Refiguring Prose Style

Pace, Tom, Johnson, T.R.

Published by Utah State University Press

Pace, Tom and T.R. Johnson.
Refiguring Prose Style: Possibilities For Writing Pedagogy.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9275.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9275

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=298330
I am going to argue that creative uses of imitation are the most promising approaches to teaching better style to first-year college students—and probably most college students. Like everyone else who wants to argue about teaching style by any means other than sentence combining, I do not have direct empirical support. Still, I hope to show that if we place creative imitation in the context of what else we know about teaching style, its prospects are the best available.

Of course, we have to start with that great negative finding, that black hole whose gravitational field defines the territory of all composition pedagogy. Currently, our best hypothesis is that teaching grammar is one of the worst ways to produce better writers (Hillocks 1986, 1995; Daniels 1983; Hartwell 1985). The main knock against grammar teaching is not that it hurts self-esteem or limits creativity or takes away students’ own language; the main knock is that it can’t work, it doesn’t help, and it probably hurts most writers. Thus, if writing teachers hold ourselves accountable not only for the state of knowledge in our field but also for producing the best possible writers, we should not teach grammar. Apparently, the art of grammar, far from being “basic,” is highly advanced, and follows the development of other abilities. That grammar teaching is a theoretical and practical failure shouldn’t surprise anyone who has looked into the history of the theories behind grammar instruction. The psychological theories out of which grammar instruction developed were the fruit of a long-abandoned mechanistic paradigm (Connors 1985; Daniels 1983). As a result, grammar instruction has never worked. As Daniels explains, the consistently negative findings have been rolling in since 1906. There is no record of preexisting, effective teaching “basics” to “get back to.” Indeed, no one has yet shown that ignoring grammar entirely hurts the quality of student writing. Anyone can tell horror stories, but those who love to make this claim have never shouldered the
burden of providing serious evidence. Quite to the contrary, Hillocks finds that even when grammar is taught thoroughly and well enough to raise scores of grammatical quality, the overall impression of the quality of the writing does not improve (1995). More recent studies continue to affirm this finding (see especially Holden 1994). Indeed, the most likely interpretation of the record is that grammar study uniquely retards the development of more highly valued writing.

Yet we still must do something. I will start to turn toward the positive by means of one last critique, one that eventually I will need to distinguish closely. One common argument for grammar teaching, and particularly for having students do grammar exercises, suggests that we build a sort of “muscle memory” of the mind by doing such practice. The most common analogies are to shooting basketballs or playing scales on a musical instrument. I will pass over lightly the rather large leap we make when we compare training muscle, which is fundamentally binary (contract/relax), and training thought, which is fundamentally complex (always the product of multiple neural connections and multiple neurotransmitters). The more easily attacked presumption here is the implicit claim that forming grammar along lines of drilled habit is a significant part of what the mind does when it writes. The analogies fail the test of correspondence. When players shoot basketballs in games, they use motions similar to the practice shots; most music is written in some relationship to scales (though here we should note that few if any expert musicians limit their practice of repetitive motion to repetition of scales). When writers write, they think mostly about what they mean, and the words come out—overwhelmingly, even for weak stylists, in close relationship to correct form. We learn the habitual “moves” of syntax early and well. Young children have rather more trouble handling the exceptions than the rules (“We eated pizza!”). It simply would not be possible to drill into place the amazingly complex variations of correct language that even very poor writers execute correctly most of the time. If we needed drill to write properly, none of us could do it. Exactly how humans manage this trick of syntax is still an open question, even if one to which we have some insight (see Terrence Deacon’s The Symbolic Species [1997] for the best recent treatment approaching lay terms); but we’ve long known that drill and correction cannot account for it.

Instead, we need to match practice with performance. Musicians who play music already written for them benefit most from practicing the “rules” of scales. That is a common and valuable kind of musicianship,
but it forms a poor analogy for writing. Musicians who have to create on the spot more often tend to spend more time practicing fresh combinations of canonical riffs that they learned originally from their idols and from models of what they want to achieve. Similarly, much less than a set of simplistic grammatical “scales,” an effective writer needs to come up with a steady stream of “riffs”—novel connections and judgments. That is, writers mainly need to learn to create fresh material using variations on standard moves; and so that’s mainly what they need to practice. Writers need to practice more of the things that actually happen in the minds of good writers when they write. A limited range of grammar moves isn’t even on the top ten list. Whether it is actually on the bottom ten list is a more serious question in light of the data.

