition studies.

Why is imitation shunned as a writing pedagogy? One answer is that the negative attitude toward imitation is part of what Dale L. Sullivan has termed our "modern temper" (5). He identifies three major causes for imitation's decline as a valued pedagogy.
The first is the "myth of progress": the idea that a society is evolving from a less to a more advanced state. Believing this, a society devalues past accomplishments, and teachers in such a society often resist offering models of writers from the past (16).

The second and more significant cause for a lack of interest in imitation comes from the influence of Romanticism. The Romantics stressed the importance of individual genius. Similarly, today's composition teachers encourage students to "find their own voices," a phrase commonly used in composition studies.

In fact, the general tendency of our society to favor originality, gives the very word imitation a negative connotation. Terms such as artificial, unnatural, illegitimate, counterfeit, fake, forged, spurious, or inauthentic are often associated with imitation in postmodern society. In fact, imitation has come to mean the opposite of original: a copy of something, an effort of inferior quality, or a product less valued. And this is true whether one considers foods containing artificial flavorings or clothing constructed of synthetic materials that masquerade as natural. Most people desire the so-called "real" thing and value both what is natural and
what is authentic. Thus, they prefer a diamond to a cubic zircon or a leather jacket to a synthetic one. Although these kinds of comparisons are, of course, not related to imitation pedagogy, they do reveal a general attitude that deems all imitation suspect.

Sullivan identifies another cause of negativity toward imitation as the "technological mindset," the tendency to reduce the principles of any art, including composition, to technique (16).

These explanations for a cultural mindset tend almost automatically to ignore the worth of imitation. At the same time and perhaps also for these same reasons, teaching methods changed. Several decades ago composition instructors, wanting to free students from what they considered bondage to arbitrary forms, rules, and restrictions, moved their students toward self-expression, a movement that, of course, worked against the use of imitation. At this time, student writers became solitary figures, searching for the creative genius to command the much-coveted originality their instructors looked for. Out of these teaching values, the process movement emerged; and, if anything has militated against imitation, it has been the process movement. Andrea Lunsford argues,
The move from text-centered to student-centered theories and pedagogies of writing (often called the move to process theory and expressivism) served to entrench the traditional notion of a 'writer' as autonomous, solitary, and possessed of individual creativity and ideas, often buried deep within.

For many compositionists, the focus on process over product has nearly eliminated all imitation as a pedagogical tool. Consequently, many theorists and teachers think that imitation should not even be discussed.

One of the most prominent examples of this attitude is expressed in "Apologies and Accommodations: Imitation and the Writing Process" by Frank M. Farmer and Phillip K. Arrington, in which the authors maintain the view that "there is little urgency to speak against [imitation's] use in the writing classroom" (12). They base this assertion on the assumption that "many readily assent to the idea" (voiced by Stephen and Susan Judy in 1981), that "almost any form of direct imitation leads to a distortion of the writing process" (qtd. in Farmer and Arrington 12). Therefore, any discussion of imitation by those who might...
endorse it "share an awareness that its use must be justified in answer to, and anticipation of, its critical refusal by the community at large" (12). Another assumption the authors share is that "the silence of imitation's critics [. . .] implies a "tacit rejection of imitation" (12), an assumption which may explain the noticeably few articles in composition journals arguing against imitation pedagogy.

However, even when imitation is discussed, it is usually not related to pedagogy but to other concerns compositionists have. These concerns further demean imitation's use.

Problems concerning textural ownership or intellectual property are important. Never before have the issues related to intellectual property been more apparent, especially since the development of the Internet. With vast amounts of information available to students, it is no wonder that instructors are concerned about issues of plagiarism. Indeed, questions over whether students have plagiarized frequently surface in many universities. This, of course, is a valid concern, especially when students are faced with writing the research project and learning how to legitimately
incorporate other voices into their conversations, a task that many of them have never done before. At the same time, other university practices such as collaborative writing projects, writing center sessions, and peer editing groups only increase the concern about plagiarism. Many instructors ask where the line between originality and plagiarism can be drawn in these particular writing practices.

