MUST IMITATION BE THE MOTHER OF INVENTION?

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When many of us began teaching, composition theory was in its infancy. Yet we met our classes with confidence, and the changes we made in method and content during those early years were based more on indications from the gut than on seriously considered theory. Besides, we were literature majors, assigned to teach some freshman composition. To do this part of our job, we invented ourselves as teachers of writing.

I look back on the teachers we became and the students we had become before that, frequently through our own invention. We were often very successful. Our invention was both imitative and creative; it was a survival skill, one which we all use many times in our lives.

Yet when I first read David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" and tried to accept his notion of invention, I found myself skeptical. His "invention" seemed too imitative, too centered on recapturing the forms of the past rather than creating a form for the present. The creativity I found enjoyable when inventing myself as student and teacher seemed lacking in Bartholomae's definition. And I wondered even more about so many of today's diverse college students who come with little or no knowledge of the forms of the past. The scarcity of reading and writing in many of their lives made me nervous about their readiness for imitation of forms. I wondered if they—and not just they but all of us who must write—don't need a base for writing first. So I asked myself these questions: can I support a theory which states that learning through language is "a matter of imitation and parody"? (Bartholomae, "Inventing," 143) Do I want to teach students to thereby "invent" themselves as writers by following the forms of those who have preceded them, by just replicating the

structure and the language of the academy? Can students develop a critical mind through such imitation? By working my way through Bartholomae and the forces that support and oppose him, I hoped to find answers to these questions.

INVENTING AN INTERPRETATION OF BARTHOLOMAE'S TEXTS

> Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion . . . . The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, report-ing, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. . . . The student has to appropriate (or be ap-propriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his au-dience. . . . by assembling and mimicking its language.
> (Bartholomae, "Inventing" 134-5)

This is the argument of "Inventing the University" and the argument which is carried over in "Wanderings: Misreadings, Miswritings, Misunderstandings" and in the introduction to *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts* by Bartholomae and Petrosky. The stu-dent is not "inventing a language that is new"; learning is "more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery" ("Inventing" 143). In fact, Bartholomae says, letting a student believe he might have something new to say is "dan-gerous and counterproductive" (143). The invention is of the stu-dent himself, invented as literary critic or scientific writer or philosopher. The student is "trying on the discourse" (136) in order to sound authoritative, and the good student succeeds at this better than the basic writer because she doesn't slip out of the voice as easily.

Part of doing this involves the use of the "commonplace," which is "a culturally or institutionally authorized concept or state-ment that carries with it its own elaboration" (137). Bartholomae argues that using it helps the student write reader-based, rather than writer-based, prose. The student assumes a role as an in-sider in a discourse community, speaking to its members in its language. Students who depend on commonplaces to give their voice authority are those who sound impressive; their essays sound

smart and are difficult to tear apart. They're powerful. Bartholomae calls this writing

> the academic version of street knowledge . . . a willed, brash toughness of mind that enables a writer to bluff his way into a high stakes struggle for turf, for priority, without knowing all the rules or what moves will work, and without knowing beforehand whether he can carry it off should he win in the end. ("Wanderings" 113)

In the introduction to *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, Bartholomae and Petrosky say that students shuttle themselves "between languages—theirs and ours—between their understanding of what they have read and their understanding of what they must say to us about what they have read" (4). The authors speak against "liberation pedagogies" like those of Friere which try to find the "natural voice" of the student (7), saying that the issue is not so simple; that any "classroom performance" necessitates the student entering "a closed community, with its secrets, codes and rituals" (8). To them, the issue is not the student's voice or the student's knowledge; it is his *status* and his *authority* to read, to write, to speak.

