Imitation and Style

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It may seem incongruous for someone who has written a text entitled *Process and Thought in Composition* to lead a writing workshop that stresses the imitation of models. The imitation of models suggests a product approach to the teaching of writing, whereas a heuristic approach puts the emphasis on the process. This seeming dichotomy is not a real one, however, for the imitation of models mediates between process and product.

What is imitated is not merely the form or structure of the original model, but more importantly the grammatical and rhetorical principles that underlie the structure of the model. These principles are the elements that model the writer's cognitive processes. They are analogs of the composing process.

Imitation is a process that focuses the writer's attention on the "literalness" of the writing activity. This literalness is one of the meanings we give to literacy. But it is also a process that enables a writer to go beyond the letter, so that the principles a student learns in imitating models can be applied to other kinds of writing tasks.

To teach students to imitate is to teach them to make full use of literacy, that is, to read and to write. In the seminar that I will be conducting, I want to discuss strategies that teachers might use to teach imitation and that students might find useful to develop their skills in reading and writing. These strategies consist of a close reading of the model, followed by an intensive study of the features of the text, and two kinds of writing assignments — stylistic analyses and imitation exercises. This is the process that I will hope to imitate in my workshop:

Close Reading

I ask students to read the model carefully before coming to class, making annotations on their copies of the model. In class, we reread the selection. Then, I proceed inductively, asking questions about the context, the dominant tone, point of view, arrangement, sentence structure, diction, and so forth. I encourage students to relate the various features of style to the writer's intention. I also guide students into a discussion of the effect that a stylistic feature has upon meaning, tone, or dominant impression.

We use short selections from literary works, from time to time I will introduce non-fiction models, especially those that may be similar in form, but different in rhetorical purpose. For example, I may pair a non-fiction narrative with a fictional narrative or a scientific description with a literary description. This kind of pairing raises interesting questions about genre, technique, and intention. Each model is selected because it has certain characteristics of arrange-

ment or style that might reward our study. For example, one selection will emphasize the cumulative sentence, concrete and specific diction, and figurative language. Another will emphasize the balanced sentence. A third might emphasize abstract and impressionistic diction, Latinate words, and so forth. I try to get students to notice that these principles of style *can be found in any kind of discourse.* Their use and their effect, of course, will vary as their context and their writer's intention will vary.

This kind of close reading and analysis provides *material* for one kind of writing that they will subsequently do. It also provides the rhetorical *means* for a second kind of writing. In this kind of class, teachers and students use a *subject-specific heuristic* rather than a more general heuristic. The heuristics implicit in our teaching are not always clear to our students, so this is one way of our being explicit about what we do. Both kinds of heuristics are important, but in imitation exercises we aim at something more specific and limited.

Stylistic Analysis

After a class period or two, I give the first kind of writing assignment, a stylistic analysis of the features of the model. The purpose of this assignment is to insure that students *understand* the rhetorical and grammatical principles that they will subsequently *use* in their imitations. Another purpose is to reinforce their reading skills, since they must necessarily read the model carefully in order to write about it. To help them write this paper, I suggest strategies they might use for dealing with the context, the tone, the stylistic features, etc. In brief, I introduce them to the conventions of doing this kind of writing.
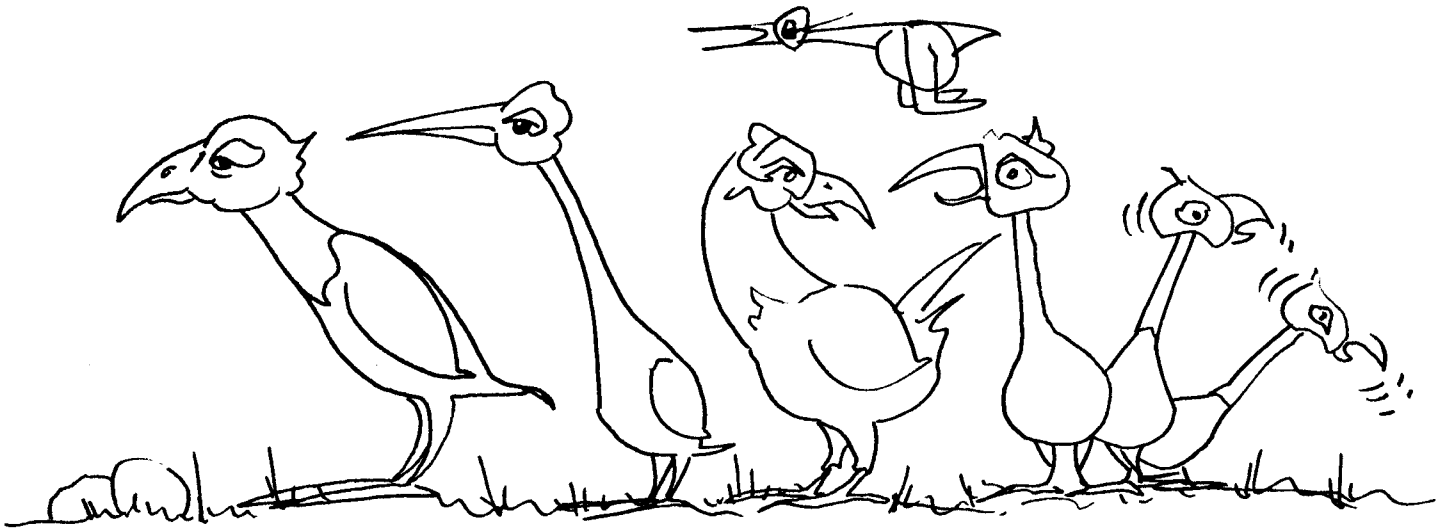
Imitation Exercises

The next assignment is one in which students must imitate as closely as possible the structural and sylistic features of the original. I suggest certain subjects that they might want to consider in doing this assignment, but more often than not I encourage students to provide their own subject matter, based on their own knowledge and experience. Not only do students learn that certain kinds of stylistic features will not be appropriate to all subjects, but they also learn how important it is to be able to choose the proper set of features that will communicate their intended meaning. This calls for more than slavish imitation. It calls for a thorough understanding of stylistic alternatives.

Follow-up

After each kind of writing assignment, I bring my students' papers to class, read them aloud, comment on the relative

strengths and weaknesses of each, and make suggestions for improvement. I reinforce this procedure by writing marginal and summary comments on their papers and by student conferences. As often as I can, I discuss the possible applications of what they are learning in my class to other classes. My hope is that the principles of writing they learn in doing these exercises can be applied to other kinds of writing situations. I also hope that this method of teaching and process of learning can be modeled successfully in my June workshop.

Imitation Exercises