Because textual ownership concerns so many instructors, most instructors shy away from imitative pedagogies altogether because they feel students might consider the activities related to imitation exercises as just reason to appropriate ideas, words, or phrases of others and claim them as their own.

However, other perspectives exist. In a historical study of plagiarism, Jan Swearingen suggests that Aristotle’s use of imitation deserves review because mimesis, Aristotle’s word for imitation, is synonymous with "copying," a common imitation exercise. She states,

If copying an exemplary author was widely practiced in the classrooms of the ancient world without a concern for plagiarism, its practice can be reviewed today as a way of teaching
composition, and as a way of understanding the modern meanings of plagiarism. (23)

But in an attempt to relate ancient practices to modern practices, she asks the question that many compositionists pose: "How can paraphrase and imitation of styles be used without apology or questions of authenticity to prepare students to develop a diversity of their repertoire" (29-30)? Some consider imitation pedagogy a way to teach students how to write rather than what to write and do not consider imitation an infringement upon textual ownership. Indeed, Donna Gorrell maintains "[i]mitation is not plagiarism" (55) because "[t]he creator of an imitation competes with the original, trying to improve on it" (56). Yet most postmodern compositionists shun imitation, primarily because they are concerned that students develop their own writing styles. Their main concern is that students will rely too heavily upon models and fail to construct their own distinctive ways to produce effective discourse.

But not all compositionists reject imitation pedagogy, especially as it relates to the development of one's own style. For instance, in Style and Statement, Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors maintain that
imitation is not only a way for students to learn how “to write or improve [their] writing,” but a valuable tool to use in the formation of style (75). Following the classical tradition, Corbett and Connors outline three basic methods writers can use to gain “versatility of style”:

(1) through a study of precepts or principles (ars), (2) through practice in writing (exercitatio), (3) through imitation of the practice of others (imitatio).

The authors stress that of these three methods exercitatio is the most productive learning tool and that “one learns to write by writing” (3).

However, before engaging students in imitative exercises or practice sessions, the authors provide writing examples in order to acquaint students with diction choices, sentence types, sentence length and variety, figures of speech, and paragraphing techniques (ars or theory). Then, after the students have been introduced to several stylistic structures and know how to identify them, they are ready to participate in the copying exercises, which involve copying passages word for word (imitatio). The copying exercises are not designed
for the purpose of encouraging students to adopt the style of the model, but for the purpose of "lay[ing] the groundwork for developing [their] own style[s] by allowing them to get the 'feel' of a variety of styles" (89).

In addition to the copying exercises, students are encouraged to imitate sentence patterns "to achieve an awareness of sentence variety" and "increase their syntactical resources," which in turn will help them gain greater "confidence in their writing abilities" (107). After the completion of successful sentence pattern imitations, students are urged to devise alternate ways to express the imitated sentences, similar to the variation method (copia) suggested by Erasmus in the 1500s (110). This last step, exercitatio, provides opportunity for students to practice what they have learned through theory and imitations. These three steps--theory, imitation, and practice--are, of course, the traditional teaching method practiced by the ancients. The purpose of these imitative exercises, according to Corbett and Connors, is that

(1) they can make you aware of the variety of lexical and syntactical resources which your language offers; (2) they can afford you practice in choosing apt words and collocating
them in various ways; (3) they can teach you that not every variation is equally clear, graceful, or appropriate; (4) they can teach you that variation of the pattern of the sentence often results in a different effect and that an alternate expression often results in a different meaning. (111-112)

The authors also maintain that "the ultimate goal of all imitation exercises" is not to make students dependent upon the models but to "eventually [. . .] cut [them] loose from [the] models, equipped with the competence and resources to go it on [their] own" (112).