DISCOVERING BARTHOLOMAE'S DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

For whom, and with whom, does Bartholomae speak? Instinct tells me I'm not ready to join his camp. But as I poked around, reading and re-reading with an anti-Bartholomae agenda, I discovered that his camp is a large one with powerful allies as well. James Berlin, in his essay "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Classroom," lumps Bartholomae in a large group of supporters of "social-epistemic" rhetoric, one of the three classifications into which he puts composition theorists; the other two are "cognitive" and "expressionistic." Social-epistemic rhetoric is a social constructionist approach to language: "the subject is itself a social construct that emerges through the liguistically-circumscribed interaction of the individual, the community, and the material world" (489). Berlin admits that the members of this group do not all agree on all things, however, and although the emphasis on language as a critical part of knowing is shared by all—"is circumscribed by socially-devised definitions, by the community in

which one lives" (489), not all members would agree on the extreme at which Bartholomae ranks the importance of the *form* of discourse in the hierarchy of products or processes that foster knowing.

Assuming the language of the discourse community does produce power, this fact makes the effort to adopt its language worthwhile. The agenda of social-epistemic rhetoricians explicitly includes the gaining and distribution of power. Patricia Bizzell asserts in "Literacy in Culture and Cognition" that "academic literacy has privileged social origins but . . . this very connection with political power is what makes it worth having" (135).

Teachers and theorists who favor writing in the academy that more closely mirrors writing in the business world are also concerned with empowering students. They want graduates who are familiar with the forms and language of their new discourse communities, who are able to get jobs and advance in them. Such familiarity can lead to more meaningful student experiences as well. Lucille McCarthy's essay "A Stranger in Strange Lands: An Ethnographic Study of a College Student Writing in Two Academic Courses" tells of a student who makes A's writing in a biology class and C's and D's writing in a poetry class. Her study determines that his biology writing was successful because the instructor treated the student like an apprentice, showing him the ways of the discourse community and having him do the kinds of writing that real biologists do. In the poetry class he always felt like an outsider; he was never anything but a stranger in a strange land.

Literary critic Stanley Fish says that all different kinds of academic writing are identifiable to us—lab reports, poems, assignments—because we are part of an academic community that constructs them the same way. The ways of writing are conventions that each discourse community has created. Sharon Crowley, in *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction*, defines the skill well: experienced writers "know how to submit themselves to the flow of the community's language" (35). Walker Gibson argues that, in writing, the revising process is a chance to try on new masks. He says we consistently calculate our voices "to present our reader or listener with a recognizable character who is to do the communicating" (qtd. in Fulwiler, *Teaching with Writing* 71). (Although he sees this as a freeing process, her term "recognizable" shows that this transformation of character has its audience's restrictive view in the forefront.)

In "Wanderings" Bartholomae quotes from Edward Said who, in his book *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, says that the literary critic today is "a wanderer, going from place to place . . . *between* homes" (114). Bartholomae pictures his student writers the same way: "wandering between the old neighborhood and the university, belonging to neither, and left to invent academic expertise every time they sit down to write" (114). He says that "when a student is making it up as he goes along he may very well be carrying out the essential work of the imagination" (114). Even if this results in "misreadings" by students, he sees the misreadings, the attempts to imitate academic discourse, as the truly valuable learning experiences.

INVENTING AN ARGUMENT AGAINST BARTHOLOMAE

When I envision the wandering student, I don't necessarily assume one who will find safe harbor by sheer luck or who will invent food and shelter for himself, either. Nor do I assume, like Elaine Maimon in "Maps and Genres: Exploring Connections in the Arts and Sciences," that the "maps" we draw by providing models of scholarly behavior will be enough to help Bartholomae's wanderer. Even Bartholomae, while saying that following the maps or routines grants power, admits that these "routines" can make student work "mechanical and deadly" if they are empty (Wanderings 116).

The emptiness of the writing is my concern. And I fear that the attitudes expressed in "Inventing the University" promote mechanical and deadly writing. Bartholomae refers to "knowledge-telling" writing: tests, summaries, reports, and all of the writing which keeps students "outside of the official discourse" where they are to admire the work of those within rather than to participate in it. He calls this "bastard discourse" (Inventing 144).

But isn't nicely structured and stated academic writing often bastard discourse as well? It may be the legitimate offspring of the discourse community, but it's often not the legitimate offspring of the writer. Certainly our students' voices are socially constructed, but their structures may be radically different from the structures of the academy. And if we force them to adopt the language of the institution before they have anything to say, we keep the power in the institution. If we take a more Freirean view—starting with the students where they are, with their knowledge of the world—

and if we teach them that it's not just the teacher's idiom that is valuable in the classroom (Shor), we have a greater chance of empowering more of them.