This brings us at last to the one method that has demonstrated robust and strong gains in both usage and overall writing quality: sentence combining. It’s dull at times, but it’s something a grammarian can do well and that probably can satisfy the grammarian soul to some degree. Books by leading figures like Don Daiker, Max Morenberg, and William Strong guide teachers through reliable, proven exercises that really work; and the research is fairly clear that it all works just as well without grammar instruction as with it. As Robert Connors pointed out in his landmark article, “The Erasure of the Sentence,” there is no truth to the common perception that sentence-combining research eventually turned against the practice. Sentence combining, so far as we know, worked and still works, and the worst that can be said about it is that other students who persist in college might eventually catch up with those who experience its immediate gains. As Connors writes, “[I]f people believe that research has shown that [sentence combining, imitation, and Christensen rhetoric] don’t work, their belief exists not because the record bears it out but because it is what people want to believe” (2000, 120).

If we are to get any further with the teaching of style in composition, we need to learn as much from these contrasting facts as we can. Grammar study hurts; sentence combining helps. There are no sturdier findings in all of the research into how students learn to improve their writing. We literally have just about nothing else that is concrete on which to proceed. The NAEP tests of writing in secondary schools found that socio-economic status was by far the most powerful determiner of writing ability, and that only two pedagogical interventions had even weakly significant effects: keeping portfolios and writing multiple drafts (National Center for Education Statistics 2000). Hillocks was able to identify the success of
The “Weird Al” Style Method

a complex classroom approach, one he dubbed “environmental” (1995); but for the most part this simply seems to mean that good teaching is better than bad teaching. The success of sentence combining is literally the only strong, dependable, robust, and straightforward clue we have about how students learn to improve their writing.

At this point, I’ll pause for what will seem an aside at first, but that I hope to connect up eventually. Ann Berthoff has demonstrated about as well as one can why it should be true that writing is best approached as a process of “forming.” In her explanations, writing becomes an intellectual art, best improved by practice at looking and looking again, training the eye and hand to work with ever-increasing imaginative power. Her central insistence is on the “allatonceness” of such arts, the fact that they must be practiced whole, always, rather than being subject to a breaking analysis that seeks to build one “subskill” at a time (see especially The Sense of Learning [1990]). Berthoff, we should note, is one of the few composition scholars who is also accepted as a major figure in the intellectual arts from which she “borrows,” having published successful semiotics scholarship (see especially The Mysterious Barricades [1999]). A genuinely great philosopher of language who also happens to take an interest in composition, Berthoff has argued consistently, extensively, and well for her positions. If there is another truth that we know about learning to write, it is that writing is a whole thing that grows organically, not a set of steps moving from “basic” to “expert.” I absolutely do not mean to raise hope that sentence combining can be the beginning of a new “skill set” approach to writing. Rather, I hope that we can learn from sentence combining more about how “allatonceness” can still be approached in manageable pedagogical units that require perhaps a bit less of us than the brilliance of Berthoff and the exemplary teachers to whom she so often refers us.

To do that, we need to know just a bit more about how that organic wholeness works. I will note here only condensed highlights from the main things we know about how the mind manages language. At the level of physiology, language use is perhaps the most widely distributed activity in the brain. While local centers manage things like syntax and vocabulary, in fact language fires up the whole organ (see Deacon 1997). There is no “right/left” side for language; it’s both/and. This is not because there are not some distinctions, often associated with hemispheres, in the kinds of mental processing. Roughly, acts of brain do divide into serial and holistic processes, and there is yet much to support a view that these are distinct operations, even if their association with brain
hemispheres has always been a severe oversimplification. Yet in any operation, and especially managing language, we need both. Language is distinct and whole at once—allatoniceness. Further, the syntactic operations of language particularly make strong use of the hippocampus, an organ mostly used by other animals to map terrain. The hippocampus specializes in reducing complex information into habitual responses keyed to complex mental shapes, while also constantly comparing and bringing to consciousness novel variations to the expected forms (Wallace 1989). The hippocampus, a part of the “old brain,” is not designed to work in ways that become “visible” to higher processing, so that to the extent that it manages its complex forms along expected lines, it seems to our minds to operate like a “black box.” It is thus only problematically available to conscious control. When we add to the brain’s burdens monitoring the motor skills of writing, we have possibly the most complete use of the entire brain that most people are asked to do successfully.

