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ARISTOTELIAN RHETORIC: LET'S GET BACK TO THE CLASSICS

In his *De institutione oratoria,* Quintilian cites as an example of a *chreia* (one of the elementary exercises in speaking and writing) the following statement: "Crates (the famous Stoic grammarian), having met with an ignorant boy, beat his tutor" (I.ix.5). The continuing controversy over what Johnny and Jane can't do has produced a host of modern-day Crates who, if they haven't quite beaten us teachers of writing, have certainly given us some lumps. As most writing teachers will readily admit, not all of our black and blue lumps and bruises are totally undeserved. For many reasons, often historical and financial as well as pedagogical, we have failed to meet the challenges presented by clearly declining literacy skills. If we turn to Quintilian again, we find him placing great responsibility on teachers for the success or failure of their students:

> The complaint is groundless that very few people are granted the power of comprehending what is imparted to them and that most people through slowness of mind waste their labor and time in study. On the contrary, you will find most people ready in reasoning and quick in learning. . . . Dull and unteachable persons are no more the law of nature than are deformities and monstrosities, and there are very few of them. A proof of this is that among boys good promise is shown by most; when such promise dies away as they grow older it is manifest that it was not natural ability that was lacking but the *proper care"* (I.i.1-3).

Not so many years ago, many teachers of composition would have scoffed at Quintilian's considerable confidence in the ability of the human mind. And even today, too many of our fellow teachers continue

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to refer to the "boneheads," the "unteachables," and the "inherently stupid," thereby implying that lack of natural ability, rather than lack of care (to use Quintilian's words), has led to our present difficulties. Fortunately, however, many teachers of writing are re-learning the efficacy of Quintilian's view, encouraged by the growing tendency of traditional English departments to recognize composition research as a legitimate and respectable scholarly pursuit. Teachers are re-examining their assumptions about instruction in writing and looking with renewed curiosity and vigor at the astonishing number and variety of questions posed by the Basic Writing student. For this essay, I wish to urge that we not neglect the classical sources in our search for a richer understanding of the Basic Writer's difficulties and for methods with which to ease those difficulties. In particular, I wish to suggest some insights we may gain by applying Aristotelian rhetorical theory to what we know about Basic Writers. [1]

In "Basic Writing," a bibliographical essay, Mina Shaughnessy identifies two major features of Basic Writers:

> First, they tend to produce, whether in impromptu or home assignments, small numbers of words with large numbers of errors. . . . Second, they seem to be restricted as writers, but not necessarily as speakers, to a very narrow range of syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options, which forces them into either a rudimentary style of discourse that belies their real maturity or a dense and tangled prose with which neither they nor their readers can cope." [2]

I would like to elaborate by adding a third characteristic which is perhaps implicit in the second one noted above. My study and analysis of a large number of essays written by basic writers reveals a consistent egocentricity, what Piaget calls "centeredness," in their writing. In other words, basic writers rarely are able to adopt a persona or to achieve a distanced perspective in their writing. Yet to perform successfully in academic discourse such a distanced voice or perspective is necessary.

The noted tendency of basic writers to produce "small numbers of words" most immediately draws us to Aristotle's discussion of *topoi* in

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1. I will be relying here almost solely on the Rhetoric, though a reading of the *Prior Analytics* and *On Sophistical Relations* is highly recommended.

2. "Basic Writing," in *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays,* ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 139.

