USING STYLISTIC IMITATION IN FRESHMAN WRITING CLASSES: THE RHETORICAL AND META-RHETORICAL POTENTIAL OF TRANSITIONS IN GEOFFREY OF VINSAUF'S MEDIEVAL TREATISES

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Within the last decade or so, the debate over the relationship between form and content in writing pedagogy has been gathering momentum once again. In a *New York Times* article from May 31, 2005, Stanley Fish asserts that form must take precedence over content, suggesting that "[s]tudents can't write clean English sentences because they are not being taught what sentences are." Fish thus has his students create their own languages with parts that operate as English does, so that they can get a sense of how language works. Of course, although Fish rightly observes that grammar has been subordinate to content in much writing pedagogy over the last fifteen years or more, I think that many of us would take a more moderate view of the issue and agree that form and content shape each other. Along these lines, Laura Micciche's article, "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar" asserts that grammar overlaps with style, and that both categories shape and are shaped by the rhetorical context in which they operate (2004). Despite the problematic conceptual relationship between form and content as illustrated by the current incarnation of this perennial debate, however, I contend that style actually serves to bridge the two. In fact, much like rhetoric is the discipline without a subject and therefore cuts through all subjects, style has no clear and specific definition, allowing it to transect the rhetorical canons.

More specifically, I assert that the medieval focus on stylistic imitation, as well as the concept of transitions, can help us to bridge the form-content dichotomy actively and construct a pedagogy and course that more effectively enact the writing process for students of prose composition. In other words,

while process theory as presented in composition textbooks tends to present the first three rhetorical canons—invention, organization, and style—in that order (providing the potential for a type of imitation that is chronological and task-centered), implying that students should likewise follow that order in their own composing processes, I wish to suggest that focusing on style, essentially disrupting the implied chronology, helps students gain insights about language and their own ideas that can then help them move into invention, adopting a more advanced, recursive form of revision. Transitions play a key role in this dynamic: in fact, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* provides a precedent for a pedagogical emphasis on transitions in prose composition, while simultaneously implying, through its structure, a way of implementing these pedagogical methods (1968). Moreover, an emphasis on transitions is consistent with a lot of work being done in cognitive psychology, which makes it, at least potentially, a valuable tool in the writing classroom.

First, though, we must examine the notion of style more closely, as the various definitions of style can illuminate both how and why the form-content dichotomy has developed, as well as the importance of the role that style can potentially play in the writing process. Several definitions from the *O.E.D.* are significant in this context. The form-content dichotomy is apparent, of course, when one considers the emphasis in the following definition on the "form" end of the dichotomy. This definition states that style includes the "[f]eatures of literary composition which belong to form and expression rather than to the substance of the thought or matter expressed" (2004, p. 14), which is further reinforced by another definition that states that style is "[a] kind, sort, or type, as determined by manner of composition or construction, or by outward appearances" (2004, p. 22.a.)

Style is more broadly defined in other *O.E.D.* entries, however. One states that style is "[t]he manner of expression characteristic of a particular writer (hence of an orator) ... a writer's mode of expression considered in regard to cleanness, effectiveness, beauty, and the like" (2004, p. 13.a.), a definition that, upon close examination, reveals how broadly and varied the concept of style can be: in fact, the concept of "effectiveness" indicates the notion of "content" to some extent, as the author must consider how to gear her message for the audience in order for it to be effective. Indeed, these "features" are intended to culminate in an effect on the audience, as style is further defined as "[a] manner of discourse, or tone of speaking, adopted in addressing others or in ordinary conversation" (2004, p. 15), as well as the "[m]anner of executing a task or performing an action or operation ..." (2004, p. 23.c.) These more nebulous qualities are apparent in "Limits of Grammar in Writing Improvement," when author Rei Noguchi says that style

> … covers such aspects of "mechanics" as verb tense, sentence fragments, run-ons, comma splices, and subject-verb agreement. But it also covers more than mechanics insofar as it also deals with options that lead to effective communication of content (e.g., the sequencing of linguistic elements, parallelism, subordination, transitions, and pronoun reference. (Noguchi, 1991, p. 11)