However, Corbett and Connor's position is unusual. Most compositionists do not view imitation exercises as beneficial. This view has lead to the disappearance of most sentence-based pedagogies. In "The Erasure of the Sentence," Connors examines the historical demise of sentence-based pedagogies from the 1960s to the present and attributes their disappearance to the "wave of anti-formalism, anti-behaviorism, and anti-empiricism" that was characteristic after the 1980s (Connors 96). Objections to imitation exercises, especially during the 1970s, gained momentum due to the perception that imitation was "'mere
servile copying,' destructive of student individuality and contributory to a mechanized, dehumanizing, Skinnerian view of writing’ (114). This perception, along with the belief that imitation exercises were a ‘drudgery’ as well as ‘insulting to the creativity of student writers’ (114), put imitation even into greater disfavor among most compositionists.

Nevertheless, imitation proponents argue strongly against charges that imitation jeopardizes creativity. On the contrary, Donna Gorrell suggests that imitation encourages creativity because it ‘frees [students] from the inhibiting anxiety of striving for correct form and appropriate style, and functions as the vehicle for generating new thoughts’ (58). Similarly, Frank D’Angelo feels that imitation stimulates creativity and originality because students who utilize imitation ‘may be spared at least some of the fumblings of the novice writer’ in searching for correct forms to express their ideas (qtd. in Connors 102). Comparing the process of invention to imitation, D’Angelo maintains that ‘imitation facilitate[s] the free choice of alternate modes of expression for the writer’ (283). He argues that the
invention process practiced alone is often a painful journey:

The student who has nothing to draw upon except his own meager store of stylistic resources must, slowly and painfully, stumbling and fumbling, plod his weary way through all of the embryonic phases that are characteristics of an evolving style. (283)

Because imitation provides students with a foundational knowledge of forms, D’Angelo maintains that students are freed “from the obligation to laboriously follow the wasteful processes of slow evolutionary development” (283).

In the same vein, Adrienne Rice maintains that “[i]mitation cuts through the frustrations of creating because it replaces the process of ingenuity with a model that serves as a guide”; consequently, students have more time to say what it is they want to say because they are not struggling with “drawing up ideas and gasping through their writing” (2). Similarly, Corbett states, “that the student who imitates becomes free from the obligation of evolving new developments [. . .]” (“Ventures” 81).
Many imitation proponents, arguing that students need a basic foundation of writing skills before the creative process can begin, credit imitation with allowing students to “internalize” the various writing conventions that readers expect to see when they read. In *Copy and Compose*, Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester maintain that originality and individuality are outgrowths of a familiarity with originality in the works of others, and they emerge from a knowledge of words, patterns, constructions and procedures that all writers use. (2)

Because a working knowledge of writing conventions is expected when one enters into higher education, Donna Gorrell argues, “[b]y enabling students to write in conventional and appropriate ways, imitation permits access to the community of writers, and it is not until they “have the freedom that comes from knowing the acceptable forms,” that they will be able to engage in meaningful conversation with the members of the established community (58). Similarly, David Bartholomae argues that in order for students, especially basic writing students, to become part of the academic community, they need to “appropriate (or be appropriated
by) a specialized discourse," and they must do so by "assembling and mimicking its language," which also involves imitating the instructor's language (135). However, before students gain acceptance into the new, unfamiliar environment of the academic community, they must produce favorable products because "it is the product, and not the plan for writing, that locates a writer on the page, that locates him in a text and a style and the codes of conventions that make both of them readable" (142). The act of becoming situated within the discourse of a certain community where specific guidelines are expected, according to Bartholomae, makes "learning [. . .] more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery" (143).