the Rhetoric. Literally the "places" or "regions" of discourse, Aristotle's *konoi topoi* (the common topics of degree, possibility, time, and size) and *idioi topoi* (the special topics peculiar to one of the three types of discourse) provide the wirter not with a set of stock arguments but with a methodlogy or heuristic. Ideally, that is, they help the writer probe a subject and thereby discover things to say about it.[3] To take only one example, let us look at the common topic of comparison. Now almost all texts include some discussion of comparison, but far too often comparison becomes an *end* rather than a means, a product rather than a part of a logical process which will reveal an insight, usually a generalization, about the subject. Students who practice using the topic of comparison will begin by searching for similarities, differences, and matters of degree in examining a subject; most importantly, however, the students will be practicing and reinforcing the skills of analysis, classification, and synthesis. They begin by asking, for instance, in what ways the subject is like another and whether or not it is more like one thing than another. They can then be led to another and whether or not it is more like one thing than another. They can then be led to generalize about the nature of the subject and eventually to utilize higher levels of abstraction. Thus, a carefully sequenced and structured assignment using only similarities can lead students to list the points of comparison, classify and analyze these points, and eventually generalize or synthesize conclusions. And this, of course, is exactly what Aristotle intended the topics to enable the writer to do. As Edward P.J. Corbett points out in his *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, "The topics represented the system the classical rhetoricians built upon this tendency of the human mind [to abstract, to generalize, to classify, to analyze, and to synthesize]."[4] In short, the topics provide one means of seeing relationships and connections among objects or concepts, of finding Henry James's "figure in the carpet." By helping us to perceive subjects in different ways and from different perspectives, the *topoi* give us the means to begin developing analytic and synthetic skills. And skills of abstraction and generalization are among the most fundamental skills Basic Writing students need to acquire and practice.

3. For a lucid and concise discussion of the *topoi,* see Edward P. J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 107-155. For the most current and readily available summary of work on the *topoi,* see Richard Young's "Invention: A Topographical Survey," in *Teaching Composition,* pp. 1-43.

4. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student,* p. 108.

I have argued elsewhere [5] that Basic Writers generally have not attained a level of cognitive development which will enable them to form abstractions and apply the principles derived from their formation to college tasks. That is to say, these students may evince little difficulty in dealing with familiar concrete problems requiring abstract conceptual thought, but they are *not aware of the processes* they are using and thus often lack the ability to infer principles from their experience. I believe that careful and continued work with the topics helps students to acquire the skills necessary to facilitate cognitive growth. But let me emphasize the importance of time and repetition in this process. In order for Basic Writing students to profit from any inventional scheme, they must have time to practice it repeatedly in varying contexts. Given time and continued practice with a guiding teacher, students will begin to internalize the scheme and realize benefits. Since many teachers have argued for the usefulness of the classical *topoi,* I will not labor the point here. (For further discussion, consult Richard Young's bibliographical essay on invention in *Teaching Composition,* pp. 8-11.)

I have not yet touched on the psychological causes, namely, fear of failure and the distrust of academia and of teachers, which may contribute to the small number of words Basic Writers produce. Again, a look at the *Rhetoric* is instructive, not so much for what it literally tells us as for the method it suggests. Book Two of the *Rhetoric,* which deals largely with audience, examines human emotions in terms of 1) the circumstances in which a particular emotion is aroused, 2) the object(s) of a particular emotion, and 3) the things which arouse a particular emotion. Aristotle's classic discussion of fear is so often cited that I will not reproduce it here, but his analysis of fear's obverse, confidence, is equally enlightening though often ignored. After noting that confidence is the opposite of fear, Aristotle proceeds with his analysis:

> Confidence is the hope, accompanied by a mental image, of things conducive to safety as being near at hand, while causes of fear seem to be either non-existent or far away. Confidence is inspired both by the remoteness of calamities and by the proximity of sources of encouragement. And there is ground for confidence if there are means of rectifying mistakes and means of succor. As for the conditions under which men feel confident: they do so if they think they have succeeded in much, and

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5. Andrea A. Lunsford, "An Historical, Descriptive, and Evaluative Study of Remedial English in American Colleges and Universities," doctoral dissertation, the Ohio State University, 1977.

suffered little, or if they have often run into great danger, and have come off safely. There are, in fact, two things that render human beings indifferent to peril—inexperience and resourcefulness (2.5).[6]

Now certainly Aristotle speaks clearly to us as teachers of writing. We can help our students gain confidence by providing "proximity of encouragement," "means of rectifying mistakes," "experience" (practice), and "resourcefulness." The last sentence quoted above seems especially revealing when applied to Basic Writers. In spite of the fact that they often fear failure and, consequently, writing, in one sense their inexperience and lack of resources do make them "indifferent to peril" in their writing. I am referring to the Basic Writers who, sticking to primer sentences and bland cliches, achieve a false sense of competency, a feeling that what they have written will be safely "correct" and hence acceptable. We must learn to allay unnecessary fears on the one hand while alerting students to other genuine perils which can only be ignored if and when students build up the sufficient experience and rhetorical resources.