Richard Haswell, in "Dark Shadows: The Fate of the Writer at the Bottom," believes that we do a great disservice to our students who don't learn to write in the discourse, and, at the same time, we promote "stout" writing which is thoughtless and vapid yet acceptable and hard to criticize because it follows our conventions. He argues that we should worry more about truth and accuracy in writing and worry less about form.

Kurt Spellmeyer's essay "A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy" is a strong attack on the veneration of academic discourse. He believes that student writers who are trained "lack any sense of inquiry as a conversation." They can approximate "the ideal of systematic, impersonal discourse," but their writing doesn't succeed because the impersonality is "evidence of a pervasive absence of commitment . . . . The author has nothing of his own to say" (271). He goes on:

> By reifying discourse communities as teachers reified texts a generation ago, we dis-empower our students in yet another way: whereas before they were expected only to look at an author's language, their task now is more complicated and more intimidating, to speak about such language in terms of extra-textual conventions with which they are almost always unfamiliar . . . . The alternative is to permit our students to bring their extra-textual knowledge to bear upon every text we give them, and to provide them with strategies for using this knowledge to undertake a conversation which belongs to us all. (275)

He further suggests that the sophisticated and multi-disciplinary approach of writing suggested by Elaine Maimon to introduce students into the behavior of real practitioners in a field doesn't guarantee the students will understand the values of the discourse community and in fact may discourage students from doing the kind of thinking that can lead to social change.

INVENTING AN ALTERNATIVE

I agree with Bartholomae—almost. The reality that I have invented for my world includes exclusive discourse communities,

country-clubbish institutions which only open their doors to others who look, act and talk as they do. As teachers, it is our responsibility to help our students acquire entrance to them. They may be academic communities: will you get the A or be invited to sign up for the senior seminar? They may be work communities: can you produce the kind of writing that real people do in real jobs? They may be communities as large as The American Middle Class, and as much as we may respect Black English Vernacular or the cultural distinctions of our Hispanic or Japanese students, teachers owe it to their students to teach them the Power English which will allow them better jobs, an audience for their ideas and more choices.

The medium, Marshall McLuhan told us twenty years ago, is the message. And that's what David Bartholomae is telling us again, just as the "dress for success" advocates tell us to don grey suits rather than brown ones unless we want to look more like undertakers than business executives. Few politicians would express an honest but naked voice to the masses; they want the finery that speechwriters can manufacture to dress up the product. No doctoral dissertation, I would guess, has ever been written in Black English Vernacular.

Bartholomae is interested in more than the trappings, of course. He also believes that learning occurs during and because of the process of donning the dress of the discourse community. Learn to talk like us and you will become one of us and learn to think like us. This is where Bartholomae and I part ways. I have taught long enough to believe that most students come to college scared to death to write. Writing is torture for them, and the words they put on paper seldom represent real voices from their souls. For these students we have two choices as teachers: to give our students the forms and allow them to fill those forms with sweet nothings in the absence of real voices, or to help the students discover their voices and then lead those voices through the forms. In their own voices, they can express the souls within; they can show us how each of them has constructed the world. Without voices they are in the masses to be led; with voices, they can be the catalysts of change.

While I accept Bartholomae's pitch for learning in the discourse community and the pitches of Bizzell and others for giving our students a voice with authority and power, I argue that we first must take time to help them find their own voices. We must liberate