As one might expect, Bartholomae's ideas regarding imitation have elicited negative responses from some compositionists. For instance, in "Must Imitation be the Mother of Invention?" Janine Rider argues, "the attitudes expressed" by Bartholomae "promote mechanical and deadly writing" (179). Rider questions the validity of encouraging students to "[follow] the forms of those who have preceded them, by just replicating the structure and the language of the academy" (175-176). Her primary
concern is with student empowerment, and she argues, "If we force them to adopt the language of the institution before they have anything to say, we keep the power in the institution" (179). She suggests that instructors should "take the time to help [students] find their own voices" and make "sure they have discovered and learned to use the language to speak their own minds" (182-182). Although Rider does not discredit imitation per se, she argues that the students' voices must be heard first before encouraging the imitation of forms:

By allowing a student his own voice first, we allow creativity and imagination, and we expand the possibilities of our language and our ways of knowing. We promote not just imitation, but fresh and honest thought. Before we go for authority, we try for authenticity. (182)

Richard Boyd also regards student empowerment as an important issue and sees "problems engendered by Bartholomae's endorsement of a mimetic relationship between student and teacher" (1). Boyd views the teacher-as-model as "inherently authoritarian," which can only work to jeopardize student empowerment, and he questions the legitimacy of the teacher-model having the ultimate
"power and authority to determine the correctness of a student's writing" (1). He further asks whether instructors should even stress an "adoption of academic discourse" because some argue that students "often feel alienated and displaced by the academy's 'normal' discourse" (qtd. in Boyd). Furthermore, he contends that asking students to completely abandon their previous discourse communities and take on only the academy's language, will devalued their voices because they will become only "enthralled imitator[s] blindly following the lead of the model" (1). Although Boyd acknowledges that imitation is "a vital element in the learning process of every human being" (1), he maintains that students should be taught the nature of mimetic desire as it relates to the learning process, which can sometimes result in losing oneself in the attempt to become "another."

Bartholomae, however, asserts that students in fact actually gain empowerment through imitation. He argues that when students come into the academic community, they must, as a matter of necessity, learn how to converse in specialized ways in order to negotiate through the various disciplines. He observes that
[t]he student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluation, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. (Bartholomae 134)

He assumes that students who do not converse in the characteristic methods of the various disciplines are usually not successful until they do appropriate the language and are able to imagine themselves speaking from "a position of privilege" (139), a position located "within a set of specifically acceptable gestures and commonplaces [. . .]" (143). Bartholomae only asks for approximations toward academic writing at first, knowing that appropriation of academic discourse takes time and that students "must have a place to begin" (157). To Bartholomae, students will gain empowerment only after they have secured a position of privilege within the academic discourse community. He states,

Our students may be able to enter into a conventional discourse and speak, not as themselves, but through the voice of the community; the university, however, is the place
where "common" wisdom is only of negative values—it is something to work against. The movement toward a more specialized discourse begins (or, perhaps, best begins) both when a student can define a position of privilege, a position that sets him against a "common" discourse, and when he or she can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the "common" code but his or her own. (156)

Whatever position they take in this debate about academic language, most compositionists today agree about the role of reading. Reading does seem to be the key element that not only helps students develop their writing skills but also gives them "something to work against" and encourages them to enter into ongoing conversations. Especially those who endorse imitation say that it is through reading, analyzing, and imitating prose models that students acquire the knowledge they need to become proficient members of the academic discourse community.

According to Bartholomae, adopting the academy's language is both natural and necessary:
A fundamental social and psychological reality about discourse--oral or written--is that human beings continually appropriate each other's language to establish group membership, to grow, and to define themselves in new ways. (151)

Even composition instructors who do not endorse imitation believe that reading provides students the opportunity to sharpen their critical thinking and reading skills by learning how to summarize, analyze, and criticize what they have read, as well as respond to questions that follow most textbook readings. Many instructors also use reading models to demonstrate the modes of discourse such as narration, argument, description, cause & effect, and so forth. Others even use the reading models and classroom discussions of the models to teach rhetorical strategies, stylistic techniques, and linguistic devices that the students could in turn apply to their own writing.

It seems, therefore, that even as imitation is generally in disfavor in composition studies, it does have some general practical support, especially from those who use it to teach academic discourse.
From a historical perspective, it is clear that imitation was a central pedagogy, and one formally debated. A contemporary perspective, however, shows that most compositionists do not consider imitation significant or even worthy of debate. In fact, the question of using imitation pedagogy is mute because imitation is generally no longer considered a valuable teaching tool.