All of these various definitions, interestingly, are included in the glossary of the *Harbrace College Handbook*, 13th edition, which says that style is "[a]n author's choice and arrangement of words, sentence structures, and ideas as well as less definable characteristics such as rhythm and euphony"(Hodges, Horner, Webb, & Miller, p. G-44). Of course, from all of these definitions, it would seem that style itself is not particularly definable. Still, it is clear that style operates from the level of small mechanical units, like diction and punctuation, through the broadest conceptual levels, like content, making it a much more important facet of writing and the writing process than many of us acknowledge.

Likewise, imitation has played a role in writing pedagogy, but has also appeared in myriad forms, much like style has done. Like the notion of "style," "imitation" can take place at various levels, and can play a key role in learning and creativity. According to Piaget,

> [I]mitating … means trying to do something which seems to be useful in reality, but which one's own schemata are not yet prepared for. But to be able to imitate, one must be aware of what is to be imitated and how it can be imitated. Thus, imitation is closely connected with observation and analysis (Geist, 2005, p. 172).

Significantly, the most recent usage note for "imitation" in the O.E.D. points to its pedagogical potential, stating that imitation is "[t]he adoption, whether conscious or not, during a learning process, of the behavior or attitudes of some specific person or model" (2004, 1.c.)

Moreover, the broadness of the definition is illustrated in the ways in which imitation has been applied historically in writing pedagogy. These applications can be subdivided into various categories: imitation at the overall organizational level, and at the sentence level—both in terms of diction and grammatical structure. At the broadest level of overall paper organization, of course, "teaching the modes," more widely popular in writing pedagogy twenty or more years ago, encouraged a kind of fundamental imitation at the essay level. Students would

write, for example, comparison-contrast papers following one of two general organizational patterns: block or point-by-point. In the former, students would give all the information about one concept in the comparison, and then the second large chunk would address the other component of the comparison. The point-by-point comparison would take comparable facets of each component and develop the discussion accordingly. Of course, many students find out, very early, that these patterns are not absolute: in other words, one could write a compare-contrast paper with sections of definition and process, two other types of modes.

Imitation has also been used at the sentence level, which may be more useable in the freshman classroom, although it does not seem to have been as widely used, disregarded at times, perhaps, due to the research done by those composition scholars who suggest that students do not transfer the lessons from grammar exercises into their own writing, but must instead be taught by having their grammar issues addressed within the context of their own essays. Still, some have argued for a comeback of sentence imitation, perhaps most notably in Corbett's and Connors' *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, which first came out in 1965 and which was reprinted in 1971, 1990, and 1999. In this text the authors suggest that students copy, word-for-word, passages written by famous authors. The next step is for students to imitate a variety of sentence patterns. They also include testimonials on the value of imitation by such famous persons as Winston Churchill, Malcolm X, and Ben Franklin.

Although sentence imitation may have benefit in and of itself, the Medieval emphasis on small units of composition and the imitation of figures, just like the modern-day use of sentence-level imitation, are consistent with some of our more modern notions about writing pedagogy and potentially quite useful in the classroom. This is particularly clear in the case of Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*, a handbook that was extremely popular in the thirteenth century, having survived in more than 200 manuscripts. In this rhetorical handbook for verse composition, Vinsauf included specific exercises that students could use, and which medievalist Marjorie Curry Woods has used in her rhetoric classes at the University of Texas at Austin. In fact, she has adopted, directly, some of the *Poetria nova*'s exercises. According to Woods, one of the most rigid and unexpectedly popular writing assignments requires students to produce a piece of connected discourse using all of the 35 Figures of Words in their traditional order, beginning with *repetitio*, *conversio*, and *complexio*. This type of exercise may be so popular with her students because it

> … focus[es] on small units of composition (set pieces il-
> lustrating a particular technique or approach) compiled by

aggregation from even smaller units (lines or images sepa-
rable from the work at hand and suitable for re-use in other
compositions). (Woods, 2001, p. 13)

While this is not direct imitation of grammatical structure, it does fit in with
the types of imitation I have already outlined, in that students are imitating
linguistic patterns—in this case, in the figures discussed in the *Poetria*.