At the level of use, language is inevitably social and contextualized, not so much “meaning things” as generating both possible boundaries for meaning and possible new escapes from those boundaries. As Berthoff (1999) explains well with her title metaphor, language forms “mysterious barricades” of definition that melt as soon as we come too close to them. As Bakhtin and others demonstrate, we use old habitual forms of language, often barely conscious of what meanings we pass on, but then re-create and interanimate these “monologic” language acts with new forms of words generated within evolving speech genres. Everything is constantly negotiated and shifting. And yet as Berthoff also points out, in the coming closer to definitions, histories, and explanations of terms, the “seeing and seeing again,” we constantly deepen our sense of exactly what they might mean. We manage to act appropriately in response to language to a very high degree. As Peirce (see especially “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” [1878]), Davidson, and a few others propose, we form what Davidson calls passing theories of the meanings we construct out of each other’s words, interpreting them closely enough that, in the context of our actions in response to them, we can largely see agreement about what we intend. Add in the obvious social dynamism of language, with its dialects and slang, its cross-cultural borrowings from among these, its art of the occasion, and we can see that language is enormously complex and unruly.

On the whole, the ways in which language is managed, both biologically and socially, is by a means of artful forming and reforming,
as Berthoff has been trying to tell us all along. Our practices need to work within that reality. That brings us back again to sentence combining. The findings about sentence combining make great sense in this light, even if its limitations are also clearer. In sentence combining, students work with forming at the level of whole ideas, at least, using and using again the main tactics favored by the most broadly shared “passing theories” of English usage. We could call these tactics by their grammatical names: in general, modification, subordination, and parallelism; in specifics, verbal phrases, appositives, absolute phrases, and relative and subordinate clauses. But that description generalizes the form of the moves poorly. We can get farther by identifying the “moves”: redescribing, listing, extending, and limiting. Appositives redescribe; parallel forms list; verbal and absolute phrases redescribe too, but also often extend; and clauses either limit (or condition) results or extend the logic of a statement. The terms redescribing, listing, extending, and limiting can account not only for “grammatical” performances, but also “nongrammatical” slang and even hybrids of language and other forms of communication, like images. I would theorize, in light of information about language use only glossed lightly above, that it is the extent to which students catch on to these “moves” while sentence combining that determines their writing performance, including their ability to write more grammatically.

Linguist Sharon A. Myers has described an even more particularized set of “moves” that students need to learn. In “ReMembering the Sentence” (2003), she writes of the “grammar of words,” the ways in which specific words tend to create unique grammars around them, and the ways in which “templates,” or particular patterns of terms, serve as generative frames for students who are learning to express new ideas in the language of newly explored kinds of expertise. This idea, similar to Berthoff’s concept of “workhorse sentences” (1982, 87–95), explains part of the power of sentence combining as a way to learn not only (or perhaps not mainly) generalized moves, but rather ones that relate to specific contexts. Myers sees these more particular patterns as possibly more the point of sentence combining than any generalized syntactical goals. Instead, she offers the hope that we can find and ask students to repeat specific sets of valuable templates, finding examples in linguistic materials. That is, there turns out to be something analogous to the “muscle memory” of musical scale exercise after all; but the repetition that helps turns out to be analogous to “riffs” rather than scales—to passages rather than grammar.
Like Myers, I propose that we can do better than sentence combining; but I propose further that imitation, handled effectively, is the key practice for doing so. Imitation is a broad term, and I don’t mean to encourage everything it might suggest, but if we can imagine what Berthoff calls “persona paraphrase” (1982, 211) and kindred practices as the core of imitative practice, it remains a handy short term. That is, in thoughtful imitation there need be no mere scrivening; students may, for instance, put personally relevant thought into more distant patterns, “paraphrasing” the “persona” but not the content of their models.