But the French philosopher, Joseph Joubert, maintains, "It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it" (qtd. in Rottenberg 5). So I would argue that imitation needs to be debated and that it deserves a fair reconsideration as both a legitimate part of the writing process and as a valuable teaching method. Isn't a practice that was so prominent, even central in the teaching of composition and oratory for over two thousand years, entitled to a serious evaluation by qualified modern researchers? And despite the general disinterest in imitation as pedagogy and the general distaste for imitation as a value, there is both historical and some
current support that warrants a genuine consideration for the use of imitation in teaching writing.

For years imitation was a way for students to substantiate the theory they had been taught by seeing specific, concrete forms that they could later practice and recreate. In the first century, Quintilian described imitation as a way to increase vocabulary, to collect figures of speech, to learn the different "species" of writing, to study tone and audience and rhetorical techniques, and to examine all aspects of argument. However, Quintilian made it clear that students needed to develop an understanding about what they imitated and why what they chose to imitate was "excellent." Quintilian also maintained that students "must" imitate the common eloquence found in each particular type of writing. Above all, though, he stressed that students should use their own discretion about accepting or dismissing various aspects of writing models.

Even in the sixteenth century, a consensus about the purpose of imitation existed. For example, Pico, while encouraging students to read a wide variety of models, stressed that they should not ignore their own "native genius" and that they should go beyond imitation, beyond
the models. His contemporary, Bembo, considered imitation as a way for students to learn organizational skills, language, grammar, and style. Moreover, he believed that the stress of writing could be relieved by imitation. Both Pico and Bembo felt that students should use the best models to imitate, strive to imitate to achieve a likeness to the models, and, ultimately, be able to surpass the models.

Like Pico and Bembo, Erasmus also believed students should work to surpass models while maintaining their own voices, and he was strongly opposed to servile copying. Imitation to him was a means students could use to observe and analyze different styles and methods to help them in the development of their own writing skills.

Compositionists today also want students to develop writing skills that demonstrate competence, creativity, excellence in styles that empower writers to speak with their own voices. Toward this purpose, almost every composition textbook today uses writing examples to illustrate different genres and rhetorical situations, approved writing conventions, and stylistic techniques. The examples are also used to stimulate critical reading and thinking processes. In The St. Martin's Guide to
Writing, for instance, Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper hold that they "have tried to continue the classical tradition of teaching writing not only as a method of composing rhetorically effective prose but also as a powerful heuristic for thinking creatively and critically" (preface vii). The authors also suggest that the textbook can be used as a guidebook to help students learn the expected conventions used in various writing genres. Axelrod and Cooper do not suggest a mechanical or formulaic approach to learning specific writing conventions, but they do suggest that students will profit by working "within a framework" and that ability will in turn allow them to be innovative and creative (6).

This framework, of course, is structured through multiple reading selections of a particular genre written by both professional and student authors, followed by detailed writing guides. Interestingly, Mary Oliver provides the logic behind providing many reading examples in the following statement:

You would learn very little in this world if you were not allowed to imitate. And to repeat your imitations until some solid grounding . . . was achieved and the slight but wonderful
difference—that made you and no one else—could assert itself. (qtd. in Axelrod 6)
The authors clearly do not consider the examination of several reading examples as inviting “slavish imitation”; indeed, they consider such an examination “an education” because “writers have always learned from others” (6).

Alfred Rosa and Paul Eschholz, in Models for Writers, also espouse the use of both professional and student models to “allow students to see how rhetorical strategies and techniques enhance what the author is saying” (preface iii). They, too, provide writing instruction along with the reading models, and they urge students “to observe how writers have used effective combinations of rhetorical patterns to fulfill their purposes and to use these combinations in their own writing” (preface vi). Rosa and Eschholz, like Axelrod and Cooper and not unlike Quintilian in the first century, recognize the importance of reading as a way to improve one’s writing. In fact, they maintain that reading is “one of the best ways to learn to write”:

By reading we can begin to see how other writers have communicated their experiences, ideas, thoughts, and feelings. We can study how they
have used the various elements of the essay—words, sentences, paragraphs, organizational patterns, transitions, examples, evidence, and so forth—and thus learn how we might effectively do the same. (1)

The authors provide detailed explanations and examples for each new writing element introduced, followed by several model essays to demonstrate the particular writing technique under scrutiny (3).