Significantly, Vinsauf's other treatise, the *Documentum de modo et arte
dictandi et versificandi,* focuses specifically on prose composition. The insights
it offers into the nature of prose are clearly more pertinent to any discussion
of freshman-level writing courses, where the focus is on prose composition.
In fact, most manuscripts of the *Documentum* include sections on *prosecutio*
(how to transition from the beginning of the work to the body), as well as
on the methods of ending a work, neither of which appears in such extended
discussions in the *Poetria*. This emphasis on transitions suggests that, for
Vinsauf, at least, transitions were particularly important in prose composition.

Transitions, of course, are forged in a many ways in order to signal a variety
of different conceptual connections between two ideas, whether those ideas
occur at the sentence level, the paragraph level, or beyond. These connections
can be spatial or chronological; they can signal similarity or opposition; they
can signal causality, aggregation, exemplification and intensification. Moreover,
they can occur through repetition of words or phrases, through brief summary,
or through the insertion of transitional phrases.

Interestingly, though, while transitions hold an important place in a
piece of writing as well as in the writing process itself, many people, students
especially, seem to think of transitions as "only" a matter of style, relegated
to surface appearances, which, as we've seen from the various definitions, is
faulty: transitions involve diction, grammar, organization and content; style, as
such, is really **not** mere ornamentation, but an important part of the organic
whole message conveyed in any piece of writing. Indeed, any transition involves
juxtaposition of concepts: in order to determine which transition to use in
one's writing, one must decide what the relationship between the two concepts
actually is.

As such, cognitive psychology can shed some light on the significance of
transitions; in fact, this notion of juxtaposition is at the heart of the research
done by Gilles Fauconnier in his books *Mappings in Thought and Language*, and
The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities,
which he co-authored with Mark Turner. In his books, Fauconnier discusses
analogy—more specifically, "analogical counterfactuals"—which involves
juxtaposition of concepts, the "projection of structure from one domain to

another" (1997, p. 101). An example of an analogical counterfactual would be the sentence "If I were you, I would listen to me." Clearly there are two categories, or domains, at play here: "I" and "you." These are set up as analogous and therefore separate entities. The relationship is counterfactual, though, in that "I" is not the same being as "you"; in other words, this subjunctive construction indicates something that does not exist in fact. This kind of thinking, though, entails a very sophisticated cognitive move, as it creates a relationship between two separate categories—a relationship that does not exist in empirical reality.

At the same time, though, grammatical constructions like this, which create connections between conceptual categories, have additional potential for meaning: in *Mappings in Thought and Language*, Fauconnier cites Langacker to explain that "grammatical constructions and vocabulary items 'call up' meaning schemas" (1997, p. 11). In other words, concepts and relationships bring with them attached sets of other concepts and relationships. If this is true, then transitions may be of particular importance, as they not only call up specific schemas within sentences but also serve as the explicit linguistic **link** to conceptual frames, thereby contributing to the creative process. Furthermore, grammar and creativity, so important in the invention portion of the composing process, are linked: Fauconnier suggests that "[t]he mental operations that allow us to construct meanings for … simple-looking words and sentences … are the same ones at work in what we recognize more consciously as creative thought and expression" (1997, p. 99). Juxtaposition of concepts can clearly provide the potential for creative thought.

Juxtaposition also operates in the notion of concept maps, the use of which may provide clarity on the cognitive dynamic under discussion. Concept maps are graphical representations of the relationships between concepts. In other words, they illustrate knowledge. Writing about these tools for understanding conceptual relationships, Novak and Cañas define the word "concept" as a "perceived regularity in events or objects, or records of events or objects, designated by a label" (2008, p. 1). A concept map of this definition is shown in Figure 1.