A study of Book Two of the *Rhetoric,* however, does more than offer us the chance to extrapolate tips on teaching. Much more importantly, it offers us a *method* for learning about our students and hence about our craft. If we follow Aristotle's procedure, for instance, by defining and analyzing 1) the circumstances in which students write "a small number of words with a large number of errors," 2) the object(s) or person(s) towards which such writing is directed, and 3) the things which arouse that particular writing behavior, we will have gone a long way toward helping our students break out of that particular pattern. Such work has begun, most notably in Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* and, more generally, in books like K. Patricia Cross's *Accent on Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976). But we need more, much more, of the meticulous observation and classification that characterize these books in order to develop a heuristically sound program of instruction.

Thus far, we have noted that Basic Writers produce few words because they feel they have little to say and because they are mistrustful and fearful of their teachers and academic surroundings. I would also like to suggest that Basic Writers produce very few words[7] because of a

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6. *The Rhetoric of Aristotle,* trans. Lane Cooper (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960). All subsequent references are to this edition.

7. In a study conducted at the Ohio State University during 1976, the average Basic Writing student wrote only 132 words in a 48-minute period.

tendency to assume, in academic matters at least, that they are either "right" or "wrong," that somehow the college writing tasks they must accomplish require a set of facts which are irrevocably right, and that unless they know these right answers, then they have nothing to say or to write about. Aristotle speaks to this problem most directly in his discussions of the enthymeme, which he defines as "the rhetorical syllogism." Specifically, Aristotle notes that rhetoric is concerned only with "such things as appear to admit of two possibilities" and with issues which affect our ordinary lives. Hence, the enthymeme deals primarily with *probable* truths, and is thus distinguished from the deductive syllogism used in dialectic to arrive at "necessary conclusions" drawn from universally true premises. Basic Writers can profit by an introduction to Aristotle's distinction and to class or workshop exercises which lead to the search for and analysis of enthymemes. One useful introductory exercise may be derived from Aristotle's discussion of maxims (which he classes under the enthymeme):

> A maxim is a statement; not about a particular fact, such as the character of Iphicrates, but of a general nature; yet not a general statement concerning any and every sort of thing—thus 'straight is the opposite of curved' is not a maxim; but a statement about those things which concern human actions. . . .Now enthymemes are a kind of syllogism which almost entirely deals with such matters; take away the syllogistic form, then, and a premise or a conclusion of an enthymeme is a maxim. Thus. . .Euripides "There is no man in all ways happy'. . . . Taken so, it is a maxim. You have an enthymeme when you add the next line, "For each is a slave to money or chance.' (2.21).

Aristotle goes on to list a number of maxims and to show in what ways they may be expanded to enthymemes. The application of this passage to the teaching of Basic Writing is simple enough. In a sequenced set of exercises, students can 1) discuss a list of maxims provided by the teacher;[8] 2) search out maxims in materials provided by the teacher (*e.g.,* passages from newspapers, textbooks, novels, comic strips); 3) expand those maxims to enthymemes; 4) create maxims of their own based on

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8. Aristotle shrewdly notes that maxims appeal greatly to a popular audience because people are delighted "to hear stated in general terms what they already believe in some particular connection." Precisely for this reason, maxims almost always provoke lively discussion, so lively in fact that I often find it difficult to keep students moving back and forth between concrete experience and higher levels of abstraction.

their observation and study of a set of data provided by the teacher (this step requires classification and generalization); 5) write short essays or paragraphs illustrating their own maxims; and 6) form groups to listen and argue with each others' maxims. This final step should bring the class back around to the original concept: That almost all facets of our daily lives deal with probability rather than with certainty, and that one of the major purposes for writing papers in college should always be to explore an idea for possible, not preordained, answers. Exercises such as this one coupled with steady work on *topoi* should also help build inferential and synthetic thinking skills.