them from the constraints of silence, for if, as Bruffee states, thought is simply internalized conversation (639), then without real conversation there can be no thought. James Berlin states that all teaching is ideological; "a way of teaching is never innocent" (492). And as we know if we read through any history of literacy, literacy can be and has been used both to free people and to control them. Paulo Friere's campaign in Brazil hopes to free the people from oppression. In seventeenth century Sweden, literacy was almost universal because King Charles XI and the State Lutheran Church believed their conservative goals of piety, civility, orderliness and military preparedness could be best served by a literate populace (Graff). George Orwell's *1984* gives a frightening picture of controlling the populace by controlling the language. Patricia Bizzell, reviewing *Invention as a Social Act* by Karen Burke LaFevre, finds "LeFevre's book so important because she suggests that ultimately, such changes can help composition studies to question the radical individualism of Western ideology and to promote more equitable relations among individuals" (486). Can this be construed as something other than a political statement, a statement of the discourse *as* ideology? Of course not. And the statement shows what a powerful tool we teachers of writing hold: language. As college and university teachers, we are obliged to pass on the use and care of the language to our students, which does mean helping them gain admission to elite discourse communities. But before we use this tool to help our students enter new communities, we should be sure they have discovered and learned to use the language to speak their own minds.

The Students' Right to Their Own Language resolution adopted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1974 speaks for a multiplicity of languages, a multiple literacy, to meet the needs of the changing population. James Sledd, speaking for its ideals nine years later, disdains the attitudes of narrow-minded English teachers who push standard English on all students. He says that the traditional demands for standard English "are irrelevant and damaging in a world which our students know but we do not" (673) and that perpetrators of its use should "acknowledge that the linguistic forms which they demand from all their students are arbitrary, idiosyncratic, and intrinsically insignificant" (675). These statements could well apply to the constaints of academic discourse, which is an even narrower part of

the same language. And because its forms are foreign to many students, they are controlling rather than liberating.

The liberation comes by freeing the students' own voices first, appreciating that they are laden with the influences of their own lives rather than those of academic discourse. Ken Macrorie in *The I-Search Paper* states that "when you write freely, losing yourself in trying to tell truths, you'll often find yourself and others. But if you allow yourself to play the game of trying to look good, you'll probably write junk" (2). Donald Murray, in "Writing and Teaching for Surprise" says that students first become writers when they find themselves surprised by what they say, "[O]ur students learn . . . if they experience difference" (7). Yet our curriculum asks for "sameness."

Robert Connors acknowledges the teacher's dilemma about "making writing meaningful to the student and making the student meaningful to the community" (180). He believes that we must move beyond personal writing and get into the writing of our communities, but believes that personal writing is necessary to let a student, especially an eighteen-year-old student, know that he has a voice which has validity. Toby Fulwiler's *The Journal Book* chronicles in its chapters the experiences of teachers who find fresh, honest writing by encouraging different modes. Real creativity can come when students can invent not only themselves but their language as well.

Louise Rosenblatt says that students must start understanding texts by responding personally to them; although she admits that his kind of response is limited, she says that the readers' own responses give them important frameworks for what they learn to say later. Both Elbow and Rafoth, in their considerations of audience, argue that there is a time when writers should *not* worry about audience but should formulate their own ideas. The key is not to eliminate the kind of thinking and writing that Bartholomae advocates, but to save it until the student is ready for it. And I suggest that the student is ready for it, first, when she has something to say and, second, when she can use written language with some confidence. Remember Sharon Crowley's statement that "experienced writers know how to submit themselves to the flow of the community's language" (37). The imitation of forms comes naturally, but with time. As we learn to write better, we learn to say what we want to within the forms; they become second nature.

Then form and meaning become one: form does not interfere with what we have to say.

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.

After all, what we like to read is not "normal discourse," as Kenneth Bruffee identifies the regular conversation within a discourse community. It is the "abnormal" discourse that moves us, that which sounds either "kooky" or "revolutionary" and "sniffs out stale, unproductive knowledge and challenges its authority" (684). The Tom Wolfes of journalism, the e. e. cummingses of poetry, and the Ernest Hemingways of fiction are memorable for their revolutionary language; and although they all were perfectly capable of carrying on the normal discourse of their communities as well, my belief is that they started not with the forms, but with strong voices of their own. If we, like Henry Higgins, hope to reinvent the Eliza Doolittles of the university, we should begin not with their language but with their souls, first giving them the confidence to bare those souls in their own voices, and then teaching them the tricks to help make those voices heard.

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