

Utilizing Imitation to Jumpstart Creation in Writing

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One of the things that I find difficult to effectively teach is composition. Writing has always come naturally to me, so breaking down the hows and whys of the process to students doesn't. I found myself getting frustrated while teaching students composition because I wasn't sure how to show them what I wanted them to do without doing it for them. One thing I've realized is this: writing is *hard*. It's not something that always comes naturally, and it tends to require a certain struggle. I wanted to encourage my students to be okay with this struggle and to enjoy it; to enjoy the feeling of finally getting the "just right" words in the perfect order to expertly convey their thoughts and ideas. That is where the joy of writing comes from, and I wanted that experience for my students.

While I was wrestling with these struggles, I began to think about how we were going to resolve them. And I realized: *I could spend the entire year teaching composition*. There is so much to explore with students about writing! Unfortunately, I can't spend the whole school year exploring composition. Furthermore, the time I did have didn't even seem to be enough. I tried combatting this time crunch by implementing mini lessons on writing in my classroom. I really wanted my students to take risks in their writing and try some new things. To do this, I started using imitation. Harry Noden explains this method expertly in his text *Image Grammar*. This text is especially useful when looking for ways to teach composition that will engage students, allow them to be creative, and really instruct students on the art of writing.

Teaching imitation can be risky because some students have a hard time telling the difference between imitating an author and plagiarism. According to Noden, "imitation emulates the techniques that produced the artwork; plagiarism attempts to duplicate the entire artwork" (Noden 79). This is the fine line we have to teach our students before we allow them to start imitating. We have to explicitly teach *how* to imitate, as imitation is "only effective if students are shown 'how' to re-create the technique being imitated" (Noden 81). Imitation in itself focuses heavily on structure rather than the content. This allows students to practice different writing methods and styles that they can use repeatedly to express their own views and ideas.

By imitating, a writer uses the structure of another's writing to infuse their own content into. This seems to work especially well with poetry, as a lot of students are hesitant to try writing poetry. I've used Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" as a mentor text in my classroom. Students were challenged to think of a time they "still" did something and write about it using the same repetition and/or rhyme sequence as Angelou. One student used Angelou's structure and the repetition of the last line to express his own struggle with society:

You may call me out and call me names
You may paint my car
With disgusting words
But still I rise
People ask me why
I say I don't know
People say it's a choice
But how would they know?
Just like the grass in the spring
And snow in the winter
As sure as a child's joy and a bride's smile

Still I rise
You may beat me senseless and crack my bones
Shout my name and burn my crosses
But unlike a straight man's wishes
Still I rise
Death may grab me by the throat
Throw me into a wall and crush my bones
But love is love
So still I rise

Another student chose to imitate more of the rhyme scheme to express her perseverance throughout the day:

People put me down and shame me
And like to be so vile
My peers assault me with their words
But still, I always smile
Do their words upset me?
Well of course; they're hostile
But I walk away filled with glee
Because still, I always smile
Just like we are in a movie
We walk in single file
But I walk a little more groovy
Because still, I always smile
Was their goal to make me cry?
To make me go away awhile?
Well there is no tear in my eye
Because still, I always smile
They can try with all their might
But it won't be worth their while
Because I'm always bright and light
And still will always smile

Imitation can be a powerful tool for technique, but it can also become a powerful tool for expression. I continually tell my writers, "Writing is about expressing your thoughts and opinions—and finding a powerful way to do it." One way that I model that for them is by sharing a piece I wrote for a college class. I show them an excerpt of then-Senator Barack Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address, during which he speaks of the idealism and eminence of America:

That is the true genius of America, a faith in the simple dreams of its people, the insistence on small miracles. That we can tuck in our children at night and know they are fed and clothed and safe from harm. That we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door. That we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe or hiring somebody's son. That we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution, and that our votes will be counted—at least, most of the time. (Obama)

I then share my imitation that I wrote at a time when I was frustrated with the system of education:

“That is the true genius of educational legislation, a system of flaws; a complete dependence upon governing bodies, that we can stop paying teachers and know that our students will still get taught. That we can cut the budget, cut out art programs, without too much complaint from the masses. That we can regulate and standardize curriculum, without any checks or balances; that we can expect students to learn and grow without an actual plan or any funds to support them. And that our kids might just become productive members of society—at least most of the time.”

We then discuss how someone else’s structure can be a powerful platform for our own thoughts and I challenge my students to find their own platform for creation. One student chose to model the structure of Obama’s address to express his view on and experience with the foster care system:

“That is the true genius of foster care, a system so broken people forget to care. That children can grow up experiencing abuse and neglect. That these children forget what love feels like; they don’t remember any hugs or kisses. That we rent children out for a hundred bucks a pop, and then don’t care where they end up. That when they grow up and steal from a grocery store, we wonder why and what happened to them. That we can send them to jail without any glance into their past, and that they are lost, forgotten, and discarded—or at least, most of them.”

Imitation can seem like an ineffective method at first glance. However, it’s a great method to give students tools to put in their writing toolbox. Research done at the University of Miami found that students who had imitated professional sentence structures “wrote papers that were graded higher than those written by students who had not” (Daiker, Kerek, Morenburg 4). This research indicates that imitation is key in growing and improving as a writer.

Another aspect in becoming a better writer is reading. Findings from Stephen Krashen’s book *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research* shows that extensive readers show improvement in writing as well as in reading and “have a more mature writing style” (Krashen 8). This occurs because avid readers are consistently exposed to writing—specifically higher quality writing—than non-readers. To harness this in the classroom, Krashen suggests using “free voluntary reading,” in which students “read because [they] want to: no book reports, no questions at the end of the chapter” (Krashen 1). This will “provide a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency may be reached” (Krashen 1). Another author, Ruth Culham, in her book *The Writing Thief: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Writing*, backs up the reading and writing connection by explaining, “a deep thoughtful understanding of how text works creates an understanding of what good writers do, and in turn provides options for them as they write” (Culham 34). The more texts we expose our students to, the better writers they will become.

When we encourage students to read for pleasure, we can lead them to becoming better readers and writers. When we hook students with literature that they enjoy, they are learning from established writers. We can supplement this by using imitation in our classrooms. Encourage your writers to choose their own passages to imitate—passages that mean something to them. This will lead them to creating compositions that are meaningful. In addition, encouraging students to play with an already established structure allows them to take more risk with their writing and gives them the confidence to begin creating their own structure within their compositions.

Works Cited

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Author Biography

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