The student who has developed the thinking skills necessary to help him discover dimensions of a given subject may still be inhibited by the second feature of Basic Writers: their "narrow range of syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical options." Perhaps we may agree that the student who has consistently worked through the topics and enthymemic reasoning has already expanded his options considerably. But I would like to offer, as a further means of widening semantic and syntactic options, work on the metaphor. In Book Three of the *Rhetoric,* Aristotle includes a lengthy discussion of metaphor as one means of devising "lively sayings" which will please an audience:

> We may start from the principle that we all take a natural pleasure in learning easily; so, since words stand for things, those words are most pleasing that give us fresh knowledge. . . . Accordingly, it is metaphor that is in the highest degree instructive and pleasing. When Homer calls old age 'stubble' [but nonetheless I ween one might see from the stubble what the grain has been], he makes us learn, gives us a new concept, by means of the common genus; . . . . It follows, then, for style and reasoning [enthymemes] alike, that in order to be lively they must give us rapid information. Consequently, we are not highly gratified by enthymemes that are obvious. . . nor by those which, when stated, we do not understand. What we like are those [enthymemes] that convey information as fast as they are stated—so long as we did not have the knowledge in advance—or that our minds lag only a little behind. With these latter two kinds there is some process of learning; from the former two we learn nothing either instantly or soon (3.10).

Most notable in this passage for the teacher of Basic Writing is the connection Aristotle makes between metaphor and learning. Particularly, he stresses the way in which metaphor (and enthymeme as well) evoke synthetic thinking and identification of relationships among objects or

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ideas. It seems to me, that a sequenced set of exercises on the metaphor (similar to those suggested for the maxim) would provide students not only with a means of creating "lively sayings" and options for writing, but also with further practice in generalization and abstraction.

Even though the principle is only implicit in the *Rhetoric,* I cannot leave the question of rhetorical options without arguing at least briefly in favor of *imitation.* In the classical school system, these exercises in imitation formed the core of the early rhetoric curriculum. They included not only copying and translation but analysis of models and paraphrase of them in various styles as well. Eventually, students were expected to analyze entire arguments and to rewrite them in different ways. For the Basic Writing class, however, the beginning exercises in transcribing sentences and imitating style and syntax seem most fruitful. The students begin by copying, word for word, sentences which use particular syntactic patterns.[9] After a sustained period of such transcription exercises, student and teacher begin the analysis of patterns and the imitation of them. In his discussion of dictation (similar to the imitation exercises I am recommending) in *How the French Boy Learns to Write* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915), Rollo Walter Brown warns that the teacher must completely explain the passage to be dictated, and he goes on to add the following caveats: ". . . the ideas and words in which they [the passages to be copied] are expressed must be just within the pupil's reach. And . . . the teacher [must guard] against letting the exercise become monotonous. It is never long—the corrections are made immediately while interest is warm, and the pupil is not asked to rewrite. . . ." If we heed Brown's warnings, the use of imitation exercises, especially as a means of preparing students to generate sentence patterns and later to combine sentences, deserves at least an extended trial by teachers of Basic Writing.[10]

The third feature of Basic Writing, egocentricity or lack of a distanced voice, may also be examined profitably in light of Aristotle's teachings. Considerations of audience, which pervade the entire *Rhetoric,* are most immediately relevant to our concerns here. Almost never does the Basic

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9. From a teacher's point of view, analyzing the *products* of this exercise can provide many cues to perceptual and conceptual difficulties encountered by basic writing students. See Patricia Laurence's "Error's Endless Train: Why Students Don't Perceive Errors," *Basic Writing* (Spring, 1975), 23-42.

10. For further arguments in favor of the use of *imitatio,* see Donald Leman Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), pp. 146-176; and Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student,* pp. 496-538.

Writer have a knowledge or sense of that ubiquitous academic audience, the teacher/critic. Part of the business of any Basic Writing course should be to help students develop this sense, and I know of no better way to begin this process than by having students write directly to each other. Misunderstandings and misapprehensions of one another's writing, which will occur immediately, can be used by the teacher as a means of motivation as well as a means of identifying the elements in each student's writing that mislead an audience. Students can then proceed to an examination of the class members as audience and, later, of the teacher/critic as audience, using for each examination the method proposed by Aristotle: 1) define the emotion or response the writer wishes to arouse in his reader; and 2) catalogue and classify the ways in which to achieve the desired response. (Teachers will recognize here the methods of task analysis and the use of student-set goals, both often helpful in achieving motivation.)