Rosa and Eschholz differ from Axelrod and Cooper in how they use reading models; in addition to using the models to demonstrate particular methods and writing elements, they also encourage students to write close imitations of the reading models, using, of course, their own experiences and words. They maintain that this activity helps students "practice what [they] are learning, as [they] are actually reading and analyzing the model essays in the text" (1).

But it is not just history or even the force of some lone voices that suggest a serious reconsideration of the role of imitation in teaching writing. There are issues of practice, partly the role and use of reading, and practical considerations that argue for a genuine
exploration of its use.

The dynamic connection between reading and writing is not a new concept; in the first century, Quintilian said that, along with speaking, reading and writing are "inseparably linked with one another" (X. i. 1-2).

"Inseparably linked" is strong language, strong enough to sound like a composition theory. Because the connection between reading and writing is considered as important today as it was in Quintilian's day, we should investigate the mechanics of the connection as it relates to imitation more thoroughly. What, for instance, should students take from the readings to aid them in their writing? Should they "take" anything? Some compositionists believe that students can learn discourse conventions through close reading and imitation, but many others are opposed to such imitation in any form.

But what are teachers inviting students to do, if not to imitate when they give them reading models to study, especially before issuing a writing assignment, say, in a particular genre that the students are unfamiliar with? Why do instructors conduct class discussions about the models? Are they hoping the students will absorb something from the examples they have chosen to demonstrate the
elements of a particular genre? Isn’t it easier for students to learn new writing tasks by example rather than by trial and error? When students are not able to communicate effectively, it is often due to the insecurity they feel when they are given new writing tasks. Their insecurity is compounded when they are expected to do the task with an acceptable degree of performance. Thus, when students must meet high performance demands while being required to work within the boundaries of unfamiliar discourse types, they worry more about how to write rather than what to write. No wonder some think that imitating reading models aids students to write with less fear and uncertainty, and that imitating models can be a bridge or "scaffolding" that connect students’ ideas and thoughts with choices in order to communicate what they want to say effectively.

Because the major goal of compositionists is to teach students how to compose, it seems only fair that instructors should show them various examples of well-established writers to read and respond to. Most compositionists who use reading examples want students to gain a sense of what constitutes effective writing and an appreciation of rhetorical strategies, linguistic devices,
and stylistic techniques. Instructors also want students to learn about purpose, audience, tone, and the like. But without examples, students have little to draw from when they move through the writing process.

Most compositionists also believe that students can sharpen their critical thinking and reading skills as well as learn how to summarize, analyze, and criticize what they have read through responses to questions that follow textbook readings. Also, many instructors use reading models to demonstrate the modes of discourse such as narration, argument, description, cause & effect, for example. Thus, through reading models and classroom discussions of the models, students learn about rhetorical strategies, stylistic techniques, and linguistic devices that they in turn can apply to their own writing. That is, students are free to take from the readings any strategies or “tools” they lack and add them to their own writing skill repertoires.

College instructors expect their students to do more than avoid grammatical error. They want them to think about ideas and expression in complicated ways. However, more and more students are coming to the university having read very few books, perhaps because they are immersed in
television and other technological media. Thus, students have not developed the writing skills that they might have developed from exposure to and imitation of good prose.

All of the above suggest that even though imitation has fallen from favor, the practice deserves serious consideration. Perhaps the very term imitation needs clarification. And perhaps those practices already in use that depend on imitation should be identified. Indeed, a closer exploration of imitation pedagogy could be a potentially rich resource for practice and theory in composition studies.
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