The boxes contain concepts, while the lines and arrows indicate the conceptual links between those concepts. These units of boxes and arrows constitute propositions, which are "statements about some object or event in the universe, either naturally occurring or constructed … containing two or more concepts connected using linking words or phrases to form a meaningful statement" (Novak & Cañas, 2008, p. 1). The concept map, like Fauconnier's notion of "analogical counterfactuals," illustrates how important a place comparison holds in the learning process of the human mind, as the act of placing one idea or concept next to another invites the mind to establish relationships between
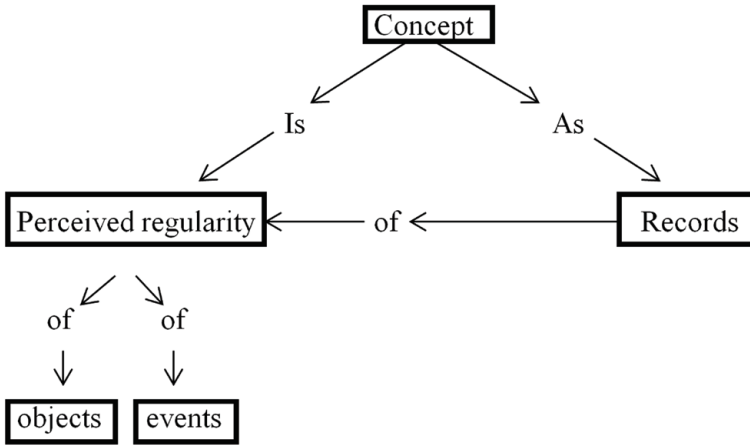
Figure 1. Concept Map of "Concept"

those two things. This is precisely how transitions work: two phrases, sentences, or paragraphs are placed in sequence, and the reader's first thought is "How do these two things connect to each other?"

Indeed, from the audience's perspective, transitions provide coherence for the message of any given piece of writing, providing for us, in effect, the steps comprising the conceptual journey on which the writer wishes us to accompany her. For the reader, in fact, transitions constitute a window into the mind of the writer; for the writer, they function not only as a manner of indicating purpose to the audience, but they also appear at the moments at which she is cognitively able to see her own reasoning in a reflexive manner. The fact that this is the point at which her line of reasoning becomes clearest to her—and that awareness intersects with her awareness of the cues required by her projected audience—possibly explains why so many of the students I have spoken to have such a difficult time with transitions. This difficulty is also explainable in terms of creativity in both the reader's and writer's minds. As Fauconnier states, "To communicate is to trigger dynamic creative processes in other minds and in our own … mappings can be entrenched (as in conventional metaphor and established grammatical constructions), but … also operate on-line to yield novel meanings, construals and interpretations" (1997, p. 182).

It is this potential for "novel meaning" that connects the medieval emphasis on prose composition to modern pedagogy—in the form of process theory and post-process theory—and further reinforces the pedagogical potential of style. Much of process theory revolves around the notion of "writing process," which,

in composition textbooks, moves through the first three rhetorical canons—invention, organization, and style. Still, it is much more complicated than that: the recursive nature of writing is apparent in that a writer can have an idea (invention) and begin to organize it, only to find that the act of organizing it has changed the underlying focus somewhat—leading the author back into revision.

Recursivity also has a place within with post-process composition theory, which moves beyond process theory by emphasizing how context-dependent every writing act actually is. As George Pullman suggests, "… the process of writing is not context invariant. The genre, the circumstances, the subject, and the whole dynamic of the rhetorical situation influence what process will lead to what document" (1999, p. 26). In this formulation, the act of writing cannot

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Figures of Thought

"Figures of thought" are kinds of "building blocks"—strategies for conveying your ideas as effectively as possible. Although there are more figures of thought than the ones I've included here, and there are other kinds of figures catalogued in writing handbooks throughout the various historical periods, I've selected the following as those that would possibly be more useful to you in technical and business writing situations.

On your rough draft of paper 2, please select three consecutive sentences or paragraphs, and use two or three of the following figures of thought as you recast and revise those passages. Be sure to include transitions between the figures you use in your text. Once you have accomplished this task, we will discuss your experiences in class.

