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### Deliberate Practice in the Composition Classroom

Born of a “shortlived” marriage between “[i]ts mother, the eldest daughter of Rhetoric...Oratory.... [and i]ts father...Philology or what we now call linguistics,” the English department’s function has been fractured from the start (Parker 4). Some, like “George Gordon, an early Professor of English Literature at Oxford,” alluding to Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, claimed “that ‘England is sick, and...English literature must save it.... [It should] delight and instruct us...[while at the same time] save our souls and heal the State” (qtd. in Eagleton 20). Other early administrators, like in the United States, believed that the department’s mission was not only devoted to the study of literature and linguistics but the instruction of writing. At Harvard in the 1870s, students were required “to write a short English composition, correct in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and expression [and] the subject [of the composition] is to be taken from such works of standard authors” (“Three Harvard Catalogue Course Descriptions from *Twenty Years of School and College English*” 34). As evidenced from the sample composition requirement, the Harvard approach stressed linguistic correctness while Oxford and Cambridge put an “emphasis...on the classics,” but Scottish universities, who seemingly remarried rhetoric, oratory, and linguistics, “saw communication skills, both spoken and written as central to the entire educational endeavor,” where “[t]here was no attempt to analyze or critique...literature [which instead] served rhetoric in a very real way since students were often required to imitate the models” (Horner 45).

These various approaches form the basis for modern composition pedagogy--though much like in the past, the present is still very much fragmented. For example, current-traditional rhetoric emphasizes the same significance of correctness as the early Harvard curriculum, privileging product over process. Expressivism, on the other hand, makes the process paramount in order to allow for the student's free expression, viewing "writing...as a way of helping students become more emotionally and psychologically healthier and happier" (Harris 28). This approach, like social constructionism and critical pedagogy, can be seen as a descendent of the great books, soul-saving Oxbridge model. (The tools to a student's salvation lies within him or herself rather than in someone else.) Meanwhile, cognitivist scholars also elevate process over product as the expressivists do, but they see the act of composition as goal and choice-driven but often refrain from offering practical, actionable pedagogical advice.

It should be clear that over the history of composition pedagogy that the Scottish approach noted above (at least in this brief, cursory history) has been largely ignored, and while composition instructors no doubt make models available through various readings almost universally, imitation in the composition classroom deserves a resurrection. In fact, it is central to artistic disciplines, like painting or music, where budding artists master others' compositions. This approach is not new to writing<sup>1</sup>, of course, as noted by Ben Franklin in his autobiography:

...I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*.... I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it.... I took some of the papers...and then, without looking at the book, try'd to compleat [sic] the

papers again...in any suitable words that should come to hand. Then I compared my *Spectator* with the original, discovered some of my faults, and corrected them.... By comparing my work afterwards with the original, I discovered many faults and amended them; but I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that...I had been lucky enough to improve the method of the language, and this encouraged me to think I might...[become] a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious. (16)

It is important to recognize that Franklin's method did not rely itself on an osmosis-like approach to reading, that his skills improved simply by admiring great writing as often expressed in some expressivist models of composition pedagogy but through the careful practice of the craft. Therefore, through the goal and choice-driven framework of the cognitivists as well as taking our inspiration from how performers and athletes learn disparate artforms and sports, the concept of deliberate practice, research on the most effective learning techniques, and the classical rhetorician's use of imitation, our research reveals the following recommendations for the instruction of first-year composition: (1) Writing cannot be taught independent of the various systems and rhetorical situations in which the practice is undertaken. (2) Students must understand the "tools" available to them to make good writing choices at the sentence-, paragraph-, and essay-level within a rhetorical situation. (3) Students must practice writing inside and outside of the classroom for significantly greater lengths of time. (4) Students need immediate and honest feedback that addresses their progress as a writer. (5) Students need frequent testing in order to retain

information longer and use it more often. (6) Students need to practice imitating great writers.

### 1. Systems and Tools

Some composition scholars have argued that, since there is “no autonomous, generalizable skill called ball using or ball handling that can be learned and then applied to all ball games,” as David Russell writes, there is no “autonomous, generalizable skill or set of skills called ‘writing’ that can be learned and applied to all genres or activities”; in other words, language is not inherently meaningful in itself as a ball is not meaningful without the context of a specific sport (57, 59). In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida describes this problem thusly:

...the signified concept is never present in and of itself.... Essentially...every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences.... [or] *différance* (11).

However, we depart from what some would call the literary nihilism of certain deconstructionist followers of Derrida, believing that to deprive writing of context (and intention) is to make any text “an accidental likeness of language” (Knapp and Michaels 2496). Habermas, in his conception of universal pragmatics, argues that through “‘communicative competence’ I understand the ability of a speaker oriented to mutual understanding to embed a well-formed sentence in relation to reality,” or put it another way, speakers (and therefore writers) operate within a set of universal rules based on “intuitive

rule consciousness” (29, 26). In other words, the act of writing, like the act of ball handling, is always dependant on the *situation* (author, genre, audience, setting, purpose) in which it occurs, and the same could be said of the stroke of a brush or the sounding of a note (26).