In addition to a detailed study of audience demands, I would like to recommend two exercises, practiced widely in the classical schools, which I think may aid the process of "de-centering" in our students and help them achieve distanced perspectives on a given topic. In the opening of the *Rhetoric,* Aristotle recommends that speakers "be able to argue on either side of a question; not with a view to putting both sides into practice—we must not advocate evil—but in order that no aspect of the case may escape us, and that if our opponent makes unfair use of the arguments, we may be able to turn to refute them" (1.1). The classical *controversiae,* often based on factitious and, later, on ridiculous themes, have been subjected to much criticism. Nevertheless, they will serve us well if, in applying this classical exercise to our teaching of Basic Writers, we always use themes evolved by our students, ones which touch on their everyday lives. Once the theme is determined, each student becomes responsible for writing about the theme both negatively and positively (preparation for this writing exercise can be combined with either work on enthymemes, maxims, or metaphors; it is best done, in my experience, in small workshop/discussion groups). The resulting products will offer a wealth of material for discussions of audience, sentence patterns, topic development, and logical reasoning. But more importantly, use of the *controversiae* helps students develop different perspectives on a topic. Practiced sufficiently, this exercise can help students get outside themselves or become "de-centered." In addition, *controversiae* will reinforce the idea that, where decisions regarding

human motives and actions are concerned, there are few absolutely "right" or simple answers.

Another exercise designed to foster "de-centering" is one the classical teachers called *prosopopoeia,* or impersonation. In these exercises, students assume the voice of a famous person and compose what that figure might have said in a given set of circumstances. This exercise, easily adapted to the basic writing class, is generally a popular one with students. The teacher, who prepares a set of situations consonant with student interests and experience, can best begin by providing an example for the class. In the beginning, characters from familiar movies or television series, or well-known public figures, can be used as subjects of impersonation. As students become more adept at assuming various personae, however, the impersonation exercise can be combined with some elementary research on a figure personally interesting to the students or about whom they are studying in another class. Although this exercise evokes intense response from other class members, discussion should ideally focus on answering two questions: 1) how true did the impersonator remain to the original figures; and 2) what elements allowed (or did not allow) the impersonator to achieve that fidelity. Used in this way, exercises in impersonation will help students gain more distanced perspectives and help them develop the ability to adopt the persona of "member of the academy" which is so necessary to success in college.

Our familiar contemporary label for such activities, of course, is role-playing. What I find most often absent from current uses of that technique, however, is a proper emphasis on the end to be gained. In the classical system, most exercises (and certainly every exercise I have recommended thus far) led to generalization and inference-drawing. And that is, at base, what I find most instructive and applicable to our instruction of Basic Writers in the work of Aristotle and other classical teachers. Our students need methods and strategies and options, not "facts." Isolated grammar drill has never improved the writing of our students, because almost all basic writers are operating below the cognitive level at which they could abstract and generalize principles and then apply these principles to tremendously varied writing situations. Therefore, in applying classical rhetorical theory to the teaching of Basic Writing, I have stressed the Aristotelian *method* of close observation, classification, analysis, and generalization rather than a set of precepts. Only by letting our students practice these mental processes for

themselves and thus eventually internalize the principles can we hope to achieve a true transfer of learning.

Aristotle reasons that pleasure is a "certain motion of the soul, a perceptible settling of it, all at once, into its rightful nature" and that learning, therefore, provides pleasures because learning also "implies a settlement into our normal state." If Aristotle is right, and if the methods I have suggested do lead our students to learn, then the resulting pleasure at least should be twofold. Our students will be pleased because they will have "satisfied the normal human desire to learn and to know." And we, of course, will be pleased too, if for no other reason than that the next time we meet a modern-day Crates, he will not thrash us for sending forth ignorant youth. Finally, you see, getting back to the classics needs no other recommendation than pleasure and learning.