1) Distribution. Assigns specific roles to various things, people, or ideas: *In this letter I provide information about the JAVA class, the project assignments for the class, and the format of the final exam.*

2) Description. Presents possible consequences for a given situation (while describing both in specific detail): *This example of a memo's format, including the headings and paragraph layout, may help you as you undertake the assignment for COMM class.*

3) Division. Distinguishes between and among alternatives, accompanying each with a reason and/or possible consequence: *My boss is not very good at dealing with people: he either doesn't communicate at all, or he communicates poorly. Both situations prevent the employees from doing their jobs well, and the employees eventually become frustrated.*

Figure 2. Assignment Handout

be distilled into steps, which is precisely what process theory does. In a sense, post-process theory recognizes how changeable a piece of writing can be when one considers the various forces that come into play to initiate and carry out any writing act, forces that change substantively over time. In fact, for the post-process theoretician, revision is something that, when necessary, is just as likely initiated by forces external to the writer as by the writer's own impulse to do so. Indeed, revision may ultimately be even more important for the post-process theoretician because, if the context is ever-changing, that situation would require revision as the context changes—even if revision means revising one's needs in terms of genre and message.

When any type of revision occurs, however, recursivity plays a significant role, especially for more experienced writers. As Nancy Sommers suggests,

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4) Accumulation. Gathers up details that had been discussed previously: *Clearly, poor communication at work can lead to these additional problems: misunderstandings between co-workers, frustration with the job, and even the production of faulty—or even dangerous—products.*

5) Antithesis. Sets ideas in opposition to each other: *You may not have enough experience to understand the problems caused by poor communication, but my twenty years on the job has shown me the vast array of difficult work situations that are only made even worse with poor communication.*

6) Comparison. Draws out similarities between two dissimilar things or concepts (an analogy): *Just as music requires attention to the notes used and the order in which they are played, writing well in a professional setting requires attention to the words used and the order in which they are presented.*

7) Exemplum. Cites a quote or an action of an authority figure: *John Smith, expert in business management, asserted during employee orientation that "a clear, well organized procedural manual contributes to an efficient work environment."*

8) Portrayal. Provides a depiction or portrayal of relevant physical and/or visual characteristics: *While Mr. Smith spoke, his voiced wavered and he couldn't stop shaking: his glasses bounced around on his nose and his unruly white hair stood up in all directions.*

9) Conciseness. Compresses a point into the least number of words necessary (can be a brief summary of what you've already stated): *Thus, while Mr. Smith's presentation was informative, his demeanor and appearance made him less credible to his listeners.*

Figure 2. Assignment Handout, continued

novice writers tend to revise by focusing on change at the lexical level, while experienced writers revise in a way that "confuses the beginning and end, the agent and vehicle; it confuses, in order to find, the line of argument" (Sommers, 1988, p. 125). To put it more directly, more experienced writers revise **as they compose.** Cognitively, of course, when this happens, the writer is forging links between existing material in her mind while creating new links—conceptual transitions at the cognitive level, as it were, many of which will appear in the written text in the form of linguistic transitions.

Vinsauf's treatises illuminate the potential pedagogical and psychological importance of these linguistic transitions not only as a topical focus for composition teaching, but also as a method. In fact, both the *Documentum* and the *Poetria* discuss the figures while they embody the very precepts they describe, making them function both as instructional tools and illustrative meta-rhetorics. Thus, while the *Documentum* includes a discussion of transitions, it also uses transitions within the description itself. If we consider the fact that Vinsauf's treatises are intended for teaching purposes, we can extrapolate another lesson from them—one which can be incorporated into a pedagogical approach: the classroom experience as a meta-rhetorical construct.