Our first supposition, therefore, is that writing instruction cannot ask students “to build a house without any tools” but to teach them the system in which the writing will occur and why (Sommers and Saltz 131). These types of tools, as Wilder and Wolfe have found, can be taught, for their research found that students taught the conventions of literature wrote better essays and enjoyed the subject matter more than those who were not (170). To draw an analogy from a field like music theory, for example, students learn the major and minor scales, which informs the intentional improvisation and composition of conventional, non-experimental music. The difference necessary for the formation of musical scales creates a network of pitches, which when played in combination or in succession is--for lack of a better term--pleasing. It should go without saying that a system of language has its own smaller subsystems, which, when “played” in succession, is also pleasing, and these language “scales” should be a part of the first-year composition curriculum. For example, if a writer is describing the usefulness of Sigmund Freud’s Oedipus Complex to modern day psychology in a paper for an academic journal (the situation), a word like “stupid” would be considered unacceptable whereas a word like “sophomoric” might be wholly appropriate (in this subsystem). These language “scales,” as we describe them here, go beyond simple relations between words but into the creation of sentences as well, both by structure (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex) and by purpose (declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamatory).

At this point, we anticipate that some readers may object to such an approach here, as “nearly 90 years [of research] has consistently shown that the teaching of school grammar has little to no effect on students” (Flood 591). However, we are not arguing for the teaching of grammar for grammar’s sake: Instead, we see these distinctions between dependent and independent clauses as necessary tools for the construction of sentences. As Judith Hochman, founder of the Writing Revolution, puts it: “It all starts with a sentence” (Goldstein). Students may have an understanding of the basic rules of a sentence, but often, they fail to distinguish what types of choices are appropriate for various contexts. Thus, just as a music teacher may ask a student to write a melody for a blues using a minor scale, we believe that a composition student must master the use of sentences based on a specific rhetorical situation, from uses of rhetorical tropes and schemes to general mechanics. For example, having a student write compound-complex sentences serves little purpose other than to know and to show what a compound-complex sentence is; whereas, in our approach, students would write compound-complex sentences in order to connect the sentence to a preceding one. Though this may seem a minor difference, it makes writing a matter of choices within the given rhetorical situation or “an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle 115). This may be, of course, done in the context of a single sentence as well: Instructors can assign students a task, such as, to write a sentence for an audience like their professor with the intention of telling them why they prefer either Apple or Android smartphones. Once the task is finished, instructors could change the audience and have the students compose another sentence, demonstrating the various language systems at play. It should go without saying, obviously, that these tasks at the sentence-level can be scaled up

for paragraphs and essays too, such as, asking students to write a body paragraph (or body paragraphs) to go between a pre-written introduction and conclusion.

In summary, the logic behind this is the same as a basketball player practicing his or her three-point shot. Few, if any, basketball players wish to master the three-point shot just to be good at the three-point shot independent of the sport: It is an action within the greater discourse of the basketball game, a situation the player will see again and again. In other words, students must see the use of rhetorical tools in a similar way, which is why composition instructors must not only stress writing within various situations and intentions but the concepts of deliberate practice and imitation.

## **2. Deliberate Practice and Feedback**

While writing instructors may understand that practice makes perfect, they often forget that a student cannot practice four times a semester (based the typical four major papers assigned in a first-year composition course) to improve performance meaningfully. Even writing in every class is insufficient as instructors may only see students for three hours a week and only a small fraction of that time (usually 10-15 minutes per class session) is devoted to the actual practice of writing. Should a basketball player only practice 30-45 minutes a week, we would expect the player to make minimal gains in performance--if any. Furthermore, the informal rule for student study time is 2-3 hours for every hour of class time. In an art class or music class, the student would be practicing their craft both inside and outside of class, whereas composition instructors rarely, if ever, assign practice times of a similar length. Rather than having students devote time to memorizing rhetorical concepts or

reading lengthy essays<sup>2</sup>, the majority of that time should be devoted to practice. And research shows that expert performers spend about 25 hours a week “on deliberate practice, and this time is distributed across the entire week in practice sessions of limited duration” (Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 391). Obviously, composition instructors are seeking competence rather than expertise, but deliberate practice time in the range of 6-9 hours per week on writing should yield the results we are seeking far better than the limited and inconsistent amount we now require.