The key advantage of a thoughtful imitation is that it works at the level of whole and parts at once—what my colleague Greg Roper has been calling “macrostructure and microstructure” as we have developed materials to support thoughtful imitation. When students take on the voice of, say, Aquinas’s arguments for purposes such as arguing that one’s father should watch his diet, their attention is at once on structures of both passages and sentences, on the structures of their own arguments and those of an argumentative craftsman, on the “moves” that add up to a supported and rhetorically deft claim. It is a practice of “allatonceness” that is not just a revel in one’s own mind, but instead a subjecting of one’s voice to the gravitational pull of some great “chops.” As Myers discusses, students become familiar with how specific new terms affect the language around them and how set phrases contain and position new knowledge.

But going beyond Myers’s proposals, imitated “natural” texts will have a greater variety of templates and—because found in clearly successful writing—templates with more credibility as exactly the kind students should be learning. Myers partially repeats the mistake of grammar teaching by hoping that a limited set of exact information can be conveyed, even though her own arguments also make the point that language is much more varied than any grammar can capture.

Seeking a more rich process that builds both specific and generalized “moves,” Dr. Roper and I have, over the last six years, developed and applied imitations toward general purposes, finding models less of aesthetic completeness and more of standard “chops” that real “players” know—the essayistic flight of Virginia Woolf, the layered call and response of Sojourner Truth, the structured “Rogerian” argumentation of Aquinas, and the tightly modified descriptions of Loren Eiseley, for instance. This work is not always easy. Students cycle through a regular pattern of self-doubt, growing interest, epiphany, and expert practice, a pattern that they often repeat anew as we start again with a new author. But what they
retain is more interesting. From Aquinas’s pattern of setting out opponents’ arguments first, they pick up and use again the practices of rebuttal and cautious unfolding of unpopular views; from Eiseley’s chaining of causes and effects, they pick up and use again the practice of narrative as drama, the sense that telling a story of what happened can also work as a powerful analysis of why it happened. And as with sentence combining, students develop an easier ear for things like trailing free modifiers that enhance the maturity of their style. In any area, they pick up set patterns of words that they directly practice applying to new material.

Yet there is a limitation to such “generalist” approaches to imitation. It is likely that our approach, like sentence combining, can produce gains only up to a point. It could well be that the more successful venue for thoughtful imitation would be within disciplinary inquiry. While Myers does not adequately explain away the advantages of sentence combining as a way of learning general syntactic moves, she certainly does explain well the role of sentence-level work in learning context-specific set phrases. In imitation, as in sentence combining, students imitate their way toward specific kinds of language.

Imitation is not necessarily a popular approach to composition, particularly caught as it is among a “current-traditional” kind of simplistic modeling, an “expressivist” quest for originality, and a “social epistemic” resistance to tradition. Yet in truth it borrows the best of all three. Students enjoy their work and write about their own experiences; they model more profoundly; and they come to understand (with some external assistance) a great deal about the social constructions of knowledge that generate genre conventions. Of all practices, it seems to connect most directly with what little we know about how students improve their ability to form better sentences. Indeed, while the findings were not as robust as those for sentence combining, Connors found in 2000 that the empirical research pointed to, if anything, even stronger gains from imitation than from sentence combining. Thus, while its durability in the annals of rhetoric is not alone proof of its value, certainly the intersection of experience, explanation, and empirical findings adds strength to all three parts of this rhetorical tripod. At the very least, there seems to be no principled ground upon which the practice of imitation should be disdained. Writing teachers should instead aim to refine its uses and study the results. There does not appear, at least, to be a better path toward improving the evaluation of students’ sentences even while improving the evaluation of their work as a whole.
That is why, at last, we should not ignore the one great reason why “grammar hope” persists: that’s why, after all, there even are college composition courses, which in turn is why there even is a field of rhetoric and composition. After all is said and done, no matter how much there is to be said and done, we have work because there is an enormous demand for better sentences. We do have to do something. According to the current state of evidence, thoughtful use of imitation offers the most promise for the least pain. It deserves to be one of the hottest topics of composition research, theory, and practice.