Indeed, this notion of meta-rhetoric can inform classroom pedagogy on many levels, bringing together stylistic imitation, transitions, and the writing process. In order to do so, it is clearly necessary to combine the imitation of figures, which may involve a variety of levels—phrases, sentences, brief passages—with transitions, and do so **within** the student's rhetorical purpose (e.g., on specific class assignments). Instead of the instructor making corrective comments in the margin to indicate where improvement is needed, this kind of pedagogy would enable students to strengthen the building blocks of discourse—and to do so in a way that emphasizes invention. In other words, this type of approach would allow the student to build a repertoire of cognitive structures and rhetorical strategies while simultaneously requiring her to build and articulate conceptual linkages between juxtaposed linguistic units—between phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and larger passages. At the level of assignments and class activities, the emphasis would be on imitation of small discursive units—figures as outlined in Vinsauf's *Documentum*.

In order to determine a strategy for building such a pedagogy, I gave a brief informal assignment to my Business Communication class, asking my students to take three consecutive sentences from their drafts and recast them using three different figures of thought. (See Fig. 1.) In providing the examples of the various "figures of thought," I selected those that seemed most pertinent to the assignment at hand, which I explained to them. For example, because "character development" is not used in business writing, I have omitted it on

the handout. Indeed, business writing has its own set of stylistic expectations. The same is true of science writing, as Jonathan Buell points out in his article (in this volume) entitled "Style and the Professional Writing Curriculum: Teaching Stylistic Fluency through Science Writing." Once I selected the figures that would work best for professional writing, I then asked the students to be sure to include transitions between the newly revised sentences. Of course, we had been discussing transitions in various contexts throughout the term, but mostly during the individual conferences I hold with students at least twice during our 11-week term (between the first and final drafts of writing assignments 1 and 2).

My goals for this assignment, in terms of seeing how successful stylistic imitation would be for my students' writing, were very basic: essentially, I wanted to know if they could do it, and what sort of changes it would make to their drafts. My rationale for having them use this assignment on an initial draft was to open up the possibility that it would help move them back into "invention" as they revised, helping them revise more substantially. As a follow-up, I wanted to get their opinions on how the assignment worked for them, so I included a couple of questions on it in the teaching evaluation form I give my students at the end of the term. Surprisingly, the students thought that this was a difficult assignment, and, even more surprising, they thought that having this information at the beginning of the paper cycle—during the early stages of drafting—would be most helpful. More than half went on to say that they could see this being useful if it were integrated into the course from the first day of class, as it would help them organize their thoughts more effectively.

In future courses, I plan to take my students' suggestions, but I also want to more fully implement the meta-rhetorical potential suggested by Vinsauf's treatises within the course structure itself. For example, I not only plan to have students work on stylistic imitation and figures of thought from the beginning, as I've already said, but I also want the assignments themselves to "build off of" each other. By this, I mean that the students will select broad topics for which they can write perhaps a business letter and a formal report, thus enacting a kind of conceptual transition that will require them to link mental spaces in what Fauconnier would call "blends." Their writing assignments will thus "transition" from one to the other in much the same way as their sentences and paragraphs will.

Perhaps even more importantly, I plan on having them engage in a self-reflexive move, requiring them to become more aware of their own rhetorical, stylistic choices—by having them perform a rhetorical analysis of their own work—including an analysis of how and the degree to which their use of figures and of various factors associated with style effectively convey the content of

the message. By doing this, of course, they will enact the same dynamic they engage in when they must become aware of their own conceptual links in their construction of transitions between sentences and paragraphs. By performing this self-reflexive assignment and then having them re-write the paper they have analyzed, they will also be moving from style to invention.

Interestingly, in outlining some of my ideas here, I too have moved from style to invention. Of course, teaching itself is a rhetorical activity—even an argument, perhaps—one that we make to our students about what sorts of things are important about writing and how they execute different pieces of writing in different rhetorical contexts. It is also an ongoing argument we engage in with ourselves, as we revise and re-think our positions on what and how we should teach—an argument I've entered meta-rhetorically in this chapter that suggests the value of stylistic imitation, the significance of transitions, the lessons we can take and shape from the Middle Ages, the ways in which an emphasis on transitions is consistent with cognitive psychology, and how we undertake the act of writing, both in the papers our students write and in the classrooms we work so hard to compose and revise.

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