As a note of caution, however, this writing away from the classroom should not be of the journaling or freewriting variety as some instructors require. As Ericsson, Priuetula, and Cokley explain:

Not all practice makes perfect. You need a particular kind of practice—*deliberate practice*—to develop expertise. . . . It entails considerable, specific, and sustained efforts to do something you *can't* do well—or even at all. Research across domains shows that it is only by working at what you can't do that you turn into the expert you want to become. (118)

In order to explain this in the context of teaching a student write, instructors must begin by recognizing that most students are set in their writing ways by the time they get to college: They write on autopilot. They have seen the five-paragraph essay so many times they can easily do it on command, while they may have only had a few occasions to write thesis statements. Therefore, a homework assignment where students write thesis statements to two dozen prompts, on the other hand, may be completely alien to them--a task that will actually yield improvement. Of course, such tasks have to be paired with the proper conditions to



maximize improvement: Tasks should be designed with the student's pre-existing knowledge in mind, students should receive immediate, honest feedback, and perform the same or similar tasks repeatedly (Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 367).

While gauging a student's pre-existing knowledge comes naturally to many composition instructors who have a day one writing assignment<sup>3</sup> or an open-ended syllabus which the instructor modifies after engaging with the students in week one, unfortunately, when it comes to feedback, writing instructors have some serious limitations. For one, research shows "that students [who received]...immediate feedback...were significantly superior on measures of passage comprehension and composite comprehension [than those who received delayed feedback]" (Samuels and Wu 2). Almost no writing instructor can provide instant feedback on all student work, which would require the teacher to oversee the student's work and then respond as soon as the student is finished. Even the most dedicated instructor would fail to do so. However, one way to practice this is, of course, with the use of guided, goal-driven in-class writing. Instructors can have students compose a paragraph in class and respond more or less in real time. This undoubtedly has limitations, but in conjunction with standard composition course assessment practices (writing workshops, assigned essays, et cetera), composition instructors can mimic the conditions of a football coach or similar providers of real-time feedback. Nonetheless, regardless of the expediency of the feedback, there are three questions instructors should aim to answer:

Where am I going? How am I going? and Where to next? The answers to these questions enhance learning when there is a discrepancy between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood. It can increase effort,

motivation, or engagement to reduce this discrepancy, and/or it can increase cue searching and task processes that lead to understanding (thus reducing this discrepancy)... A major aim of the educative process is to assist in identifying these gaps (“How am I going?” relative to “Where am I going?”) and to provide remediation in the form of alternative or other steps (“Where to next?”). (Hattie and Timperley 102)

This kind of feedback helps students recognize where and how they are improving while also helping them discover their weaknesses. Best of all, these practices offer a clearer sense of a student’s progress, which should encourage and motivate the student to become a better writer and enjoy writing more. Of course, writing instructors cannot have those opportunities with students if testing and assessment isn’t stressed in the class as well.

### **3. Rethinking Testing and Resurrecting Imitation**

While many instructors realize the value of assessment to gauge progress, few would likely think of tests as a learning tool as much as it is a measurement of success or failure. Nonetheless, there have been a number of developments in educational research on testing which we believe should be applied to the classroom to the benefit of our students. As Karpicke and Roediger find: “Testing is a powerful means of improving learning and long-term retention” (“Repeated Retrieval During Learning is the Key to Long-Term Retention” 161). In fact, their research discovered that “[w]hile additional studying...had little or no effect on retention, repeated testing or retrieval practice had profound effects on long-term retention” (160). This is no mere one-off either as a number of studies and research

articles have produced similar findings, including: “Test Enhanced Learning: Taking Memory Tests Improves Long-Term Retention” (in 2006), “The Power of Testing Memory: Basic Research and Implications for Educational Practice” (also in 2006), “Enhancing Retention Through Reconsolidation: Negative Emotional Arousal Following Retrieval Enhances Later Recall” (in 2011), “Retrieval-Based Learning: Active Retrieval Promotes Meaningful Learning” (in 2012), “Improving Students’ Learning With Effective Learning Techniques: Promising Directions From Cognitive and Educational Psychology” (in 2013) and “Reflections on the Resurgence of Interest in the Testing Effect” (in 2018). In fact, these studies confirming the usefulness of testing as a learning tool in all classrooms are part of a long body of evidence dating back to Abbott’s 1909 study, “On the Analysis of the Factor of Recall in the Learning Process.” While many researchers are not entirely sure why this works, some theorize:

[that a]ttempting to retrieve target information involves a search of long-term memory that activates related information, and this activated information may then be encoded along with the retrieved target, forming an elaborated trace that affords multiple pathways to facilitate later access to that information (Dunlosky, et al. 30).

We liken this process to a weight-lifter practicing the same movement over and over again or a pianist practicing the same flurry of keys. The weight-lifter does not test himself or herself with a deadlift after studying the movement for two months but, instead, studies the movement for a short period of time before attempting it him- or herself. He or she monitors his or her progress, has others check his or her form, and so on, and over time, he or she

improves, able to perform motion correctly and lift progressively heavier weights. Therefore, though the student may learn the information through reading and study, it must be put to use as doing so is similar to the concept of muscle memory: The more it is used, the longer it is retained. Of course, as we mentioned before, the go-to approach of four major essays in the standard composition class is insufficient for building such “muscle memory.”

Let us preface what follows with the assertion that we do not think that increased testing needs to be of the high-stakes variety; however, these low-stakes tests (or practices) of student skills should be given often. We propose that writing instructors give students a practice test once a week or once every two weeks, modeled on the exercises of classical rhetoricians. Just as a baseball player must practice fielding and batting, we believe the same can be done for writing. Students should have practice tests which prepare them for the myriad rhetorical situations they will encounter as writers in college.

Classical rhetoricians primarily used imitation to enhance students’ abilities, as noted by Quintilian, “[f]rom these authors, and others worthy to be read, a stock of words, a variety of figures, and the art of composition, must be acquired; and our minds must be directed to the imitation of all their excellences” (“From *Institutes of Oratory*” 400). Cicero said much the same in his *On the Orator*: “We [should] show the student whom to copy, and to copy in such a way as to strive with all possible care to attain the most excellent qualities of his model” (320). These classical rhetoricians used exercises like epitome (summary of a passage), paraphrasis (translating a passage into the copier’s own words), and varying a sentence (in which the writer adds, subtracts, inverts, or substitutes parts of a sentence to discover the many forms of expression for one idea). (Instructors can give these tests in-class

for a full session or part of a session.) To make these exercises more practical, instructors should assign them with an assortment of rhetorical situations, so that students are not applying them in a vacuum<sup>4</sup>. In other words, these practice tests should have a context, so that when students see that context or situation in the future, they can act accordingly, relying on their writing “muscle memory.” Of course, these only allow for practice at the sentence-level, and it would be remiss of us not to include options at the paragraph and essay-levels. For paragraphs, as mentioned before, students could be write a body paragraph to a pre-written introduction and conclusion. Such a test would require them to match the style of the introduction and conclusion as well as the content alluded to by the essay’s beginning and end. Another possible test would engender analytical thinking as students could read through a passage and analyze its rhetorical situation and close read the passage, providing annotations throughout. As far as essays go, these previous examples could work here too; however, instructors could also have students attempt to mimic an assigned essay, writing as the original writer would in a similar rhetorical situation. These types of tests teach student writers as “musicians follow the voice of their teachers, painters look for models to the works of preceding painters, and farmers adopt the system of culture approved by experience”--or to sum up as succinctly as Horace does in his *Ars Poetica*--“ut pictura poesis (just as of painting, [so] poetry)” (“From *Institutes of Oratory*” 400-401; 361).

#### **4. Conclusions**

While our findings here are just the tip of the iceberg, we hope our research can spur further discoveries in educational research and provoke more changes to composition

pedagogy. Our research has been far from exhaustive; however, we feel confident that our research supports the following conclusions: (1) Students need one hour of writing practice everyday in order to become competent writers. Hopefully, more research on the topic will help us to determine what is the ideal amount. (2) Writing is not generalizable skill in itself, but series of skills for given situations, and students must understand their options within those situations. (3) Writing must be directed towards a specific purpose and rhetorical situation. Freewriting, journaling, and other forms of writing as discovery do not develop writing skills. (4) And lastly, and likely most controversially, we now believe that writing is--in fact--not a process. This is akin to saying that playing baseball is a process. While the learning and development of the skills required to play baseball are certainly a process, it is not a process when players are asked to perform. Furthermore, the process approach tends to assume that students will improve their writing by rewriting, but it is nearly impossible to improve a skill without expertise in the subject and direct, immediate feedback. The basketball player knows when he or she is successful because the ball goes into the net. In the act of writing, the writer does not have such a luxury. In the future, we look to collaborate with our post-process colleagues in the field of composition studies, whose slightly divergent objections to the process leads to the same conclusion here. In short, we hope that

Notes

1. In fact, it has a long tradition in the teaching of rhetoric which seems to have been suddenly forgot in recent years.
2. We recognize it is very unlikely for instructors to assign memorization of rhetorical concepts or for students to do so; nonetheless, we do realize that some instructors will assign longer essays and articles for reading. We advocate for shorter texts that can allow for close reading, deliberate practice, imitation, and the testing of skills through short answer essays.
3. Quintilian, in his *Institutio Oratoria*, believed that an introductory assessment was critical to furthering a student's education: "Tradito sibi puero docendi peritus ingenium eius in primis naturamque perspiciet. (The skilled teacher, [when] the boy [pupil] himself is handed over, will first look into the boy's constitution and nature.)" (1.3.1).
4. This process, known as elaborative-interrogation, has moderate effects on student performance and "enhances learning by supporting the integration of new information with existing prior knowledge" (Dunlosky, et al. 8).

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